

River Pilgrims

by Jennifer Chang

I'm the one who's raw.
I'm the one learning the river's silt
and scum, how the sediment floats
but the muck and mire

sink. Sister Elizabeth, what
did the asphalt confess?
The yellow fumes, the pink fumes,
the squat white tanks hoarding
alien fuel: my exhausted
portents! I'm the pom-pom girl
of the current apocalypse, half-
gone, all-gone, carcinogenic cloud.

The loons, grease-slick in the Hackensack,
go red-eyed with loon cries.

—

Sister Elizabeth, who will dry your dewy brow?

Winter never started and the chorus girls, the chorus girls,
are jubilant pears.

Can you do the cancan, the sleight
of hand, the slightly-out-of-date grandstand? God's in
the soccer field. He's in your messenger bag
deleting your stump speech. Like the rain, he's all

nevermind. I have two Bartlett pears and a Chinese umbrella.

Let's go.

—

I loved my errors senseless
and was not sisterly. Do you forgive?

I don't. Look what concrete makes:
A beige cake. A mold resistant gutter.

And still the stranger drowned.

If we follow his body,
we'll discover how the river ends:

I wager blue resolution, not the ocean,
but the ocean's childless oracle,

where the city barges congregate
and dispose of the city's waste.

The ducks have grown accustomed
to the stream of gasoline that braids itself

into each ripple. I watch their brave swimming
make white foam, sinuous ribbons

of water. How the river ends, only the ducks
and detritus will know: some fog caught

his body's midnight mission to skip
over the current like a palm-flat stone.

Now is when you explain that sorrow's
aboriginal. And platonic. Your order,

Sister Elizabeth, waves their black habits at us.
What have I told you about not waving back?

—

Sedge glistens along the turnpike.
Someone once told me the name of those flowers.
A man I wanted nothing to do with.
Another asked, *Why do women need to be girlfriends?*
We are approaching the swamp.

Too many sycamores mean not enough water.
So we grow wary of swamp dwellers.
Sexless in their low-eyed ways.
What's with the inaccessibility of leopard frogs?

Or the way Sister Elizabeth hikes up her skirt.

Joyful with dirt.

Up close I see the petals are in fact yellow.
Still another would not approve of such details.
Though I loved him.
I'd tuck honeysuckle into his wallet.

He'd point out stagnant water, that stench.
Of rotting wood and insect death.
Devotion's odd jewel: a trail without.
Shade the aloof August light joyful with dirt.
Sister Elizabeth calls memory a window.

Into new life.
I quote *Bah humbug* god of old.
Books knee-jerk god girlfriend's god.
Nor is the mud benevolent.
We stand and drown stand and drown.

—

Hackensack. Passaic. Raritan. Delaware.
New Jersey's algae, drift, and drear

clutter our map with riparian veins.
Sister Elizabeth's brandishing her ivory cane!

Today the sky glows aquamarine, tomorrow

it rains turpentine. Yes, the good smell
of the garden state, the cracked snail shells

baking on an off-white shore. Is this where
the river ends? Holy humidity,
can nuns wear shorts?

Your dance card, Sister Elizabeth,
lists my name besides a big, fat X. I won't ask

about the overlooked waltz or your swing time propensities
for we are out of time:

downstream we cannot find his body,
upstream we cannot find his body.

The sum of hours equals.
I wear decay as a necklace
to spook myself. A twig in your pocket, Sister Elizabeth,

or a compass? (We are out of time.) Better question:
oak or South?

Sister Elizabeth prays at the bridge.

What if.

God of steel girders. God of pigeon shit.
A feast of light
 crumbling at our feet.

I'd rather not reach the end
only to discover the end is whim,

as when that swarm of dark water
turned out to be
an upsetting of the river floor,

some wild foot
kicking out the bottom-feeders.
That clot and that inkblot.

Where is your body, Sister Elizabeth,

under the holy folds, the heat
that makes nonsense of your dress?
The bridge opens up

for us: we know
we will fail
and the current will

unlearn us, my water-skin, the ocean's clock:

we love loss as we love ourselves,
secretly. And too much.