

Three Rivers

Matthew Parris

You only meet a river properly after dark. I have lived beside the Thames for years and felt its presence always most strongly in the small hours when the river and I were alone together. Something hidden by day is revealed: a personality, secret and strong. At dead of night, you begin to know it.

I made three such acquaintances this summer. Each was a South American river: one among coffee plantations in the hills of Colombia; one down at sea-level in the hot night of the Brazilian rainforest; and one very high beneath glaciers in the Peruvian Andes. All were met by night.

I had seen all three by day, too. By day you see everything about a river, but feel nothing. Wherever water meets light, reflections of light are what strike us. Sunshine glints. Rain sandpapers the shine to lead. Wind ruffles, and an orange sunset finds its own image in every pool. It is the river's skin, it's living, glassy skin, which draws the eye.

But the river itself is hiding. Surface decoys, so that we look at what is on or above the river, what is by the river - even, if it is clear, what is under the river. We look where it runs: at the green banks and valleys, the overhanging trees; at people and boats, at fallen leaves. We look at waterfowl, stones, reeds and rocks. We see the sky itself, and our own reflections in the water. "Let's not talk about me", says the river, "let's talk about you". Like a mirror, a river by day deftly changes the subject.

By night it becomes the subject. When darkness falls you understand how a blind person in the presence of a river would have the keenest sense of the company he was keeping. The other senses swell, and you become aware are not alone. That happened this summer in Peru, by the Rio Achín, at night.

Most European tourists encounter the Andes as part of their trip to Machu Picchu; they carry on to see Lake Titicaca, fringed with the Andean range known as the Cordillera Real. But if instead you travel north of Lima you find two less visited but more majestic ranges. The Cordillera Blanca and the Cordillera Huayhuash include some of South America's highest peaks, and it was in the Huayhuash that the British climber Joe Simpson's almost fatal ascent of one of these pitched him into the nightmare which the book (and film) *Touching the Void* describes.

I was camped near a sister peak, Yerupajá. At 6,634m (21,892ft), this is one of six sentinels standing with the Amazon basin behind and below them, and facing west towards the

Pacific. Glaciers descend these slopes, and beneath one of these a high valley hangs at about 4,000m (13,200ft). In its bowl are two glacial lakes. The first, fed by melting ice, rushes into the second lake: reed-fringed Jahuacocha, spreading across the valley. From Jahuacocha, the river Achín wanders away across flat green water-meadows, tumbling finally through a gorge to the rivers below.

It was on these water-meadows we had pitched our small tent as night fell: on soft, short, sheep-cropped grass. I knew we were close to the river - we had been following it all the way from the glacier - but had taken its presence for granted: just another mountain stream, unexceptional. No people lived in this part of the valley, though a lone horseman cantered past at dusk.

Opening my eyes at two in the morning, in the pitch black, I knew my fellow-hiker and I were completely alone. Thirst had woken me (the day's walk had been hard), so I crawled out of the tent in vest and long-johns, and made for where I knew the river was, about thirty yards away. At this altitude one gasps for oxygen; my breath crackled.

The night was silent, and bitterly cold. The air was still. The grass was frozen. The stars were exuberant: a motionless ballet of tiny points of light. We were in shadow from the moon but its pale, grey-silver light was caught on the ghostly flanks of Yerupajá. As I stumbled towards the river there came a distant whip-crack as piece of glacier broke; then silence resumed.

Until, that is, I neared the river's bank. Ears sensitive now in the calm, I heard through the stillness a sort of sucking, swishing sound, as soft as a whisper. There, almost at my feet, was the river.

Quietly but with a kind of intensity, the current was busy. While humans and animals slept, the little Rio Achín was hard at work draining the lake. It had curled itself into an elaborate series of sharp bends, wider sweeps, sudden horse-shoes and complete about-turns, spreading its coils down the valley like a startled snake. Deep, clear, cold and deceptively swift, its flow belied its slight proportions, and though only a couple of yards across, the Rio Achín was shifting icemelt by the tonne.

The surface was smooth but the water moved with a cool fury. It sucked at the banks, welling and boiling at every bend, the current's power betrayed in the frantic waving of one stray reed, fingered by the flow. A floating leaf streaked urgently by, and

September

by Christopher Simons

You were talking in your sleep—drink this, relax,
no one is making you turn back the clocks,
it's late afternoon and the house has more sunshine
than it knows what to do with, the hyaline sky

so transparently blue, it feels like the crisp moon
watches our every move, and inches closer,
the softly sung round of the seasons never shy
at the interruption of various farewells to summer.

True, the thistle-furred dumbledor finds its way in
on a flight plan drunk with the long-dropped apple's wine;
true, every frog and leveret in the garden
flops drowsy in wild copulation's wane.

but if the nights come slightly sooner than you expect,
the sun swells with a rounder, more filled-out heat,
your fingers press the fresh figs' purple teats
and stain with the pomegranate's saffron ink,

the kitchen counter's piled with dusky plums
and fresh-stripped trunks of corn logjam the sink;
'plenty' and 'bounty' whistle in the maxims
of swallows' wings and gleanings beaks. Now drink

this sweet cold, crushed from the orchard's cider-press,
the cloudy mud of summer in its dregs;
shake off the fumes of winter's bitter drugs
and let the clocks tick only in your dreams of ice.

St Ives
Tamar Yoseloff

And here we are again, the end of summer:
sky's a clean slate, a lighthouse leans
on its rock, coal smoke drifts over the toppled roofline.
The hills disappear, white on white, dull pearl
prised from an oyster.

The hierarchy of boats:
dinghies, trawlers, cruisers. Bobbing like apples
in a bucket. They imagine the open sea,
a voyage; they are tied to their moorings
with elaborate knots.

