

THE RIVER

adrienne maree brown



1.

something in the river haunted 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, and to whom?

but she felt it. and she felt it growing.

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

she was a water woman, had learned to boat as she learned to walk, and felt rooted in the river. she'd learned from her grandfather, who'd told her his life lessons on the water. he'd said, "black people come from a big spacious place, under a great big sky. this little country here, we have to fight for any inches we get. but the water has always helped us get free one way or another."

sunny days, she took paying passengers over by the belle isle bridge to see the cars in the water. mostly, you couldn't see anything. 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 felt a restlessness in the weeds and shadows that held detroit together. belle isle, an overgrown island, housed the ruins of a zoo, an aquarium, a conservatory, and the old yacht club. down the way were the abandoned, squatted towers

of the renaissance center, the tallest ode to economic crisis in the world.

she had been born not too far from the river, in chalmers, on the east side. as a child she played along the river banks. she could remember when a black person could only dock a boat at one black-owned harbor. she remembered it because all she'd ever wanted was to be on that river, especially after her grandfather passed. when she was old enough, she'd purchased the little boat, motor awkward on its backside, and named her *bessie* after her mama. her mama had taught her important things: how to love detroit, that gardening in their backyard was not a hobby but a strategy, and to never trust a man for the long haul.

mostly, she'd listened to her mama. and when she'd gone astray, she'd always been able to return to the river.

now she was 43, and 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 boating. you wouldn't jump in for any money. no one would.

she felt the same way about eating out of the river, but it was a hungry time. that morning she'd watched a fisherman reel in something, slow, like he didn't care at all. what he pulled up, a long slender fish, had an oily sheen on its scales. she'd tried to catch his eye with her disgust, offer a side eye warning to this stranger, but he turned with his catch, headed for the ice box.

she was aware of herself as a kind of outsider. she loved the city desperately and the people in it. but she mostly loved them from her boat. lately she wore her overalls, kept her graying hair short and natural, her sentences brief. her routine didn't involve too many humans. when she tried to speak, even small talk, there was so much sadness and grief in her mouth for the city disappearing before her eyes that it got hard to breathe.

next time she was out on the water, on a stretch just east of chene park, 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 suddenly he 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 to her flesh.

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

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

• • •

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

she asked him: *what's up with the river?*

he laughed first. she didn't ask why.

here is what he said: *your river? man, detroit is in that river. the whole river and the parts of the river. certain parts, it's like an 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 tongued about the wrong thing or the 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.

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. the city 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 like punishment 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 downtown garden sponsored by coca-cola, bodies in potholes on streets strung with christmas lights because the broke city turned off the streetlights.

late one sunday afternoon, after three weddings took place on the island, she heard a message come over the river radio: four pale bodies found floating in the surrounding river, on the far side. she tracked the story throughout the day. upon being dragged out of the water and onto the soil by gloved official hands, it was clear that the bodies, of two adults and two teenagers, were recently dead, hardly bloated, each one bruised as if they'd been in a massive struggle before the toxic river filled their lungs.

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 reason. she shook her head, knowing truths that couldn't be spoken aloud were getting out of hand.

she tried for years 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.

but it could harden her heart a little each day, to see people showing up all the time with jobs, or making new work 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, the signs everywhere that there was history and there was a people still living all over that canvas.

• • •

the next tragedy came tuesday, when a passel of new local hipsters were out at the island's un-secret swimming spot on an inner waterway of belle isle. this tragedy didn't start with screams, but that was the first thing she heard—a wild cacophony of screaming through the thick reeds.

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

she called out: *what happened?*

the patrol, a white kid himself, looked up, terrified and incredulous and trying to be in control. *well, some kids were swimming out here. now they're missing, and this one says a wave ate them!*

the kid turned away from the river briefly to look up at the patrol, slack-mouthed and betrayed. then the damp confused face turned to her and pointed at the water: *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: 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 with her net, 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?

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 they meant well.

they should have shut down the island then, but these island bodies were only a small percentage of the bodies of summer, most of them stabbed, shot, strangled, stomped, starved. authorities half-heartedly posted ambiguous warning flyers around the island 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. perhaps because it was a diverse body of people, all ages, all races. all folks who had come more recently, drawn by the promise of empty land and easy business, the opportunity available among the ruins of other peoples' lives.

she wasn't much on politics, but she hated 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 nuff 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.

