

DAVID HERNANDEZ
Meditation on Impermanence

In Raphael's fresco

The School of Athens, we see within
the large concentric arc

an assembly of philosophers, astronomers, mathematicians, scholars—
some in discussions, some writing
with quills, two reading, at least one reading
what he wrote, and one

wholly in the zone of his own
thinking, oblivious to
the hullabaloo around him, cut off

from the rest: Heraclitus.

The one who said, "We both step
and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not."
Penned it in his native tongue:

Ποταμοῖς τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἐμβαίνομέν τε καὶ οὐκ ἐμβαίνομεν, εἴμεν τε καὶ οὐκ εἴμεν.

The accepted interpretation is one cannot
step into the same river twice
since, moment to moment, a river
rearranges the mosaic of its face.
Same goes with us and all the reshuffling
we do nonstop: body and thoughts,
cells and breath.

Our bodies are sixty percent water,
the brain alone seventy-seven percent,
we carry a river inside us, we are
and are not
this current passing between us.

Praise the dead for bestowing us these, our waves.
Downstream, we'll do the same.



Look how Heraclitus looks so

intently at his left

leather boot. That knowing smile
nestled in his ragged beard.

I like to think Raphael was thinking Heraclitus is thinking

about his foot entering
the scrolling water

the first time.

The second.

Then back

onto the riverbank

to shuck off his boot, tip it

just enough

to let the river free.



River in Greek: ποτάμι

River in Latin: fluvio

River in Spanish: río

River in Vietnamese: sông

River in English, chiseled on a marble slab, lying on a hill in Tennessee, for the next one hundred thousand years (wherein each subsequent line denotes ten thousand years, the natural erosion that comes with the passage of time):

intonaco: Final coat of plaster, the smoothest,
on which a fresco is painted
while the plaster is still wet.

pounce bag: Small square of muslin
filled with powdered charcoal,
cinched and tied off.

pouncing: To transfer a cartoon
directly onto the intonaco
with a pounce bag.



Raphael needed first to scrape away
a section of his fresco—some steps,
some flooring—then apply another intonaco,

transfer the cartoon of Heraclitus, pounce
his stippled outline
onto the still-wet plaster, and finally

brushstroke him into being:
flesh, hair, the nest of his beard.

And his lilac-colored
stonecutter's smock, his tan
workmen's boots.

And the marble block
where he rests his elbow,
where a black inkwell is set
precariously on the corner.

And the up-curved paper beneath his hand,
five lines already written, the sixth
half finished.

And all the shadows
woven over him, encroaching toward
what is lit.



A bean, a nearly
500-year-old bean was found

during the restoration of the fresco.
Kidney or cannellini

the article does not say, long
green Romano pole

or violet podded stringless
I will never know. There is

a theory: “probably from
the lunch of one of the plasterers.”

Slob. Clodhopper. (You think
any of Michelangelo’s workmen

were this careless?) The fallen
bean might explain why

restorers detected problems
with the plaster’s ingredients:

instead of sand from northern Italy,
Raphael’s men mixed

volcanic rock from Mount Vesuvius.
Hence a faster ruin.

Hence the cracks forking down
from the fresco’s upper region

like rivers, lightning, the intricate
scaffolding of branches, or our own

arteries dividing to delicate vessels,
divide again: thinnest of fissures.



Circa 1510, Raphael

painted da Vinci as Plato,
made Plato and da Vinci one,

right hand gesturing

heavenward, beyond
the stone archway to

that fractured sky, that volcanic eruption

hidden within the clouds.

See how the breaking

creeps toward the one raised finger?

This is the contract we make by breathing.

We sign it every second.