The Rhythms of Rivers
An Interview With David James Duncan
By Zac Sexton

David James Duncan's muscles twitch in excited expectation. We have just assembled our fly rods and are walking along a western Montana river, hoping we have not missed the Gray Drake hatch. Duncan's gaze is locked straight ahead, scanning the river. His focus cannot be broken. He jolts forward, then eases back into step with me. A minute squeaks by. He has had enough.

"Are you ready to run?" he asks.

"Sure," I reply.

"Let's go."

And Duncan begins to dash downstream. I stumble behind, not sure of where we are going, but now quite aware that every minute counts during a Gray Drake hatch.

Stories are spirit and matter at play. ... The authenticity of any good story is rooted in love and respect.

Duncan, born in Portland, Oregon, in 1952, graduated from Portland State University in 1973 with a B.A. in English. He is the author of two classic novels, *The River Why* and *The Brothers K*. He has also written two compilations of stories and essays, *River Teeth,* and his most recent, *My Story as Told by Water*, as well as other short stories, memoirs, and essays. *My Story as Told by Water* is the reason we run along the river to fish. Duncan is a river, meandering with purpose, to free his holy, coursing life-givers: rivers. The river we fish and Duncan himself are a confluence that gives life to his books.

My Story as Told by Water is a compilation covering the 10 years Duncan spent in an effort to protect his home waters. The stories are divided into three sections: "Wonder Versus Loss," "Activism," and "Fishing the Inside Passage." Each section completes Duncan's wish to express "the joy that living with healthy rivers and streams has always given [him]," while maintaining a narrative, sometimes humorous flow. *My Story as Told by Water* was a National Book Award finalist in nonfiction for 2001; winner of the 2001 Western States Book Award for nonfiction; winner of a Montana Arts Council Literary fellowship and a Pushcart Prize; and one of his essays was selected for the 2001 anthology *The Best Spiritual Writing*.

When we reach the spot Duncan wants to fish, we must stoop to calm ourselves from the mad dash in chest waders. The spot is a bend in a side channel of the river. Duncan points out the hiding areas of various fish he has known. I go where I am told and wait for fish to start rising as Duncan slips downstream to the next hole. Fish begin to surface, and Duncan's casts fling holy water around him. His rod keeps a beat like the poetry of his prose, and he lives another story as told by water.

Books by David James Duncan

The Brothers K. (Bantam, 1996)

My Story as Told by Water: Confessions, Druidic Rants, Reflections, Bird-Watchings, Fish-Stalkings, Visions, Songs and Prayers Refracting Light, From Living Rivers, in the Age of the Industrial Dark (Sierra Club Books, 2002)

River Teeth: Stories and Writings (Bantam, 1996)

The River Why (Sierra Club Books, 2002)

The Bloomsbury Review: *How do you know you have lived a story? How do you know the water will tell your story?*

David James Duncan: Wonderful questions, both of them. Deep. Troublesome.

Words form imaginative shapes. The number of conceivable shapes is infinite. The variety of shapes is also infinite—and phantasmagoric. Any skein of words you write in serial order will let you add some scribbles to the infinite Phantasmagoria. But it does not enable you to tell a story.

This is because stories are not phantasmagoric. The imaginative shapes in stories reflect both spirit and matter. Stories are spirit and matter at play. The authenticity of our words is rooted in the authenticity of physical and spiritual experience, in the physical world, and in our actions in the physical world. You know you've lived a story the same way you know you have loved something or someone, or spontaneously respected something or someone. The authenticity of any good story is rooted in love and respect. Dark stories, too. Dark stories portray this same love and respect distorted or betrayed.

Now the second half of your question: One reason you know water will tell your story is because you *are* water. The body is 78 percent water. The brain is 90 percent water. Human speech is moist.

