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Riverbanks and Honeysuckle

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ALYSIA SAWCHYN

RIVERBANKS AND HONEYSUCKLE

- Winner: *Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest* -

The story goes like this:

I went into the Potomac, slipped, cut my arm on some rocks.

The truth is something like this:

I went to the Potomac's bank. I cut my arm at home.

The gauze I wrapped around myself was ostentatious, its white a bright contrast against my skin, but less worrisome than the wounds themselves. No one outright called me a liar; the river's current can grab, pull hard and fast like a frightened mother. The parks around the Potomac have bright welcome pamphlets with the bolded, large text, "DO NOT SWIM," and similar signs are posted on the banks ideal for river access. Regardless, a handful of drownings are scattered in the regional news each year—usually they are accidental.

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THE POTOMAC SERVES as a boundary. Its curves separate states, denoting territory and belonging on either side. In places, it is beautiful. On the banks marking Washington D.C. from Virginia, wild honeysuckle grows in abundance. Though the foliage overwhelms the pale yellow and cream

blossoms, the perfume hangs in the summer air, heady, thickening as the days build to unsatisfying thunderstorms. The smell creeps through closed windows, sticks in the nose, the lungs.

As a child, I learned to eat honeysuckle sugar. It is a tedious process and the sort of lesson I want my mother to have taught me, one that requires demonstration and touch. Despite the meager payoff, a few drops of nectar, these are small, bright memories. When I look through my past for a consistent pleasure, I find those empty, discarded blossoms scattered through my childhood summers.

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I WOULD LIKE to have eaten honeysuckle on the banks of the Potomac. If I fold the right memories over one another, I can imagine I once did:

Two children walk down a steep hill, vines and thin branches pulling their ankles, then settle at the graffitied base of a bridge over the river. There are no warning signs here. Their parents do not know where they are. The boy clambers over the rocks, stumbling, long hair obscuring his vision, worn soles getting no traction; the girl reaches into the foliage and painstakingly pulls ends off flowers with ragged fingernails. At home, they look for rest. The long-haired boy puts a needle in his arm. The girl drags something sharp across hers.

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THE EXACT TRANSLATION of the Potomac's name is uncertain and its spelling is a bastardized version of a former Algonquin name. This is fitting for a river that cuts through the capital of a nation whose story reads, like mine, as one of overcoming and omission. My mother says I was born less than three miles from the Potomac, and I would like to hold the river and its uncertain etymology responsible for my brain's inclination to blur and rearrange memories to suit current circumstances. There are gaps, too, muddy months of years that have been filled in by others. Their stories vary in accuracy, but I listen because they are preferable to a void. A man who once had long hair says I slapped his mouth. My mother says that, as an infant, I never cried.

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I CANNOT FIND the bridge by the riverbank. I want to know if honeysuckle grows nearby, if the graffiti can give insight into what happened afterward, at home. It is impossible to pick a point and walk the Potomac's curves until a bridge resonates with memory, and there is no one to ask for directions. The boy with long hair has vanished into the desert, away from the waters of our childhood. There were others at the riverbank that day, but they slipped into deep creases when I folded my memories and have not emerged.

Driving along the river in late May, my mother points out a spot where, she says, a man and his son drowned while fishing. She has

never learned to swim. I tell her I can smell the honeysuckle even with the windows rolled up. She pauses, says she can, too.