From this window: curtains
partly drawn, the coffee in the mugs
stone cold, the tiny union jack
only colours in the world.

was gone. In the quiet of the night and with a sense of urgency, purposeful and strong, the Rio Achín was getting on with it, unobserved.

Except by me. I knelt by the icy flow, drank deeply, bade my leave of my new acquaintance, and returned to my tent. I knew the river now.

Colombia was different, and yet the same. We were near Quimbaya, between Bogotá and the Pacific. This part of central Colombia confounds our European image of a lawless wilderness of drug-barons and bandits. It is friendly and civilised, a breezy place of high hills and snow-capped ridges, around whose skirts – cool, sunny and fertile – the dark greens of coffee plantations and the lighter shades of palm and banana fold gently away towards the horizon. This is the tropics at its best: a varied landscape of blowing cloud and sun; of humming birds, ripening fruit and flowering trees.

There's plenty of options for tourists. You can swim, canoe, or white-water raft. But we chose a gentler kind of river adventure, on a floating bamboo platform. And we chose to take our five hour trip by night.

Countless streams find their way from the mountains down into the Rio Vieja, a substantial river about the size of the upper Thames, flowing in a wide, deep valley towards the distant Caribbean. Our itinerary was easy. Down to the river bank before sunset in an old Willys Jeep, then the first half of the night floating down the river to a jetty where our jeep would be ready to take us home for midnight.

As darkness fell the first thing we saw were the fireflies, thousands of them, dancing along the banks as we floated by. Among the reeds loomed the black shapes of cattle, standing silent and still by the water. Here the river was wide and open – perhaps twenty yards across – a shallow highway gurgling over stones, only a foot or so deep. Across these our bamboo platform bumped and swayed as our skipper alternately punted us clear with a long pole, and threw out his net for fish. In the big, quiet pools through which we passed, we jumped in and swam. What remained of the twilight faded.

Soon it was pitch black. The moon had not risen. Owls hooted. The silhouettes of hills to either side seemed to grow higher, crowding in. The current grew swifter and the river narrowed. The Vieja was moving into some kind of neck. Through the quiet of the night came a sound at first distant, then seeming to approach: a rushing sound. We were nearing a rapid.

Suddenly we were in it. We spun and swayed. Water slapped against rock, swelling up between our bamboo slats and boiling around our ankles. Black boulders loomed as we sped by. The river eddied and swirled in hollows on the banks, and against tree roots. The noise was almost a roar. Between these high rock banks what had seemed a gentle, shallow, harmless river had found its voice, found its power. The river was showing its fist.

Very abruptly, the roar died and the rush subsided. We were in a black pool. We could see the sparkle of white in the rapids



upstream whence we had descended. Huge trees dipped their dark branches into the newly quiet water. In this forested gorge no humans or cattle lived: unobserved, the Rio Vieja came into its own.

We paddled to a flat rock as lightning played above us through the branches, pulled out a packed supper of meat and thick maize porridge, and talked in hushed voices as the river lapped our feet. When we committed ourselves again to the stream, a gentle rain – more a sort of falling mist – kissed our faces in the dark. By the time we found our jetty before midnight – a single light on the bank after a long swift slide through a forest – we knew the river as we would never have known it had we played by its banks all day.

The Rio Yavari lived in another world. A substantial tributary of the Amazon – but one of hundreds – the Yavari joins the mile-wide, braided, moving lake which is the River Amazon

just below the point (still a thousand miles from the sea) where three borders meet: those of Colombia, Brazil and Peru. We had been staying in the captivating Reserva Palmari, in a thatched camp on the Brazilian bank where tourists, birdwatchers and scientists were welcomed into a world of mosquito nets, oil lamps and lime cocktails.

We were, we thought, pretty well-acquainted with the Yavari by then. In the heat of the day we had powered ten miles down the Amazon then fifty miles up the Yavari in a motorised canoe, to reach Palmari. I had swum with the blind pink river dolphins which inhabit these remote stretches and we had crossed and recrossed the river to see birds and monkeys on the Peruvian side. What more of the river's character was there to know?

It was only at night that we found out. We took a boat out to look for alligators, picking our way gingerly across the mud-flats in the dark, to where our

canoe was waiting. Mosquitos bit, night-jars called. We cast off. The dim yellow oil-lights of our camp faded as we chugged up-river, then disappeared as we rounded a bend. Our skipper extinguished the outboard motor. All was quiet and all was black as we rocked gently – for all the world in space we could see nothing – in mid-river, the current discreetly lapping the canoe's sides.

Our skipper switched on a torch and trained it along the river-banks.

Bright eyes peered at us: dozens of pairs of little points of yellowy light. These were alligators and they were lining the bank. We restarted the motor and, without a sound, without a splash, the lights went out: extinguished as each alligator slipped down into the river and submerged. As we bobbed down the Yavari in the dark, suspended between black water and black sky and saluted on either side by an avenue of eyes, I saw this river for what it was: full of life, and merciless. Rounding a bend where the flow was carving away the high mud banks to carry earth into the Atlantic, you could hear the faintest swish as the Yavari, with quiet muscularity, pulled at its banks. This was whispered strength. This was a battle the river would win.

Days later we crossed the Amazon before dawn – from the Brazilian port of Tabatinga to the police and immigration post at Santa Rosa on the Peruvian side. Fog swirled above the swirling current and for ten minutes we could not see the lights of our destination jetty. It could have been the ocean, but for the clumps of floating reeds and lillies which lurched by, and the boiling water – now grey in the first light – around our bows. These currents were cruel, fickle and strong. A cool mist brushed our faces but the river was warm, tepid to the touch. And so big. Relentless, invincible, irresistible.

And secret.

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