Given the fact that we and our speech are entwined in water, it follows that we have things to learn from rivers about storytelling. For me, the movement of most any admirable piece of long prose is not just "like" that of a river: it's the same movement. Our progression through a good novel is like a float down a good western river, which gives you rapids, riffles, runs, deep eddies, and fathomless pools in succession. These geophysical features create a rhythm. The best prose reflects the same rhythms. Have you ever seen Norman Maclean's four axioms for prose writers?

1. "All prose should be rhythmical."
2. "The rhythms should be barely perceptible."
3. "The rhythms should become noticeable at times, as when the author is 'fooling around and showing off.' "
4. "If an author writes out of a full heart and rhythms don't come with it then something is missing inside the author. Perhaps a full heart."

Our prose rhythms are as much a part of our riverine bodies as the rhythm of our breathing, our heartbeats, our brainwaves, our love thrusts. In the beginning the spirit of God moved across the face of the waters. Prose rhythms put us in contact with this innermost face. They are, as you put it, water helping us tell our story.

TBR: *What was the writing process throughout* My Story as Told by Water, *as compared with a stream? Was it a slow glide in a meadow or a*

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cascading headwater deluge?

DJD: *My Story as Told by Water* is a little bit complex. After I published my first novel, 21 years ago, I was rarely asked to speak in public and when I did, it was never for any kind of conservation or environmental cause. The number of river watchdog organizations that have since sprung up in the U.S. is astounding. From less than a dozen to literally hundreds, maybe even a thousand. There are watershed groups all over the country. Because I have written three books with the word "river" in the title and know something about the subject, I now get asked to speak in public at least 50 times a year. And it's been that way for 10 years.

I can't afford to say yes very often. My first love is still the novel, and I love a quiet, contemplative life at home. But some of these groups are really great. Some of these causes dovetail with work I'm already doing. So, I do a hell of a lot of public speaking. There's something spontaneous about putting together a talk that makes the language more accessible, sometimes, and more fun. There'll be more jokes in it. A lot of times it seems that standing up in front of 300 people and chatting with them about what I've been seeing on the river has led to a kind of writing, even a way of seeing, that's lighter than your usual enviro-tirade. I'd come back from this talk and think, "Shit, that was pretty interesting." At the end of 10 years of this kind of activity, I had 100 pieces. The best of them looked to me like fruit ripe for the picking, sitting on the tree. I picked about 30 and then started thinking about a book. I wanted the greatest possible narrative flow. I wanted one section that was somewhat contemplative/philosophical/autobiographical, another section that was on the activism work I do, and another that was on sheer agape river-love and mysticism—the joy that living with healthy rivers and streams has always given me. I thought there was a nice trajectory there. Too often environmentalists leave out the joy part. That's how the book was created. I put it together in a very short amount of time. It was ironic that it was the one honored by the National Book Award nomination.

TBR: *Who do you see as your primary audience for* My Story as Told by Water? *Who do you see reading your book?*

DJD: People in their 20s really interest me because they're still not completely formed. I'll write to anybody who's willing to listen. But there's something about 20s and, to a lesser extent, 30s at which I aim. I seem to go back and forth between a kind of grief-stricken comedy and the big existential questions that come at us.

Some of the work in *My Story as Told by Water* was politically motivated. That's a first for me. It began with the fight to save the Big Blackfoot River. I wrote this book, *The River Why*, that's considered a classic. The world in which that novel was set is virtually an annihilated world. It was destroyed by Reaganomics and cynical corporate assholes who were liquidating the forests of the Northwest, sometimes to pay off junkbonds. Whatever crazy reasons corporations destroy forests, it was merciless. Every watershed that I fished from the central Oregon coast to the Columbia, from the Siuslaw River north 200 miles to the Columbia—every one of those drainages was destroyed, with a couple of very very small exceptions. Salmon and steelhead are species that need to exist in very large numbers if they are going to be viable at all. Scores of species predate them at every stage of their development. I grew up in love with these beautiful, coniferous, temperate rainforests, those gorgeous green-eyed streams, and the salmon and steelhead and the culture of the towns and people that went with that. It was all pretty well trashed in the eighties.

