

World After Water

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

- 1 The boys wake at dawn. They share a mattress on the floor, piled like puppies. There are four of them, stair-step in age, as similar as twins. They are sun-colored: copper-skinned, their hair bleached white. They are wishbone-thin.
- 2 As the Midwestern sun rises, the boys step outside, blinking and yawning. The floodwater is high today. Their front porch is partially submerged. The usual smell hangs in the air—murky and sour. At this season of the year, what's left of the streets—in what's left of this town—are always brimming over. The houses stand like islands. The boys take a few minutes to play, hurling bits of trash and chips of plaster into the pool, watching the ripples expand in glittering rings.
- 3 Soon, however, they are hard at work. There is no time to waste. They gather up their tools: a wrench, a screwdriver, a six-inch knife, and all the empty containers and buckets they can carry. Three summers ago, they made a raft—pieces of board and broken furniture lashed together with twine and bungee cords. This will transport them across the flood. They climb aboard carefully with their gear.
- 4 This water is a blue desert. The boys know better than to drink from it. They know better than to let it even touch their skin. It is befouled by sewage, toxins, and algae. It is full of disease. They know this from experience. Each of them has made this mistake once, and only once, in moments of great extremity, lured by the lap of waves, the cool gleam. The results are always the same. Vomiting. Fever. Diarrhea. To drink this water is to end up sick, weak, and even thirstier than before.
- 5 As the boys row across the pool, the splash of their oars echoes off the houses. Whenever possible, the neighbors have fled. The raft orbits around dead trees, gray and erect. Something brown floats on the surface. The boys poke it with sticks until it flips over. It is a dog's corpse, swollen and rotting. Animals die every day from drinking the water. The raft moves on, trailed by a silvery wake. The boys sing softly. They hum a lullaby, one of the few gifts left to them by their parents. Their thin voices make a ragged harmony.
- 6 Their father died first. He was a policeman. He was killed during the water riots, like so many others. Their mother died soon after, possibly of dysentery, possibly of grief. The boys live with their grandfather now. He stays in the house, in his wheelchair, stuck like a snail to its shell. The boys don't remember when he had the capacity to walk, when he was not as silent as a stone.

- 7 At last, the raft bumps against solid earth. The boys have reached the edge of the flood. They have reached the nearby town, where the wealthy people live. This place stands on higher ground, a swollen landfill. The houses here are rarely touched by the tide. They have a serene, varnished look. The boys climb stealthily onto the pavement. They creep alongside fences, ducking behind garbage cans.
- 8 A nearby house beckons them. At the back, the water room is as ripe and appealing as fresh fruit. A loose windowpane. A faulty hinge. One by one, the boys tumble into the darkness. They hold still, listening. In the gloom, they meet one another's eyes. Beside them sits the house's filtration system: a huge, white box, as bright as a sunlit cloud. In this neighborhood, people can afford such things. They can afford the mechanism itself, as well as the costly replacement filters and the necessary, periodic maintenance. The boys, on the other hand, live in the house their parents left them, in a drowning neighborhood. Their faucets overflow with the same poisonous floodwater that fills their streets. Their father's death, in the line of duty, gave them a meager pension. This pays for their groceries and their grandfather's medication. They could no more afford a filtration system than they could fly to Mars. The boys have never known what it is like to have enough—enough food, enough water, enough love.
- 9 Above their heads, footsteps tap back and forth. The boys hear voices—a grown man, a child. Someone laughs. There is the plink of a piano being played. Something is cooking in the oven. Sauce. Maybe even meat. The boys lick their lips; they can almost taste it. Then, with a rolling rush, the plumbing begins to grumble. Liquid gushes through the pipes. Someone is taking a shower upstairs.
- 10 At once, the boys are in motion. This is a perfect opportunity. Working together, they open a valve. They take turns beneath the spray, mouths open, guzzling greedily. They drink until their bellies are tight. Then they fill their containers and canteens. They make an assembly line of hands, passing each sloshing canister to the window. Within ten minutes, they are done. They dash down the street. They scramble onto their raft, setting down their precious cargo, grinning in triumph.
- 11 The boys do not often think about the future. They have lived on the razor's edge of survival too long to waste time with worry or expectation. Someday, they may be caught stealing water. They may be fined or jailed, or worse, separated. Someday, their grandfather may die. People do. Someday, the lake may rise even further, swallowing up their home. But for now, the boys sing softly and trade sips from a canteen. For now, they are weightless, drifting on the flood.