

## The River Will Accept You and Carry You Home

Teenagers are hanging out in a schoolyard, next to where a river flows. One of them will see the shape of a body, floating towards them through the holes of a chain link fence. The teenagers skipping class scream for help and the teachers run from their classrooms, abandoning the lesson. The students leave their classrooms, forgetting their decorum by running past their leaders and ignoring the repeated warnings to *turn around and go back to class*.

Hearing the children, neighbors run from their yards, leaving their cooking and washing undone, and there you are, woman whose name is yet to be known, face towards the morning sun, in the parish of St. Catherine, where the *Rio Cobre River* flows. The men from the neighborhood go into the river and pull you from its dull waters and place your body on the riverbank. The police arrive and send us back to our classrooms.

With the lesson of Pythagorean theorem erased from our minds and your face taking its place, we watch from the windows and talk to each other about what could have happened. Did you drown? Or were you murdered? Where are you from? Are you from around here? Who has been looking for you? Were you beaten down by river or was it your killer?

Today, your family will find you, while the other families keep on waiting because the river still has bodies to return.

*Dear woman,*

In the many years to come, your body won't be the first or the last to be coughed up from the Rio Cobre River. Teenagers and children will drown. Heads will be chopped off and thrown into the river from the violence that never ceases. A newborn baby will be given to the river. Cars and buses will crash into the river and passengers will lose their lives. The headlines will say "*Body pulled from the Rio Cobre*" and sometimes the headlines will say "*Bodies pulled from the Rio Cobre*".

and it will be the common belief that the river is haunted, that the duppies of the slaves still roams, and that a mermaid that lives in its waters should also be blamed for the many deaths. The river gives life to those who depend on it for survival but if ever a soul is troubled and cannot find peace above ground, the river accepts them just the same.

## Everything I Write is About You, Mother

There are poems that I need to write about the oceans I crossed travelling in the Navy, poems about the loneliness I felt, and the sadness that never leaves me, poems I need to write about my son's love for butterflies, but everything I write is about you, mother, like a compass, all my words lead back to you, and on my darkest days when my light and my shadows are in a fight, I seek your strength.

My brothers and I know what it feels like to be trampled over by you, and we accept you as unfiltered in every way. We show up at your door even if your heart is closed, and it's hard for you to see us, to love us, when we look like our fathers, men that left their imprint on your skin, men that came to you as sheep, but beneath the layers of their clothes, you found a wolf and to survive them you became a wolf too, or perhaps you were already a wolf forced to wear a dress, and before they could crush you, you exposed your teeth, showing them your naked truth.

You were raised by a mother who gave birth to ten children, and like you, she never held her tongue, and she raised you to never hold babies for too long, and you listened, and you never held your babies for too long, and one day your babies grew up, and they learned to choke back tears, and they learned to rock themselves to sleep and out in the world on their own, the babies, now grown up learn how to self soothe, and they cover their scars in knowledge, dressed in business casual attire, but above all, they know how to make it on their own. Every man I see and have known resembles a wolf, mother, stealers of time that can never be returned.

I've given birth to a son, innocent and true, but still, I worry who he'll become, and worry fills me like it has always filled you, and you and I will always be intertwined. I am you, as I am my father, and together both have you have given me a storm that I can never calm. Your patience is thin, mother, and sometimes you are too angry to smell the roses, a luxury that only belongs to some. You are from a fishing village, born poor, and your crime was being born a woman, and you've paid dearly for the sins of Eve, mother. You gave birth to your first son, and because you were born in a world ran by men, you had to return to work soon after. You never picked your cards, they were already laid before you, and there was no time to say a proper goodbye to the young girl when a baby clung to your bosom, and so you fed him as your life drained from you, and through the years you fed us all,

and still we resent you because there is no joy we can bring to you when your scars never healed. For the life you gave us, there are some debts that can never be repaid. I am certain that we cannot undo the past, certain that our regrets must be kept locked away in the deepest parts of our minds, to remain whole, or else we lose our way. To mend the past, mother, I must write our future, sprinkled with hope, even if you must and will certainly burn the pages.

## Arrows Made from Words for Your Mother

To have a mother is to never feel like I've won anything, even after I leave her. My nose was hers first, the shape of my eyebrows belongs to her, and I will always be her copy. When my shipmate's button falls from her shirt and I fix it, she'll ask me where I learned how to sew, and I'll say *my mother taught me*, and I'll remember all the little things she showed me, like how to wash white rice before cooking it and how to tuck the corners of my bed, things I never said thank you for. For a second, I wonder if I've been ungrateful, and I realize I couldn't have made it this far without her, but to face this truth is to also admit defeat, and to defeat my mother with words is its own war, one I can never be prepared for, one I'll never win.

Before I set sail into the world, I tell her that even though I love her, I don't need her anymore. I tell her to her face, *you've always held me back because you wanted me polished, like a figurine on your shelf. There is always cooking to be done, clothes to be washed, bible scriptures to be read, to always remember to be covered in a room with men, and if I shrink anymore, mother, I'll certainly disappear.* I watch her as my words land on her like arrows made for an ancient war, a war I've been brewing within for years. I watch her as her shell cracks into a million pieces.