So, we move here in 1993, and I find that two rivers come together in Missoula on the upstream side: the Clark Fork, which comes from Butte and the Berkley Pit—a quadruple Superfund site and one of the most devastated places on earth—and the Big Blackfoot River, the one in *A River Runs Through It*, the classic Norman Maclean novella. The Blackfoot totally resurrects the Clark Fork, right in the middle of Missoula. Walk into downtown Missoula and you see ospreys being robbed by bald eagles after they've caught a nice big trout. You see beavers gnawing on the cottonwood trees every evening and beautiful flights of waterfowl, right through the middle of downtown, piercing the population of pigeons.

So, here's the governor, every Republican politician in the state, and Phelps Dodge Corporation, the largest mining corporation in Arizona, ready to turn this river into a sacrifice zone so they can use the cyanide heap-leach method of gold mining and create another Berkley Pit in the headwaters of the Blackfoot. Everywhere cyanide heap-leach mining has been, it's caused devastation. I was trying to write a comedy novel at the time, and I found myself upset beyond comedy. To think of the literary legacy of Norman Maclean rendered meaningless so soon after his death, it just felt to me like we novelists are a bunch of naïve, frickin' dreamers working for the entertainment corporations to create little bobbles of literariness for people who like that market niche, when in fact our world is being destroyed. Having taken pains to create this funky little world where people live on salmon streams in *The River Why*, and then seeing that destroyed by corporate greed, then coming here and seeing the same deal about to happen on the Blackfoot for the sake of the cyanide gold miners, I just couldn't write. I gave a year of my life to the Blackfoot River instead. I fought. I fought with my pen, because that's the only weapon I have.

I wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*. I wrote a 9,000-word essay that ended up cut in half and published in *Sierra Magazine*. But I sent the 9,000-word version to dozens of newspapers and magazines begging the editors to just read it, rob it, and put in a good word for the Blackfoot River. And lots of them did. I did readings and fundraisers and everything I could think of. And so far, we've managed to save Norman's beautiful river, with a citizen initiative that became law, banning any new cyanide mines.

TBR: *Did you write immediately afterwards?*

DJD: I went to work on my fiction after the bill passed. But I also continued to write the gonzo conservation essays that became *My Story as Told by Water*. Once I gave myself to it, the

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fanatical effort was enjoyable. So the Blackfoot essay got me hooked. But the other one that really grabs me in my guts is the essay in defense of the salmon, the polemic against the four Lower Snake River dams.

TBR: *What response did you get after publishing that essay?*

DJD: I just got a letter today. The most gratifying thing is the citizen response. The Army Corps of Engineers was doing a huge environmental impact study. One of the things they did involved going to 16 major population centers around the Northwest and allowing people to testify about whether they wanted to remove those four Lower Snake River dams to save the inland West's wild salmon, or whether they wanted to leave the dams. The aluminum companies and agribusiness in Idaho and right-wing conservative groups have spent 10s of millions of dollars propagandizing people on how devastating it will be to the Northwest if those four dams are removed. The truth of the matter is, Lewiston, Idaho, will lose a little barging scam that's run on local taxpayer subsidies and federal money. It's not even economically viable. The port of Lewiston is 450 miles inland, and it's basically a trucking depot. And they run barges full of lentils and wheat down the Snake and Columbia Rivers, right alongside the interstate freeway system and functioning railroad tracks. Meanwhile the salmon are running down the highway in trucks or being barged. So the lentils and petroleum products are on the river. The salmon are traveling by land. This would be funny except that when you remove the fish from the river and ship them by barge or truck 350 miles, their homing instincts are destroyed.

