

*Dedicated to Mayor Sylvester Turner and the City of Houston
2016 Houston Arts Reception for Elected Officials
Robin Davidson, Houston Poet Laureate
February 29, 2016*

To Speak of Rivers

after Langston Hughes

Out of land, *ancient, dusky*, out of marsh's *muddy bosom*—

a city rises skyward, each slab and brick,

each wooden beam, steel girder, mirrored surface,

a collective act of faith that a single port imagined and rooted

in a soil's shifting can hold, call us home.

In the Biggers mural women of color move like a river

through time, history, and the reams of fabric they carry, quilt.

The woman in their midst, almost angel,

shines amber beneath what could be thread

or basket straw or rough-hewn wings,

and she looks southward toward the city's sculpted skyline.

On Dowling Street in the heart of Houston

men's voices rise, their guitar strings turn harp, then trumpet—

Lightning Hopkins, Texas Johnny Brown, Earl Gilliam, Grady Gaines—

until the street fills with night and song,

and I hear my own son's voice, *Born in Houston*, trill among them.

On Yupon Street in the chapel named for Rothko,

the wall-sized work beneath the atrium ceiling's shining

opens into luminous black, plum, rose. The painter believed

in the power of light to save us, just as

Newman believed in elemental form, color, the ancient

obelisk broken, rising out of water, de Menil's monument

to a great man's prayers turned earthward.

In the papyrus fragment of a first-century gospel, a man stands

on the bank of the Jordan, a handful of seeds in his palm.

He releases them into the current that fills first with seedlings,

then sprouts, then trees—quinces, figs, apples.

In Fourth Ward, a woman lies down in the coffin-like hole of a street

where patterned brick laid by freedmen is dug out, lost. Her body's

weight is a port, the rooted call rising

out of land *ancient, dusky*, out of marsh's *muddy bosom*—moving like the ghost

of a river whose tide fills with trees, their sap like human voices

soaring, a singing turned city, and free.