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Place Where You Live:

ANACOSTIA RIVER, WASHINGTON, DC

by KRISTAN UHLENBROCK - JUNE 16, 2017



Pieces of trash are common visual disruptions along the Anacostia River

You belong to no one, everyone, yet you exist in the shadows of politicians and history. You have a reputation of being forgotten.

I stride past sweet honeysuckle, but traces of decay, drudgery, death, make me crinkle my nose and hasten my pace. Low tide unveils muddy banks hoarding plastic water bottles and old tires — relics

from a habitually neglectful era. Unbeknownst to the great blue heron watching me with a statuesque neck and suspicious eye, lead, beryllium, and arsenic dwell below her feet, masked by turbid eddies.

Itchy grasses tickle my calves. Crooked roots torque my feet. I hopscotch over wet patches, causing my rhythmic breath to quicken tempo. The path acquiesces to English ivy, garlic mustard, and Oriental bittersweet, crowding out the locals.

A century ago, the hands of engineers, not nature, constructed Kingman Island, an oblong refuge splitting your channel that draws me in for a daily run. Your name, Anacostia, comes from the indigenous Nacochtank, who were traders and aboriginal manufacturers and welcoming of Captain John Smith, although that proved a mistake.

And a mistake is what they made of you. Filled with pollution, your sluggish waters sacrifice beauty and functionality.

As I round the tip of Kingman Island, gliding opposite the retreating tide, a lone fisherman stands on the opposite shore with a five-gallon white bucket. What is his catch today? Hopefully not carp, filled with heavy metals and possibly tumors. Fleeting, like an apparition, the fisherman disappears as thick vines hijack my view.

Topping the wooden boardwalk back to the mainland, I see turtles skimming your surface, like scientific buoys testing the water. Running is supposed to provide clarity. But for me, this place is more like an impressionist painting, bits of scene that don't make sense until I step back to take it all in. The decay, the fisherman, the heron, the turtles, the juxtaposition between vitality and fatality.

Although your waters have been ignored, injured, and disparaged for decades — to me, and many others, you are not forgotten.