Salmon migrate via "instruments" so sensitive that we don't even understand them. It has to do with electromagnetic fields, it has to do with incredibly subtle things with distinct chemistry in various watersheds. When they release these barged or trucked fish below Bonneville Dam, within 80 or 100 miles of the ocean, these 6-inch, 7-inch baby salmon that have been "helped" past the dams are completely disoriented; between 40 and 60 percent of them die. The barges destroy their navigational equipment. A huge percent of them are unable to find their way back to their home streams.

I said I was politically motivated, but I don't feel the least bit political. These are really basic components of the world that I've loved all my life, the world I've been given. My first novel was a comedy about a fly-fisherman. I've made a living off of rivers and salmon. I feel grateful for them, and in return would like to do my best to defend them. To try to make that a literary venture and enjoyable to read is a challenge. To try and maintain a sense of humor and still describe just how gruesome a politician like Washington senator Slade Gorton is, or Mark Hatfield—it's a challenge.

TBR: *How successful do you feel the essay on salmon is in your book?*

DJD: Huge numbers of my *Sierra* essay were reprinted and distributed at the Corps' public "salmon hearings." They were available as counter-propaganda to the Army Corps of Engineer brochures about how well the dams work and the National Marine Fisheries Service's ridiculous brochures about how great their barging program is. It was nice to funnel the work of all these cutting-edge biologists into the political process and have it right there, available for people to read next to all this other propaganda.

When they did that EIS (Environmental Impact Survey) thing, 80 percent of the people in the Pacific Northwest said they would gladly remove these four dams. Among the 80 percent were the entire Seattle City Council. The power grid is nationwide. There would be no disruption of service to anybody in the Northwest if the four Lower Snake River dams were removed. They provide 3.5 percent of the Pacific Northwest's hydro-power. If they were removed tomorrow, my electricity would go up four or five dollars a month. Eighty percent of the people in the Northwest, knowing this, said, "We choose salmon. We'll gladly pay more money." The federal government is ignoring that statistic, but it's great to know that 80 percent of the people in the Northwest still love wild salmon enough to make a small monthly financial sacrifice for them. That's something I wouldn't have known if I hadn't written an article.

TBR: *So part of the enjoyment of writing an article is being involved in the process?*

DJD: Yes. Being involved in the process also meant educating the public on how the Indian tribes have been screwed, how commercial fishing communities have been screwed, how endangered wild salmon are paying for the power crisis (so called) in California that was exploited largely by Enron. Salmon are paying for the mistakes made in corporate offices in Texas!

Another thing salmon have paid for with their lives and with extinctions is the $8 billion debt created by three failed nuclear plants in Washington State in the eighties, known as WHOOPS. Salmon die so that the Bonneville Power Administration can service that loan. How they service the loan is by running the dams for maximum hydro and just grinding the salmon up as they run the gauntlet. But you've got me on a tirade! We're going to have to move into some different territory here.

I want to say some things about my book. I wanted to write some things about the small streams, the rivers, the wildlife, the birds, the intact natural tapestry that I fell in love with as a child, because I think it's becoming increasingly rare for children to be able to make contact with that kind of a world—to be able to wander freely through it. I also wanted to talk about the connection between the natural world and the kind of spiritual perspective you might call "creation mysticism." Intimacy with the intricate systems of nature leads to a kind of experience that is just, in a natural way, almost visionary, compared to what you get from watching TV. So I wrote some pieces that talked about that whole lovely process.

I wanted, even in the somewhat dark pieces, to write with humor and avoid this kind of wretched environmental journalism that one of my friends calls "spiral-downers," where all you can feel is despair. One of the things that hanging out with rivers and wild creatures does is instill hope. Salmon do nothing but hope, even if their situation is completely hopeless. They spend every ounce of energy they have trying to defeat

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impossible industrial odds against them, to return to their native ground, beat their bodies into the gravel, and sustain their kind. When you watch that kind of courage, that kind of heroism, it's an almost Christ-like impulse, hard-wired into a wild animal—the salmon. You think: No wonder Slade Gorton hates them! They're so moving and poetic and beautiful, they're up to something that's totally self-sacrificial, which is violently opposed to the whole kind of Republican position of selfishness as a virtue—the whole capitalist position. Democrats are just as bad—selfishness as an ideal. Selfishness is not an ideal. Selfishness is selfishness. The natural world is full of sacrifice, and all of us are sustained by endless sacrifices. The sun sacrifices itself to keep this whole planet going. These little sunflowers growing in my yard here, they spend the summer collecting those solar rays and then they spend the winter feeding their faces to birds. The natural world is a symphony of self-sacrifice.

