

excerpts

DRAFT

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1.

there was something in the river that went around the island between the city and the border. she felt it, when she was on the waves in the little boat. she didn't say anything, because what could be said?

but she felt it, and she felt it growing.

it made a sort of sense to her that something would grow there. nough things went in for something to have created itself down there.

sunny days, she took passengers over by the bridge to see the cars in the water. mostly, you couldn't see the cars. but sometimes, you'd catch a glimpse of something shiny, metal, not of the river, something big and swallowed, that had a color of cherry red, of 1964, American-made dream.

these days, the river felt like it had back then, a little too swollen, too active, too attentive.

too many days, she sat behind the wheel of the little boat, dialing down her apprehension.

she had been born not too far from the river, on the east side, chalmers. as a child she played in a park along the river banks and she could remember when a black person couldn't dock his boat at the harbor. she remembered it because all she'd ever wanted was to be on that river, even as a little black girl whose family said boats were bougie white shit.

she thought the river was freedom. in that boat she felt liberated all day. she loved to anchor near the underground railroad memorial and imagine runaway slaves standing on one bank and how good, terrifying, but good that water must have felt, under the boat, or all over the skin, or frozen under the feet.

this was a good river for just boating - you wouldn't jump in for any money. no one would.

she watched the fisherman reel in something, slow like he didn't care at all. what he pulled up, a long fish, had an oily sheen on its scales. she tried to catch his eye with her disgust and her warning, but all he saw was a bougie black girl with a boat. he turned with his catch, heading for the ice box.

next time she was out on the water, she watched two babies on the rocks by the river, daring each other to get closer. the mothers were in deep and focused gossip, while also minding a grill that uttered a gorgeous smell over the river waves. the waves were moving aggressive today, and she wanted to yell to the babies, or the mamas, but couldn't get the words together.

you can't yell just any old thing in detroit. you have to get it right. folks remember.

as she watched, one baby touched his bare toe in, his trembling ashy mocha body stretched out into the rippling nuclear aquamarine green surface. then quite suddenly he didn't laugh, but rather jumped up and backed away from the river, spooked in every limb. he took off running past his friend, all the way to his mama's thighs, which he grabbed and buried himself in, babbling incoherent confessions in her flesh.

the mother didn't skip a beat or a word, just brushed him aside, ignoring his warning.

from the boat she thought: babies feel things, it's a damn shame we can't understand their warnings.

she thought: I want to ask that baby what he knows.

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she didn't judge that mama though. times were beyond tough. a moment to pause, to vent, to sit by the river and just talk, that was a rare and precious thing.

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off the river, out of the water, she found herself in an old friend's music studio, making sounds into his machines. he was known for his madness, his intimate marrow deep knowledge of the city, and his musical genius.

she asked him: what is up with the river?

he laughed first, but she didn't ask why.
here is what he said:

man, detroit is in that river. the whole river, and the parts of the river. certain parts – it's like a ancestral burying ground. it's like a holy vortex of energy.
like past the island? in the deep shits where them barges plow through? that was the hiding place, that was where you went if you loose tongue about the wrong thing, wrong people. man all kinds of sparkling souls been weighted down all the way into the mud in there, s'why some folks won't anchor with the city in view. might hook someone before they ghost! takes a while to become a proper ghost...

he left it at that. or rather, he kept going, but mostly about ghosts and not about the river.

she didn't agree with his theory.

didn't feel dead, what she felt in the river. felt other, felt alive and other.

*

peak of the summer was scorch that year, detroit could barely get dressed. the few people with jobs sat in icy offices watching the world waver outside. people without jobs survived in a variety of ways that all felt desperate in the heat.

seemed like every morning there'd be bodies, folks who'd lost Darwinian struggles during the sweaty night. bodies by the only overnight shelter, bodies in the fake gardens sponsored by coca-cola, bodies in potholes on streets strung with Christmas lights because the city turned off the streetlights.

detroit had a reputation for violence, and there was some truth to it, she knew it. but she often thought to herself, it's because people need more freedom in their lives. she loved to take detroiters out on her boat, watch them see the city that way for the first time.

she thought, if people could just spend some time on this river, regular, they would get that sense of freedom, not feel so trapped into the hardships of living without work, healthcare, food or dignity.

late one Sunday afternoon, after three weddings took place on the island, four pale bodies were seen floating in the surrounding river, on the far side. upon being dragged out of the water and onto the soil by gloved official hands, it was clear that the bodies, two adults and two children, were recently dead, hardly bloated, each one bruised as if they'd been in a massive struggle before the toxic river filled their lungs.