I don't stop there because I want her to know there's a whole world out there, an undiscovered life, music I haven't heard, songs I haven't danced to, and I have to hear them and dance to them before I die, because either way I'll die, and I shove the arrow even further when I tell her I don't care about my soul in the afterlife. I tell her that I'm not a cat, that cats have nine lives to do what they want to, I only get one, but she laughs at me when I say this. She laughs hysterically. She laughs until she is in tears, and when she finally catches her breath, she finds the words to say *you're an idiot, that you're stupid if you think you'll find what you're looking for. There is no glitter on the other side.*

When it's time to leave, I leave alone, with nothing except the clothes on my back, and even thousands of miles away I still think of her. I still see her face when I look at myself in the mirror, and for this reason, because I cannot escape her, and because I haven't heard her voice in months, I must return home, to know if she forgives me, to know if her love still belongs to me, because no other love means anything, not even a pat on the back or a handshake from my commander telling me *job well done*, or the sweet words of drunk sailors sitting at Mississippi bars,

words that fell on my ears like empty cannisters, nothing was worth more than my mother's approval, and the only way to have left her was for both of us to be angry at each other, because if it were any different, and she were calm, or hugged me, I would have been forced to stay, to lay on her bosom, and never leave the nest she had engineered to perfection, and to keep going I remind myself I had to leave, to learn how to fly, even if I must and will certainly fall without her near.

## **Twisted Insides**

*After Ainaz Alipourbaghal /mo~ASerat/ (2024)*

The sun shines mighty, mother, mighty as our island's people.  
Decades have drifted by, much faster than we've thought.  
I live in Florida now, and you've returned home, to our island.  
The island of Jamaica, home, where you and I and my brothers were born.  
Home, where we made it through every storm. For this reason,  
I must always return, to find all that we lost, in the name of immigration.

You call me often to complain, mother. You think the new stove is broken,  
and you think the neighbor's dog sneaks in through the fence and messes up the yard.  
I listen as you ramble on and when I open my mouth to finally speak,  
to tell you it's just a small dog and to let it go, our words get misplaced,  
lost in translation, somewhere in the ocean between us.

One of us must retreat. I retreat. Because you must always win, mother,  
even if there is nothing to be won. Don't you know words once spoken  
can never be erased? You taught me that, remember?  
I'm a long way from the girl that climbed trees in our yard.  
Sometimes I try to remember her, but then I feel the hands of time  
strangling me, a constant reminder of an unfinished life.

I push her away, because being a mother is never enough to satisfy  
the voices of the ambitious demons that lurk inside me, unquenchable  
even when fed, because being a writer is never enough to quiet them.  
Do you remember your dreams as a girl, mother?  
Or did they drown in the floods of surviving with children clinging to you?

I work, and I wait because that's all we've ever known.  
When it's time to visit, I'll travel to you with my son by my side,  
with more suitcases and bags than my arms can carry.  
I worry the zippers will rip and the bags will fall apart,  
and even sitting on a plane I can never find rest.

There is no peace when my insides are always twisted,  
imprisoned by my duty to you and all that you hoped I would be,  
a forever game in your tug of war. When I land,  
the bags won't be there, stuck in transit,  
but they aren't ripped apart. I breathe a sigh of relief.

It's almost ten p.m. when I arrive home, hours later than planned.  
It won't matter anymore that the flights were delayed, and the bags  
didn't make it. Time has already stolen so much from us, mother.  
I'll see your shadow waiting by the glass window:  
your love was always sewn in sacrifice,  
and the prayers for your children, borderless.

## The Hands of a Tiler

a father too. You tile the floors and walls of many houses in the town of Old Harbour. Everyone knows you and they know how good you are at what you do. You scraped old paint from Ms. Marcia's bathroom walls and you leveled the floors before you even laid a single tile. They know you aren't the kind of man that would take pay for a job that wasn't well done. They also know how kind you are when they don't want to pay. You lift heavy boxes of tiles, and you sit low to the ground, laying each tile evenly in its place. The curve of your back, your head hanging low, a posture that never leaves you even when you stand, the price your body pays for belonging to the working class, the price you pay for having been born poor.

You love old western movies, and rum cream and in between the scenes of living you tell us how your father took you from your mother, and somehow you ended up with your grandmother, and it pains you too much to tell it all from a babe, but this much I've gathered, once upon a time you were a fisherman, and in my own words you've always been a wanderer, one who had to end his journey. Now you wander through books when you read about geography and the bible which guides you, your reminder to be calm in spirit.

It's hard to find the light in your eyes, father, but I search nonetheless, and they shine when you are farming, when you break the ground with the fork, and remove the rocks and old roots that get in your way, and you love the feel of the rich soil between your fingers, and you want my brother and I to learn, but we are too impatient to appreciate a garden before it blooms, too young to understand how much you had to survive. Early in the mornings you rise and water your crops and your joy comes from waiting for your harvest and nurturing each plant that needs you. You've always known how to survive, and solitude never tortures you.

You know only too well, the feeling of being a cub, in a world with no mother, no place to truly call your own. You cut shapes from plain white or brown tiles, or colorful ones, and you've always been an artist. The cement and grout sticks to your fingernails, and I can feel the coarseness of your hands when you pick me up and even after you've worked all day, and I can see the tiredness on your face, I still demand you lift me up and you do. I inhale your scent, the smell of cement mixed with sweat, a smell that's never bothered me, because everyone I know has the same smell, the smell of having toiled all their life, and no one tells me that one day I'll run

into your arms, and it'll be the last day you'll pick me up, because I've grown much taller, and heavier, and much too cool, and you've grown older. No one tells me that time is not just knowing how to read the hands of a clock, but time is living and working while leaving one phase and entering the next. Time is standing in a moment and being unaware that it'll be the last time, and not realizing it'll never come again.