

3rd Precinct, South Minneapolis, May 28, 2020

We walk past the State Patrol and National Guard. They're all knee pads and machine guns. No barrier lines today, just little knots of them. Watching. It's the end of May. I hop over twisted metal and smoking concrete down the center of East Lake where the sidewalks are inaccessible and slog through ankle-deep banks of water gathering from geysers pouring through high holes in tipping apartment buildings. Downed power lines spark too close to the pools and a new river of fire mitigation and sewage is forming over the memory of old tributaries.

We would escape the city to the headwaters of north central Minnesota in May when I was a kid, camp in shadows between old growth white pines and tall white spruce along LaSalle Creek and Lake Itasca. Coarse snags and furred logs crowded like ruins as stone-black glacial waters rushed up and fell south. Did the waters know they'd swell and meet into the Mississippi? Did they know what they'd witness along the way?

It's over 80 degrees out, but it's hard to tell where the heat's coming from, the sun or the steaming streets. Looks like our drug store and grocery store and post office and liquor store and bank and library and gas station and pawn shop are closed up or just... gone. Some buildings still stand, but only the outlines of them, like a kid's line drawing of a city in brown and gray. There's light shining through where there shouldn't be light. Shadows folded up where there shouldn't be shadows. The shapes of the city are not quite what they were. Already it feels like a thousand years have passed since people lived here. But we live here.

The plywood covering the windows of buildings left standing has spray painted messages like, “elderly family inside, please don’t burn.” Folding tables are blooming like riverine chanterelles in patches of shade, offering bandages, coffee, masks, boxes of cereal. People push the charred building guts into piles with kitchen brooms and tape cardboard signs to kitchen chairs in the intersections, warning of unstable walls and crumbling earth. Old men fold into folding chairs with smoking red eyes. Watching.

A few blocks east, the river runs dark with gutter ash and burnt roofing tar and charred insulation.

I walk to the Target at East Lake and Minnehaha. Glass doors shattered, their frames torn off. Inside there’s a carpet of debris in a wide, wide spaciousness, like a bomb exploded. I feel heat in my chest, and hope that everyone who needed diapers and a pretty dress, baby Tylenol and bottled water just went right in there and took it. I start forward, drawn toward that maw and its glass-shard teeth, into the belly of it all, when my phone hums. A text. “This is where you live?”

Is this where I live? She won’t say “protests.” She says “riots.” She says, “If they had been on their best behavior, people would have listened to them.”

If I had been on my best behavior.

I stop in front of the charred box of the 3rd Precinct Police Station. Breathe deep. I remember reading once that a river diverted, its flow redrawn by civil engineering, will begin to unearth what's buried along its new path.

3rd Precinct, South Minneapolis, November 4, 2020

November 4. Go bag. Again. Three tens and a two-dollar bill my dad gave me for a Diwali offering last year. A faded stack of marigold blossoms, singed from the burning *diyas* on the altar. I don't know why I pack them. A half-sharp knife, mace, great-aunt's silver coin, phone charger, Flamin' Hot Funyuns, cashews, one book—the one closest to the front door, a dusty chair leg prop under backpacks and yoga mats—Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.

I should have attended that interfaith nonviolence training, the military coup resistance session, the bespoke election night ritual workshop, but I'm disdainful of anything labeled “bespoke.” It's weirdly warm out, the kind of late autumn gloaming that feels like the inside of a kiln firing up, slow banks of heat brush my arms as I walk to the river. Beneath the heat I feel a premonition of winter, a granite boulder seeping cold even in the sun.

I haven't checked the results. Lights on, neighborhood safety watch crews in bright green t-shirts, alleys barricaded with chipped pallets and faded Target grocery carts. The sky is a limpid, liquid orange. I can feel my pulse in the bends of my elbows and the tips of my fingers.

My phone hums. A text. “I’ve read your requests and am feeling very stressed about them. I’m at a point where I feel way too drained to do many of those things.”

Things like washing hands, wearing masks, locking the windows tonight in the apartment we share.

Italo Calvino says a city wears its past like the lines of a hand, but I’m afraid ours has nothing left under smooth burn scars. Maybe we’ll draw new lines, heal forward in new shapes.

This city used to be a prairie watershed. Pretty much the whole state was, shifting tallgrass like muscles moving, stretching. Flat earth bouldered, swollen seams, and milky lakes blinking everywhere. So many tough little flowers and tough little birds.

Right here. The intersection of East Lake and Minnehaha, a seething bowl of water. Hiawatha Falls. Is this where they lived? Is this where I live?

Here is the Dakota *Bdote*, where the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers meet. The birthplace of a world where the stars come down. Eden. Here is where we lynch Black men and eat the Brown and Indigenous, pave over prairie smoke and prickly pear blossoms, curled bones of upland sandpipers and marble godwits. In the gutters, remnants of the tallgrass mown and pushing, mown and rooted, mown and tangled.

