“Yes, as everyone knows meditation and water are wedded forever,” Herman Melville writes in the opening chapter of Moby-Dick, and the history of nonfiction—from Mark Twain’s Life on the Mississippi to Anne Carson’s “Kinds of Water” to Olivia Laing’s To the River—furnishes many meditative examples of literary hydrography, writing that is at once about water and watery, formally and stylistically fluid. Having gone swimming through that literature, I attempt to add to it, but I depart from the premise that in the 21st century, Americans drink from and bathe in a kind of River Lethe of our own making. Our aqueducts are buried underground. Our rivers, away from the downtown waterfronts, are hidden from view. What happens in our water treatment plants, as the crisis in Flint reminds us, has become for most of us mysterious. At a time when aquifers are running low, the drought-struck West is on fire, and the waterworks of America are in disrepair, our estrangement from water has consequences. A thirsty hydrography for the Anthropocene, informed by the environmental sciences and the environmental humanities as well as by the literary history of water writing, might, I’d like to think, provide some slight corrective to our terrestrial vision, an antidote to forgetting.

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