TBR: *The spirit you talk about is not your basic spiritual writing.*

DJD: If you read cutting-edge physics there are new discoveries of things like e-fields and morphogenetic fields. These are invisible fields from outside any organism. An example of a morphogenetic field: If we went outside right now and cut a little sprig off a willow tree and jammed that sprig in the ground, there would be no information stored inside that willow sprig that would enable it to grow a new willow tree. But it would glean morphogenetic forces out of thin air or space or nowhere or God, and it would grow a new willow tree. If we took a dragonfly egg and chopped it in half, that should effectively destroy it. But instead it would grow two intact organisms because, again, of morphogenetic fields, not because of anything that is materially contained in the egg. So cutting-edge science has reached close to metaphysics, close to a kind of poetry that's been described in the great world wisdom traditions, particularly some of the Indian traditions like the Upanishads. It's become impossible for physics professors who are cutting-edge and up-to-date not to sound like mystics. Stephen Hawking makes statements that sound like John of the Cross at times. He talks about the invisible fire that gives power to the equations. That's pretty cool. That's like the image of the fire hidden in water, in that salmon essay I tried to talk about. How the hell do you get this courageous life out of frigid water?

TBR: *How do the quotes throughout your book emphasize what you are trying to say?*

DJD: Literature is created when we balance on the shoulders of the writers, thinkers, and imaginers who came before us. We are not self-generated. The little epigrams you find at the heads of chapters in my novels and my essays I consider to be homeopathic doses of the wisdom and insight (or occasionally just good jokes or even interestingly stupid statements) of the writers, thinkers, imaginers who have come before me.

TBR: *The story about Jeremiah Ransom, "Fearless Leader," was my favorite. I related to it because of my experiences in fly-fishing. Where did Jeremiah come from, and when was it written?*

DJD: Jeremiah Ransom is my alter-ego. When I wrote *The River Why*, it became a cult book for a while. It was coincident with the boom in fly-fishing. It created some pretty serious guilt in me, as I had no intention to popularize this thing. But it kind of served that purpose. In about 1986, I tallied up everything that bugs the shit out of me about fly-fishermen—particularly high-end, private fishing club, have-to-pay-a-guide fly-fishers with name-brand everything and $10,000 worth of techno-shit covering their bodies. I just wanted to lambaste those guys. I launched a tirade against them that was incredibly fun to write. The story is in *River Teeth*. "Not Rocking the Boats." Jeremiah lives in my mind. He represents the anger of a lot of people who fished in the comparative tranquillity and solitude of the sixties and seventies.

TBR: *In the chapter "Beauty/Violence/Grief/Frenzy/Love: On the Contemplative Versus the Activist Life" you describe your fiction-writing persona as "benign, monomaniac; a self-giving narcissist; a Glasperlenspieler."*

DJD: That's a reference to Herman Hesse's *Magister Ludi*, the German name of the novel. He finished it right before he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. *The Glass Bead Game* was the American nickname. It's a fantastic novel. The guys in that novel are kind of like monks that play this game that's like a cross between chess, some incredibly sophisticated video game, and writing a novel. The maestro of that artistic/sport tradition is called the Magister Ludi.