I gulp hot air, keep walking. Do I have the right to see this? To say this?

My phone hums. A text. “I’ve read your requests and am feeling very stressed about them. I’m at a point where I feel way too drained to do many of those things.”

Things like not saying this is the great equalizer, not asking me to turn off the news.

I looked up the word *aftermath* on Google. After something happened. Before something healed. How’d something so raw and diffuse get thrust through the eye of that little word?

The very first thing Google offered was *aftermath.com*, honed in on the IP address of my internet connection here in South Minneapolis. “Aftermath Services Is The Premier Provider Of Trauma Cleaning & Biohazard Remediation.”

Before this, before the need to mop up burnt blood and bits of skull and chattel slavery and genocide, *aftermath* meant *a second crop of grass grown on the same land after the first had been harvested, from after + -math, from Old English mæð "a mowing, cutting of grass."*

I spent six and half hours on Zoom before my walk, live commentary and fact checking on mute, my cheeks screenburnt, my mouth crimped dry, my ass pancakey. How do we share these mutual aid docs? Which neighborhoods need which supplies? My co-worker, whom I’ve never met in person, dropped off a pound of coffee and a couple gallons of water because I’m afraid. I’m afraid.

Every night is fireworks and screams, even now, after months and months. And always helicopters. Especially tonight. Folks are starting to think it's a tactic, keep the dissidents sleepless, turn our rest to warzones. We might not even notice if some real shit goes down as the day gets darker and the counts begin.

I walk, kicking at bits of things worried up through the shifting silt at the edges of the river.

My phone hums. A text. "I've read your requests and am feeling very stressed about them. I'm at a point where I feel way too drained to do many of those things."

But I cleaned my hair out of the drain after every shower. I answered your questions when you asked what you should never say as a straight white woman to the Black, Brown, and queer folks at work. I bought you a fire extinguisher and mace. I rushed home when you were crying. I drove 35 miles to the closest open gas station to fill up so that if we needed to flee, you'd be safe.

The sidewalk shivers and my palms are wet. The sun sends up bright arms over the Mississippi and cottonwood trees from below their edges. My phone slips, drops and cracks with a sound like dry twigs or small bones underfoot. Percussive and distant, breaking breaking. A text.

I erupt. Melted brick vomit and twisted metal vomit and the roaring carapace cracking scream of buildings falling. The river swallows it all. Is this where I live?

I scream until I can breathe again. Alone at the shore under a brown drift of leaves where you'll never be bothered, or hurt, or scared or inconvenienced by my rage.

In those moments and days and months after the burning, I took baths in petals, flowering rush and forget-me-not, water-marigold and crested arrowhead until my skin pickled and the tub stained saffron and pink. I shirked work duties for respite. Took long walks in the long sun of long, long northern evenings. I harvested blue vervain, cut off its tiny violet fringe, drowned it in vodka and hid it in the bowels of the credenza.

I felt goaded by the gods, by the wolves in the lost fens, by the fence weeds growing through dead prairie loam. I felt an unfurling within me that was dark-luminous as river pearls. I was regaining: *From re- + Old French gain, gaain "grass which grows in mown meadows."*

I noticed the dead raven half tucked in alluvium and the weird bower of sticks like a pyre on my walks every day for weeks. They were full of meaning. When folks talked about floundering, I felt focused, my chest was a hollow bone whistle keening, a honed knife edge skipping against the current of this storm.

I don't know when it started to fade. Maybe when I knelt with the other religious folk on the spot where George Floyd's body had been, at the intersection, on the beds of dying flowers while sweat ran down my sides. Maybe when I started losing my hair.

Maybe when you texted.

They're talking on the news about a lightening of spirit. Surely it'll be a landslide. A widening of hope or at least not of terror. I don't feel it. I feel tired. I feel suffocated. I feel caged. I feel alone alone alone.

3rd Precinct, South Minneapolis, January 19, 2021

It's January, 20 degrees in the sun, but it feels colder. By this point in a Minneapolis winter, sunny days begin to mean danger. Without its hat of clouds, the sky draws away warmth with a violence. It's biting cold. The sun off the snow is knives. Last couple days, it snowed steadily. Not hard, but enough for the city to declare a "snow emergency." All the cars in the avenues and parking lots got plowed in, ticketed or towed. The streets are empty.

I sit in front of the Target at East Lake and Minnehaha. Fresh Target red paint in winter-scraped light, fresh glass doors shining. The vacant 3rd Precinct station side-eyes me from the corner, plywood-shuttered and fenced.

