

## **King of the River**

by Stanley Kunitz

If the water were clear enough,  
if the water were still,  
but the water is not clear,  
the water is not still,  
you would see yourself,  
slipped out of your skin,  
nosing upstream,  
slapping, thrashing,  
tumbling over the rocks  
till you paint them  
with your belly's blood:  
Finned Ego,  
yard of muscle that coils,  
uncoils.

If the knowledge were given you,  
but it is not given,  
for the membrane is clouded  
with self-deceptions  
and the iridescent image swims  
through a mirror that flows,  
you would surprise yourself  
in that other flesh,  
heavy with milt,  
bruised, battering toward the dam  
that lips the orgiastic pool.

*Come. Bathe in these waters.*

*Increase and die.*

If the power were granted you  
to break out of your cells,  
but the imagination fails  
and the doors of the senses close  
on the child within,  
you would dare to be changed,  
as you are changing now,  
into the shape you dread  
beyond the merely human.  
A dry fire eats you.  
Fat drips from your bones.  
The flutes of your gills discolor.  
You have become a ship for parasites.

The great clock of your life  
is slowing down,  
and the small clocks run wild.  
For this you were born.  
You have cried to the wind  
and heard the wind's reply:  
"I did not choose the way,  
the way chose me."  
You have tasted the fire on your tongue  
till it is swollen black  
with a prophetic joy:  
"Burn with me!  
The only music is time,  
The only dance is love."

If the heart were pure enough,  
but it is not pure,  
you would admit  
that nothing compels you  
any more, nothing  
at all abides,  
but nostalgia and desire,  
that two way ladder  
between heaven and hell.  
On the threshold  
of the last mystery,  
at the brute absolute hour,  
you have looked into the eyes  
of your creature self,  
which are glazed with madness,  
and you say  
he is not broken but endures,

limber and firm  
in the state of his shining,  
forever inheriting his salt kingdom,  
from which he is banished  
forever.