TBR: *Some say that exposure to television desensitizes us to crime and violence. What desensitization has there been with you and researching salmon and dams for your book? How does it affect you?*

DJD: I can't read all the biological studies and stay there very long. Those kinds of studies aren't made for consumption by human beings. The Army Corps of Engineers and National Marine Fisheries Service, which are in charge of the Endangered Species Act, have created a stack of documents more than 10 feet high. It's ridiculous how many studies they've done. They are incredibly repetitious. They are very stupidly worded. The science is faulty. The purpose of the documents, literally, is to be so thick that nobody will read them and no one will hold them accountable. The documents they submit to Congress and to senators, they hand them 3,000-page manuscripts! How many congressmen or -women read those? The answer is very easy: zero. Nobody reads these multimillion-dollar taxpayer-funded studies. I couldn't read those documents either. But I did a tour of the gauntlet of four Columbia and four Lower Snake River dams with a fisheries biologist who spent 30 years of his life studying that. I allowed him to just pour forth whatever was in his mind and heart based on a lifetime given to this. The tour with this one guy was really moving, no quasi-scientific, politically motivated crap. I just converted his stream of information, hope, anger, and despair into a narrative that would be accessible to a larger readership than this fisheries biologist could reach. That was kind of the essence of my effort in "A Prayer for the Salmon's Second Coming."

TBR: *An interesting character in* My Story as Told by Water

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is the river soldier with a rifle converted into a fly rod. It seems there's more to that character than just being a fisher on your home river. Why a fly-fisher, and what does that figure signify?

DJD: I was a kid during the Vietnam era. When I was even younger, it was poignant and painful to see the attitudes toward Indian tribes, the glorification of U.S. Cavalry soldiers, the whole Ronald Reagan set of prejudices that in Vietnam killed 2.5 million people for no reason. The river-soldier thing was an epiphany that I described briefly in the book. It was a little cavalry soldier whose rifle I demilitarized by ripping off the stock and turning the barrel into a fly rod. A hundred speeches and essays into this unwanted second life I've had as a defender of wild systems and places, I realized I was doing a kind of soldiering—that this little totem cavalry creature I created when I was young had really invaded me in a serious way. It became a part of who I am, which is an agape defender of anything that's clean, wild, and predominately enlivened by water. The reason he's a fly-fisher rather than a bait-fisher is the rifle was one of those muskets that's kind of long, and there were bamboo fly rods in my house, from earliest memory, that fascinated me as objects. I found them beautiful. The first time I saw trout flies, I found them beautiful, too. When I was four my father took me fishing to this awful reservoir outside of Portland. He sat me on a rock with a bamboo fly rod. It was the first time I fished. He tied a great big red fly on the end and cast it 6 feet out in the water and said a trout might come and grab it. So, I'm looking at this scarlet fly—I might as well have been fishing with a Barbie doll in a red dress, in terms of the chances of catching a fish. But I was so excited at the possibility that a fish might come out of the depths and chomp this fly, I just sat there for hours. The water mesmerized me. The thing I love about a fly is that it's a handmade work of fiction that allows you in a very direct way to insinuate yourself into the wild food chain. With your fiction you dupe this very sophisticated wild animal that's 60, 70, even 80 feet away from you. The animal is invisible. The only signal you have is this subtle little rise form. To throw this tiny work of fiction 80 feet away from yourself and then have something as big, strong, and wild as some of the trout we hooked today appear out of nowhere and accept this offering and play with you (even though from the trout's perspective it's not play)—it's one of the most subtle and satisfying art forms that human beings have come up with. I find it energizing. If I have a rod in my hand, and think there might be fish 10 miles down the trail, I'll walk 10 miles. Take the rod away, I'll only go a mile and say, "Shit. Let's go home." You watch a fly-fisher on the river. I watched you today for four hours; you were in one position. You were basically on your knees, on a stone bank, like a damned yogi. But there you were in this distorted posture. That is a power coming to you because of the fly rod. You try to do that in your Zen meditation class, it's just a lot of pain and nonsense, whereas on the river it's flowing. It comes easy. That is the fisher's sensibility. Other people get it from their putter or their driver or tennis racket or, God forbid, their jet-ski. Robert Michael Pyle, this friend of mine, gets it from butterflies.