Someone wheat-pasted a line of three posters for Martin Luther King Jr. Day on the concrete and barbed wire barrier between the precinct and sidewalk. "Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter." Next to them, three upside-down American flags and a South Asians for Black Lives sign.

Remember that Indian restaurant that stood over there, by the hole where the post office was? During the nights when this block became a blazing sun, I remember the owner saying, “Let my building burn, justice needs to be served.” I remember how proud I was. And how ashamed that he was an outlier. How privileged he was to say, “let it burn.” How desperate I was to be able to say the same. To let my longing and my contrition burn without anyone seeing, ashes down the Mississippi.

My phone hums. A text. Mittened hands are no good with touchscreens, and I leave it tucked beneath the layers.

I’m in my deep winter coat, the one that goes down past my shins with the faux-fur lined hood. It hides all my shapes—which takes some doing—but it can’t hide my smallness. I sit on a landscaping rock, an old river stone, a knuckle of the river’s bone, in a median in the parking lot of the Target while you grab us some dish soap and packing tape. I try to look bigger than I am.

If I press my ear to the distance I can almost hear the water pushing at the pylons of the Lake Street Bridge, rushing rushing as it gathers speed beyond my sight.

Even seated, I feel a sense of vertigo. Even bent, elbows to knees, I feel exposed. My limbs used to know how to move through this neighborhood. My bones knew how to swing. My skin and smallness prescribed the lines I walked. I knew my place against the rise of the old Oddfellow’s building across the intersection, the rust and bare bulbs of the 1930’s Minnehaha Liquors Drive-In sign hanging over the walk. Gone, gone. There’s only bare air and winter where a warm

brick canyon and wide, warm human stream once was. The whole neighborhood's like a smudged nuclear shadow. Etched all around are vague absences. If you don't know to look, you can't see the rage-raised scars for the smooth empty lots under snow or the bodies that stood in the paths of the blast.

3rd Precinct, South Minneapolis, February 7, 2021

We've just passed the cross-quarter day between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. Negative 20 degree nights. I wake with dried blood under my nose and furled blooms of frost on the inside walls of the bedroom from my breath. It'll pearl up and drip into the molding as the sun warms us ten or fifteen degrees by noon. It's strange to feel the sun like a star. Pure white radiation through air so cold it can't hold the sky. I always feel in the deepest well of winter a coiled counterweight turning toward the sun. I know the earth is kindling even as it comes near to breaking under the ice. Each day is two minutes and seven seconds longer than the last.

These are the days when you can walk on the river.

There are ice-thickness guides and charts that track accumulation over 24-hour periods by temperature. We never looked at them as kids. We just knew what we knew, from the sounds and the color and texture of the ice. When the air is this cold it can't hold scents, but I think I remember the good blue smell of good blue ice, six inches thick.

Before 2020, I'd been away for a long time, so I consult the charts. They tell you how many inches you need in order to walk, to skate, to drive in a sedan, a truck. River ice is usually slush ice, though. Half the strength of blue ice. I wait until the temperature hasn't risen above zero for a week.

Some years ago, I spent 100 days at a monastery in the Los Padres Wilderness out near Big Sur in California. The Tassajara Creek flows through that valley. It was common to hear drums along the creek banks. And singing. It unsettled some people, but most of us got used to it. The creek remembered so much, and it had reason to be angry. I remember the man who washed the dishes in the shack that drained straight into the water below telling me that 99% of the water in your body is renewed every 50 days. Halfway through my time there my blood remembered everything that creek did. We are never the same selves we were.

I've spent most of my adult life away from Minnesota, but I think I was always coming back here, to the Mississippi. Most of my selves, ghosts though they may be, were shaped by the river. She's the heart pumping the blood of 10 U.S. states between the Rockies and the Appalachian Mountains. Her veins form a wide heart-shape with the Great Lakes, fully two-thirds of the map of the United States, viscerally intertwined, like the delicate skeleton of a cottonwood leaf. But it's here in the long low basin of Minnesota that she and I were born.

In Minneapolis's 3rd Precinct, the Mississippi is our sole source of drinking water. In the 18 months since I've been back, the water in my body has been replaced 11 times. So many cave dripping echo whispers, old memories, cold bones.

I suit up for walking. Wool leggings and top, wool sweater and pants, shin-length down coat with hood, wool hat and wool gloves under down mittens. Wool scarf and tall boots, rubber and chains over the soles for traction.

Lately I've been discovering a capacity for hate. A clear and biting *NO*. Glacial, behemoth, crawling slow, deep, and wide. A frozen riverful of the marrow of leathery mastodons and those saber-toothed cats who lasted longer in North America than almost anywhere else on earth.