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they were from Pennsylvania.

on Monday she motored past the spot she'd heard the coast guard going on about over the radio. the water was moving about itself, swirling without any kind of reason. she shook her head, knowing things which couldn't be spoken aloud were getting out of hand.

violence against folks deemed to be not-detroiters was not a new phenomenon, but this was different - kids? drowning?

there was no small degree of tension between those from Detroit, and those who had come in more recently. she tried to keep an open heart to the new folks, most of them white - the city needed people to live in it, and job creation, right? and some of these new folk seemed to really care.

it could harden her heart a little each day, to see people showing up all the time with jobs, making new jobs for themselves and their friends, while folks born and raised here couldn't make a living, couldn't get investors for business. she heard entrepreneurs on the news speak of detroit as this exciting new blank canvas; she wondered if the new folks just couldn't see all the people there.

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the next tragedy came Tuesday, when a passel of new-local hipsters were out at the unsecret swimming spot on an inner waterway of the island. this tragedy didn't start with screams, but that is the first thing she heard, a wild cacophony of screaming through the thick reeds.

by the time she doubled back to the sliver of waterway and made it to the place of the screaming sounds, there was just a whimper, actually just one whimpering hipster and an island patrol, staring into the water.

she called out:
what happen?

the patrol looked up, young and terrified and trying to be in control:
well...no one is supposed to swim out here! and sounds like some kids were swimming out here! and now they are missing!

the whimpering hipster looked up slowly at the patrol, face both blank and betrayed. then the dry androgynous face turned to her and pointed at the water:
it took them.
it took them!

she looked over the side of the boat then, down into the shallows and seaweed. the water and weeds moved innocently enough, but there were telltale signs of guilt. she started scooping clues out with her net - a mangled pair of aviator glasses, three strips of natty red board shorts, the back half of a navy striped Tom's shoe, a tangle of bikini, and an unlikely pile of clean new bones of various lengths and origins.

she gathered these troubled spoils, clamping her mouth down against the lie 'I told you so', cause who had she told? and even now, as more kinds of police and coast guard showed up, what was there to say?

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something impossible was happening.

she felt bad for these hipsters. she knew some of their kind from her favorite bars in the city, and had never had a bad experience with any of them. she had taken boatloads of them on her river tours over the years. it wasn't their fault there were so many of them. hipsters and entrepreneurs were complicated locusts - they ate up everything in sight, but many of them were sweet people with big ideas.

they didn't deserve this, she thought. no one did.

they should have shut down the island then, at least told folks not to go in the water. but it wasn't a big deal, these island bodies were a small percentage of the bodies of summer, most of them stabbed, shot, strangled, stomped and starved. the city did nothing as swimmers, couples strolling on the river walk paths, and riverside picnickers went missing without explanation.

no one else seemed to notice that the bodies the river was taking that summer were not the bodies of detroiters. they were all those folks who had come to the city more recently, drawn by the promise of empty land and easy business, the opportunity available amongst the ruins of other peoples' lives.

she wasn't much on politics, but even she had noticed the shifts in the city, the way it was fading as it filled with people who didn't know how to see it. she knew what was coming, what always came with pioneers: strip malls and sameness. she'd seen it nough times.

so even though the river was getting dangerous, she didn't take it personally. she hated strip malls too.

then something happened that got folks' attention.

(closing):

she still went out in her boat, looking over the edges near the island, searching inside the river which was her most constant companion, for some clue, some explanation. and every now and then, squinting against the sun's reflection, she'd see through the blue, something swallowed, something caught, something held down so the city could survive, something that never died.

something alive.