• • •

the mayor's house was a mansion with a massive yard and covered dock on the river, overlooking the midwestern jungle of belle isle, and farther on, the shore of gentle canada.

this was the third consecutive white mayor of the great black city, this one born in grand rapids, raised in new york, and appointed by the governor. he'd entered office with economic promises on his lips, as usual, but so far he had just closed a few schools and added a third incinerator tower to expand detroit's growing industry as leading trash processor of north america.

the mayor had to entertain at home a few times a year, and his wife's job was to orchestrate elegance using the mansion as the backdrop. people came, oohed and aahed, and then left the big empty place to the couple. based on the light patterns she observed through the windows on her evening boat rides, she suspected the two spent most of their time out of the public eye happily withdrawn to opposite wings.

she brought the boat past the yard and covered dock every time she was out circling the island looking for sunset. as the summer had gone on, island disappearances had put the spook in her completely,

and she circled farther and farther from the island's shores, closer and closer to the city.

which meant that on the evening of the mayor's august cocktail party, she was close to his yard. close enough to see it happen.

dozens of people coated the yard with false laughter, posing for cameras they each assumed were pointed in their direction. members of the press were there, marking themselves with cameras and tablets and smartphones, with the air of journalists covering something relevant. the mayor was aiming for dapper, a rose in his lapel.

as she drifted through the water, leaving no wake, the waves started to swell erratically. in just a few moments, the water began thrashing wildly, bucking her. it deluged the front of her little boat as she tried to find an angle to cut through. looking around, she saw no clear source of disruption, just a single line of waves moving out from the island behind her, clear as a moonbeam on a midnight sea.

she doubled the boat around until she was out of the waves, marveling at how the water could be smooth just twenty feet east. she looked back and saw that the waves continued to rise and roll, smacking against the wall that lined the mayor's yard.

the guests, oblivious to the phenomenon, shouted stories at each other and heimlich-manuevered belly laughter over the sound of an elevator jazz ensemble.

again she felt the urge to warn them, and again she couldn't think of what to say. could anyone else even see the clean line of rising waves? maybe all this time alone on the boat was warping her mind.

as she turned to move along with her boat, feeling the quiet edge of sanity, the elevator music stopped, and she heard the thumping of a microphone being tested. there he was, slick, flushed, wide and smiling. he stood on a little platform with his back to the river, his guests and their champagne flutes all turned toward him. the media elbowed each other half-heartedly, trying to manifest an interesting shot.

that's when it happened.

first thing was a shudder, just a bit bigger than the quake of summer 2010 which had shut down work on both sides of the river. and then one solitary and massive wave, a sickly bright green whip up out of the blue river, headed toward the mayor's back.

words were coming out her mouth, incredulous screams twisted with a certain glee: *the island's coming! the river is going to eat all you carpetbaggers right up!*

when she heard what she was saying she slapped her hand over her mouth, ashamed, but no one even looked in her direction. and if they had they would have seen naught but a black water woman, alone in a boat.

the wave was over the yard before the guests noticed it, looking up with grins frozen on their faces. it looked like a trick, an illusion. the mayor laughed at their faces before realizing with an animated double take that there was something behind him.

as she watched, the wave crashed over the fence, the covered dock, the mayor, the guests, and the press, hitting the house with its full force. with a start, a gasp of awe, she saw that the wave was no wider than the house.

nothing else was even wet.

the wave receded as fast as it had come. guests sprawled in all manner of positions, river water dripping down their supine bodies, some tossed through windows of the house, a few in the pear tree down the yard.

frantically, as humans do after an incident, they started checking themselves and telling the story of what had just happened. press people lamented over their soaked equipment, guests straightened their business casual attire into wet order, and security detail blew their cover as they desperately looked for the mayor.

she felt the buoys on the side of her boat gently bump up against the river wall and realized that her jaw had dropped and her hands fallen from the wheel. the water now was utterly calm in every direction.

still shocked, she gunned the engine gently back toward the mansion.

the mayor was nowhere to be seen. nor was his wife. and others were missing. she could see the smallness of the remaining guests. all along the fence was party detritus, similar to that left by the swallowed hipsters. heeled shoes, pieces of dresses and slacks. on the surface of the water near the mansion, phones and cameras floated.

on the podium, the rose from the mayor's lapel lay, looking as if it had just bloomed.

• • •

the city tried to contain the story, but too many journalists had been knocked about in the wave, felt the strange all-powerful nature of it, saw the post-tsunami yard full of only people like themselves, from detroit.

plus the mayor was gone.

the crazy, impossible story made it to the public, and the public panicked.

she watched the island harbor empty out, the island officially closed with cement blockades across the only bridge linking it to the city. the newly sworn-in mayor was a local who had been involved in local gardening work, one of the only people willing to step up into the role. he said this was an opportunity, wrapped in a crisis, to take the city back.

she felt the population of the city diminish as investors and pioneers packed up, looking for fertile new ground.

and she noticed who stayed, and it was the same people who had always been there. a little unsure of the future maybe, but too deeply rooted to move anywhere quickly. for the first time in a long time, she knew what to say.

it never did touch us y'know. maybe, maybe it's a funny way to do it, but maybe it's a good thing we got our city back?

and folks listened, shaking their heads as they tried to understand, while their mouths agreed: *it ain't how I'd have done it, but the thing is done.*

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, caught, held down so the city could survive. something that never died.

something alive.