Walking under what remains of the riparian cottonwood corridor, I wonder if it's hers. If this is the water's hate. If it's teeth bared and lungs screaming, stars clothed in gas-flames and dust as they tower and tilt toward the surface wailing *how could you? how could you?* incapable of being small enough to fit inside me. I'm just borrowing it for a time.

I slide on frozen mud and boulder banks. I hear my river-water pulse, the world breathing, ice groaning and pinging like breaking metal coils. Today it's too cold. There have been exposed-skin warnings. Engines won't start. Car tires grow flaccid as the air inside them contracts into stale little fists. I'm alone. I listen to the center of the river crack and I crunch through the white world, far darker and heavier than a ghost could be.

I remember when I was learning to figure skate as a kid, we couldn't afford rink time. We scoffed at the rich kids who only knew how to skate on the smooth crust of a rink's heat-flattened ice. (Have you ever noticed how there're always livid strokes of red, yellowed at the edges,

sealed in, never oxidizing under the glaze of new ice? I still hate indoor rinks. No place that holds blood hostage is well.)

Instead, I'd skate on the lake surrounding my house and the edges of the river on the coldest days. Days like this. I think it made me a better skater, constantly negotiating with the ridges of captured waves, aware that I slid on knives over a dark force full of silt and twenty-five hundred years of ceremony and drowned Union soldiers, skimming the surface tension of a living artery. I'd pull my weight up into my chest, convinced that my grace or my speed would make me a feather, less disrespectful of the water the winter caught before it could curl itself away.

I know the river hasn't forgiven me for thinking I am something above it. The watershed is always tugging, always rolling me up and down to its bed. Come away, submerge, float free, dismember, remember, come home. It has a sharp stone tongue, sharp stone teeth, bitter eyes packed with clay. It is agricultural runoff and concrete culverts. It is life and death twined together. It's a ghost running between so many worlds.

One of my figure skating teachers said that. The river is a ghost. It feeds and forms and changes worlds, but can you find it? A river is never there. You can never step into the same river twice. Is that Heraclitus?

A ghost. Aghast. The condition of being a river among humans.

I stop under the Stone Arches Bridge on the Minneapolis side. I can almost hear the brown slide of the water beneath the winter white. I remember when we drove down to Shiprock, New Mexico, leaving our vigil on the shore of the River of Lost Souls, El Rio de las Animas Perdidas, in Durango. The Gold King Mine waste spill had turned those waters orange as traffic cones for days. We drove to the wilderness to talk to the plants in another watershed for a while, get some perspective. Sleep under tarps with the hummingbirds. Grieve.

We stopped at your friend's house in the driest land beside towering stones and he told us stories as we sat sharing ham sandwiches. I can't remember what story he was telling, but he spoke of rivers. He said, "a river is a long soul." It would carry on flowing, even rusting, even toxic, even charged with blood or changed. What is a river but change? What is change but a long soul? And I remember a stone falling in the glacial source within me. It takes a long soul to slip between worlds. It takes a long soul to remain here, ever changing. The only things I know that move in that way are rivers, ghosts, and grief.

My coastal friends, my mountain friends say they could never live in the Midwest, and once I agreed. Where's the drama? The mountains? The desert, the roaring ocean? But we have freshwater seas seething with wrecks. The kinds of fish-maidens and memories that swim unsalted water are darker, colder, smoother, like eels. We have branching lungworks and nervous systems and marshflows under grass and they tug tug tug to the river. We have the watershed. We are watershed people. Driftless Area people. Bluff and prairie people. Boreal forest and boulder, ivy-damp-bricks and light-dancing-on-water people, tall grass waving people, long soul people.

We saturate the fields for years until the sugar beets freeze in the earth and rot into red mush so the spring soil stinks, red as gore. You know us by the forces that shaped us. Glacial bypass and knuckled moss, heavy skies and the heavy hands of bad white men. Concrete and blood, tar sand pipes and broken treaties. My stone teeth are sharpening. This is where I live.

Crouching against the wind on the sandstone bluffs of the St. Paul side now, I feel my phone hum. A text.

The temperature has climbed to negative four, but the tips of my nose and ears are sparking in the peculiar way that once-frost-bitten nerves do, desperate never to freeze again. I hazard my fingers to check it, wondering in a doomy way if the wind will accidentally toss that piece of shit phone down three hundred feet to the river's rim of slush ice below. I've been trying to text you or call you, to connect in warmth when the frozen-river-long hate swallows me, when I come close to hating you. Right now, I hate all white people a little. You've just sent me a heart eyes emoji in response. I think of that Juan Ramón Jiménez poem so often quoted by the abbess of the monastery where I once lived:

*I have a feeling that my boat
has struck, down there in the depths,
against a great thing.
And nothing
happens! Nothing...Silence...Waves...
—Nothing happens? Or has everything happened,*

and are we standing now, quietly, in the new life?