

POSSESSED

RIVERS AND STONES

by AKIKO BUSCH

For a period of several years, I found myself preoccupied with swimming across rivers. Whatever divides there were in my life at that time, swimming across rivers spoke to the efforts I was making at breaching them. And so for several summers I swam in rivers as often as I could. It started with swimming across the Hudson River, then the Delaware and the Connecticut, later the Susquehanna, Monongahela, and Cheat, and finally, the Mississippi and the Current River in southeastern Missouri.

During this period of time, I found myself acquiring a collection of rings by the jeweler Gabriella Kiss. She is a neighbor and friend, and so I came to have these rings in that way that such a collection is gathered. Sometimes my husband gave me a ring as a gift. From time to time, Gabriella gave me a ring, once a purple lace agate, another time a milky green moonstone. A dazzling fire opal drop was given to me by a friend at dinner one evening when I admired it on her finger. And sometimes, too, I would come upon a ring in Gabriella's studio, and a sense of urgency would compel me to buy it. And during that period, as I swam across one river and then another, all the while collecting this ring and that, I began to associate the rings with the rivers.

As a writer, I have always been interested in the way physical artifacts come to represent and reflect human experience. Logic, I have noticed, vanishes in the process. Landscape and time can collapse in on themselves. Part of the beauty of these rings lies in their simplicity. Their simple bezel set, sometimes delicately scalloped, was inspired by the jewelry in sixteenth-century Flemish paintings. Five hundred years later and a continent away, the beauty and economy of such a setting has not diminished.

There is no geological accuracy that links any of these rings to any of these rivers. The origins of a bezel-set emerald are not in the turbid, grey-green waters of the Hudson River, but in a mine in Colombia, yet the four times I swam across the Hudson River, it was essential that I wear the emerald; in its own way, the ring belonged to the river, and the river to the ring. And the cloudy green moonstone was quarried not anywhere near the Connecticut River, but in Sri Lanka; still, it has come to evoke that soft, languid river. A tiny blue star sapphire from a seam of the earth in Thailand was able to speak to the elusive character of the subaquatic Delaware.



The Hudson River, I learned early on, is a river that flows both ways. Equipped with a tide, it is an estuary as well as a river, and sometimes it flows to the north, sometimes to the south. Swimming in the Hudson was a lesson in order, and how a sense of order is sometimes established when people and things do exactly the opposite of what you would expect. And so it was with these rings as well. It's a funny thing about stones. The conventional wisdom is that they weigh you down. But as sometimes happens with physical objects, use and function can be turned on their heads, and just as a river is capable of changing its direction, so this collection of stones came to confer a sense of lightness, a sense of buoyancy even.

I know that people who are given to regular sports are given as well to ritual, and often to the ritualistic obsession with gear: a pair of shoes that is sure to carry you across the track at utmost speed or a special shirt that enables you to traverse the rock face. All of these stones became my essential accessories. In much the way some swimmers depend upon a particular pair of goggles or fins, I came to rely upon a small star sapphire, a blue chalcedony, an emerald, all of these the talismans that would carry me safely from one shore to the other.

"All stones come from the constant heat and pressure of the earth," Gabriella told me once. When I heard those words, I knew that part of the satisfaction in wearing these rings into the rivers came from knowing how these bright stones taken from veins found deep in the ground could now coincide with the fluid arteries that stream across its surface; and from the idea that something so enduring as a stone can begin as a liquid or a gas, a bubble, a stream of heat, some disturbance miles beneath the earth's facade. For all the discipline, design, and craft with which these rings are made, they also speak to the notion that beauty is random and improvisational. By that time there were nine rivers and twelve rings.


And wearing these rings together as I tend to do, it is possible to believe that these rivers are congregating on my hands just as surely and swiftly as they do in my own recall; that the light and polish of these stones can speak to the dazzling variations of taste and texture and color and light that I found in all these rivers. When the glint of an andalucite faceted garnet



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casts a sliver of light on a sapphire drop, it occurs to me that the curious geography of human imagination is a waterway where it is possible for the Hudson and the Connecticut to momentarily converge. Where beauty and memory coincide is a haphazard geoscience of its own.

When I look at all these rings on my fingers now, I think of those rivers. The fissure in the flash of white sapphire carries something of the clarity in the Current River; the dusty gray of the blue chalcedony holds some particle of the Hudson; and the radiant graphics of a dendritic quartz, seeming vestiges of some ancient moss, evoke that confluence where the northern and western branches of the Susquehanna coincide. It is possible for this handful of stones to speak to all those ways we find to distill human

experience; to find a way to carry it with us. It is possible also to think I am wearing bits of those waters. Most of all, it is possible for me to believe now that those rivers are something I can hold onto with my own two hands. 

AKIKO BUSCH'S most recent book of essays is *Nine Ways to Cross a River: Midstream Reflections on Swimming and Getting There from Here*, published by Bloomsbury/USA in 2007. She lives in the Hudson Valley.

opposite
GABRIELLA KISS
Hand Earrings, 1984
silver, crystal drops

above
Akiko Busch wearing 18k
gold medieval stacking rings
by GABRIELLA KISS from
her collection
top hand, from left:
dendritic quartz, purple lace
agate, emerald, sapphire,
moonstone, blue chalcedony

bottom hand: sapphire,
citrine, fire opal, tourmaline,
tree carved in green
tourmaline, ceylon
moonstone
Photo: Gabriella Kiss