TBR: *There are four photographs in your book. Why those visual images to go with those stories?*

DJD: The first photograph is of an articulated locomotive stopped by Celilo Falls, the engineer reaching for a salmon netted by Indian tribes that inhabited Celilo for 11,000 years. The way the photo got cropped, you can't see Celilo Falls to the left, but there's just so much poignant information in this image. Celilo was the oldest consecutively inhabited village on earth, pre-Columbus, pre-European settlement. It was, for many thousands of years, the largest tribal gathering place west of the Mississippi; in a manner of speaking, seasonally, the largest city in North America. This cultural treasure was buried behind a dam for the convenience of hydroelectric. It was devastating to the tribes, but it was also the loss of one of the most culturally rich sites on the face of the earth. It's really silly that it's buried behind a dam given the fact that there are no other such cultural sites in America, and there are 75,000 dams in the Lower 48. There are 227 dams more than 110 feet tall in the Columbia/Snake River system. Why did this one dam have to be built over the 11,000-year-old village? That's the question I felt this photograph asked more effectively than I could ask it in language. It brings the reality of the place home.

The second photograph at the head of the "Activism" section is by Emmet Gowin. It's an aerial photograph of the Columbia River. It looks like a silver ribbon in the photo, but the river there is actually a mile wide. There's a grid to one side of the river. That grid is all that's left of Hanford City, where the plutonium triggers of every nuclear bomb in America were manufactured. The city is a radioactive disaster site now. It has a population of zero, yet that city is the reason why the four Lower Snake River dams exist and are destroying the inland West's wild salmon. That Cold War relic is why we stand in danger of losing the Pacific salmon, upon which 300 species of flora and fauna depend.

The third photo, at the head of a section called "Fishing the Inside Passage," is just a gloriously lyrical landscape photograph of a beautiful stream that's turned me on for 50 years. The other image is a picture of a postcard that the philosopher Henry Bugbee sent me, shortly before he died. I just thought it made a wonderful final chapter to the Henry essay.

TBR: *What of yours can we expect to read next?*

DJD: Pretentious as it sounds, I felt years ago—in high school, in fact—that the West's greatest metaphysical comedy is in need of an update. All comedy has a shelf life. Dante's humor, great as it once was, is now ascertainable only if we pursue the punchlines by delving into the explanatory footnotes. And as everyone but academics knows, to explain a joke is to ruin it.

This implies no fault in Dante. His staying power has been amazing. Compare the theological system of *The Divine Comedy* to some other highly systematic work of humans—say, Microsoft Word. Word has been updated, what, 29 times since 1987? While Dante's comedy has remained in the same version 1.1 since 1320. That's a feat!

But *The Divine Comedy*, like the cathedrals of Europe, is not impervious to the corrosive atmosphere of our age. The modern

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industrial world—and the philosophical and economic suppositions that fuel its suicidal engines—has splattered our comprehension of *The DC* with the literary equivalent of acid rain. This is more than metaphor: I believe the same modes of thought and action that create raindrops that literally devour cathedrals have likewise devoured our ability to fully embrace Dante's vision.

So I'm working on an update. Two or three volumes of contemporary comedy which, whether or not it manages to be divine, will, I hope, be funny. The first volume is called "Eastern Western," and I hope to finish it this year. ■

INTERVIEWER/WRITER: **Zac Sexton** was born in Lapeer, MI, in 1978. He grew up in north-central Wyoming, at the foot of the Bighorn Mountains. He is a senior at the University of Idaho working on a B.S. in journalism; the outdoor columnist for the *Lewiston Morning Tribune* in Lewiston, ID; and a freelance journalist/photographer, fly-tyer, and fly-casting instructor. He currently lives outside of Moscow, ID.