

# The River Woodlawn

Beth Towle

The boat it goes on the river  
it goes down into some dark we cannot see  
in the darkness of the river Woodlawn.  
Our oars, if we have oars, are made of swamp maple.  
Our boat is made of dirt, packed tight.  
Our hull is coated in limestone dust; it's sealed with sweat.

The boat it goes up and down  
it goes with the flow of the water,  
no the train tracks, no the water.  
The dumping ground is dumped out.  
The dumping ground is swollen  
under the noonday sun. The dumping ground  
is our departure, and we watch it in the rearview  
mirror. The water is our rearview mirror.

The boat it flushes out the seaweed,  
the algaic fingers that grab the sides,  
the fleshed lily pads that gather and disperse  
beneath the hull. The crack of the boned cattails  
cracking against our oars.

We are coming  
we are coming to get you.

—

You were small and so sweet  
and you whispered in your sleep.

You were big and mean  
and the days made you hurt  
and the nights made you hurt a little less  
though you had to hurt them  
to make them do that to you.

You are out here on the river Woodlawn  
and our dead boat is coming for you,  
although it lost you out there somewhere  
in the muck, in the mire.

You were small and so sweet  
and your bones they knew sleep.

—

The boat is stuck on reeds. I will not mention  
whose bones they look like. They're not mine.  
Or, they are mine. They are all our bones  
and they wished you something else completely.  
The gold coins are heavy in our pockets  
which are the only part of us that haven't rotted  
out with holey spots.

The dumping ground keeps calling after us.  
And sometimes it gets caught in the cochlea  
inside our ears and it gets spoiled and molds inside there.  
The dumping ground where you played  
soccer with the skulls, where you found that baby's empty casket.

All the babies we might come to get  
and we are getting you instead.

—

The river Woodlawn splits in two  
and we might have gone the wrong way.  
The dumping ground is mocking us,  
it tells us we will never find you.  
We go the way we want to go.  
We have no bigger plan.

The bigger plans are dashed on the banks  
which slope so high we cannot see the land  
or which are so shallow that we cannot see where  
the river ends and the land begins.  
Mud sloshing. Sloshing mud.

Eat us through the rough part, river.  
Take us down to your very gut  
and let us go again. Where has it  
let you go?

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Hours are passing. Days are passing.  
We pass on the wilted swamp maples,  
the tiger lilies, the remains of the Big Huck Marsh  
with its bones of remaindered hucksters,  
the fallen women, the grease-slathered priests.  
History and you and me and us  
keeping out an eye for you  
in the middle of this mess you made.

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We did not know you as the baby  
you were although we have imagined it  
enough to believe in the saving of it.  
We caught glimpses of it, we think, in the way  
you sleep. We catch it in your sleep  
which is weightless. Or weighed. Weighted  
down by the babyhood of itself.

You are lost and you are not our baby  
although heaven knows we tried enough  
to gather you into our hearts.  
Our hearts are as empty as you. We are such  
lovely matches in the broken patches.

We are coming; we are coming.  
We cannot even hear the dumping ground now.

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For a moment, in the calm before the rapids,  
we thought we saw you there in the water,  
the muddied water. Your soggy face in the water.  
But how could we have? The water  
is so black and cold and so so hard.

The rowing is hard. The river took away our oars  
five miles back. We row with our hands,  
keep getting grabbed by the things there in the water  
that we cannot see. How we might have  
wished your hands to just grab us and bring us over  
the hull at that moment  
when we thought we saw your face in the water.

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We do not know who took you. We do not know why.  
The roots of the swamp maples scrape  
the bottom of the boat, they scrape holes in the bottom  
and the water is coming in. We are so close.  
You, our non-baby. Our displaced possession  
that we never possessed. You have possessed us.  
The river. The dumping ground.  
Our memory is their memory. And you  
out there all alone somewhere in the grave of it.

The water blurs us out. It takes us down.  
Our arms flail. We contend with the boned reeds,  
the fleshed lily pads, the white caps  
like ghostheads in the water.  
We are going under.

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The sky is so bright it looks like sanded limestone.  
The world going down is like a photograph  
we've burned in the dumping ground.  
I mean, you. You burned it.  
The boat it has sunk. The water it has risen  
to our heads and we cannot breathe  
in the water without drowning.  
Or we can breathe it in and live in it.  
You choose. You choose.

**Beth Towle** is a native IN writer. She received her MFA from the University of Notre Dame and is currently a contributing editor at *Actuary Lit* ([actuarylit.com](http://actuarylit.com)). Her work has previously been published in *Spork* and *Deluge*. Tweets [@bethtowle](https://twitter.com/bethtowle), web [bethtowle.com](http://bethtowle.com).