

Bodies of Water

Rivers are not like seas, they rage in different ways. They lack the unchecked power, rely more on shrewdness and attrition. They chisel away at the soil, slowly churning earth into brown water and stones into polished pebbles. Rivers are more discrete, too. The smallest can slip past unnoticed beneath banks brimming with brambles and ferns. In summer they hollow out further, flowing as idly as they dare. During these hot months, the rivers almost seem like they're slowing down to take in the view. But in the end all rivers must pour into seas.

I have a summer job. In the afternoons, I work the punts, ferrying undergraduates and their divorced parents. Tourists come in large numbers, buying novelty boaters with red and white ribbons. The air is full of furry clematis seeds and wisps of willow. They fall to rest on the brown, lazy water. The punts cut through them like icebreaker ships.

In the evenings, we shackle the punts, reinforcing their berths with thick, greased ropes. With the passengers gone, we emerge as individuals again. No more regimented motions through the water. We stop delivering facts about the various colleges, or observations about the weather.

Max always greets us with a joke. He likes to show off a bit, pull tricks like leaping from punt to punt. He rarely falls in. If he does, he rises to the surface like a synchronised swimmer, melding it into his act. He'll heave himself up onto one of the boats, dripping, and raise his arms to the sky in pure exhibitionism.

Ben will sulk, and complain that Max's exploits have loosened the ropes he just tied. The other boys will ignore him, preferring to laugh along with Max.

"Jesus, cheer up mate!" one of them will shout. "We're done for the day."

Grace scares me. She's the only other girl on the punts. Grace moves casually, as if every motion is meaningless. She smokes her mum's cigarettes while the rest of us work, her feet dangling above the dark water. She has an energy that reminds me of the girls who would have bullied me at school.

We change out of our dirty clothes in the punt shed. Grace pulls her arms out of the punt station t-shirt and slips her tank top on in one swift movement. I can see her shoulder blades rubbing together as she does so. She pulls on a denim jacket, transferring her phone and the cigarettes into one of the inside pockets. Max is already out the door. He calls back to us.

"Come on Grace, pub!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming." She turns to look at me before heading towards the door.

We get paid on Thursdays, so we go to drink on Thursdays. The pub smells of oak and hops and old men. Grace orders a pint, sipping at the foamy surface as she lifts it from the bar.

We found the hare on a Thursday, too. Max had spotted it as we were tying up the punts for the night. We walked along the river to take a look, treading carefully on the loose bank. It had fallen in amongst the bulrushes. The water was shallow there, and it lay on its back, long black-tipped ears sticking up like television aerials. Its feet reached towards the sky, forelimbs raised limply. A reluctant pugilist.

"That's so cool," Ben said, poking the hare with a stick. "I'll have to come back with a knife."

"What for?" Grace raised an eyebrow.

Ben sighed. "Their feet are lucky. Don't you know anything?"

I caught Grace staring at the hare. She pulled out a cigarette, feigning nonchalance, but dropped it onto the matted fur and swore.

"Shit, that was my last one."

"Suck on that now, eh, Grace?"

Max was still pissing about. Grace didn't say anything. The cigarette had bounced into the river and was floating there like a half-finished sentence.

Grace is halfway through her beer now and laughing loudly with the boys. Max has spilt his drink already, adding another layer of sticky sheen to the laminated tables. Ben wrinkles his nose and moves out of the range of Max's drinking arm. Max leans across him, slopping more beer around as he yells something to Grace. She ignores him. I sink back into my chair and bury my face in my glass, nostrils tingling from the gassy bubbles.

I sit there quietly, nursing the same pint as chatter erupts around me. Sometimes I nod, or lean over pretending to listen, just so nobody notices my abstinence from proceedings. I'm listening to Ben bemoaning the pub's prices when Max comes back with a third round of drinks. He places the tray on the wet table and grabs a pint from it as he sits down next to me, sloshing the beer so that it gently rises over the rim of the glass. It flows down gently to meet his hand.

Max gets too close, reaches a wet hand around me. I can smell the hops on his breath. I get up to go, grasping Max's shoulders to pull myself past him, patting him on the back to wish him a good night. As I leave, I notice Grace watching me from her position at the table.

I started reading about hares online. I'd just wanted to work out if it had been a male or a female. For some reason, that seemed important.

The mythology surrounding hares intimidated me. It was vast. I wondered if Ben knew what he was tampering with, taking a foot. I hoped he would leave his penknife at home. Clicking through links, I found references to their associations with lust, sexual desire. This seemed to vaguely fit another, more biological account that I had found, of female hares boxing at males to ward them off. Was it all about male lust, after all? And had the one we'd found been a male? Or a fraught female, an Ophelia?

The next day is damp. Fewer tourists means more shunting and hauling of the punts, more menial chores. Grace doesn't show up to work.

My first boat out isn't until three in the afternoon. It's a group of academics. The punt station is cash only, and I'd seen them fumbling for notes and coins as they lined up to pay. They're colleagues but not friends; their chatter is awkward and forced as they clamber into the punt. I hold the boat flush with the pontoon as they step in, watching them wobble from one foot to the other.

"Haven't found our sea legs yet!"

Once they are all sat down, I cast the punt off. The rope slips into the water like a serpent. I grab my main piece of equipment, a scaffolding tube that is used as a punting pole. It's metallic yet dull, like a silverfish, and the end of it makes a clunking noise as it drops through the water and comes to rest on the riverbed. Standing on the stern, bobbing up and down with the motions of the craft, I lift the pole, dripping cold water down my arm. It falls smoothly through my hands and makes its second contact with the sediment, allowing me to push my weight against it and lever the punt forwards.

We're running smoothly now. Fields slip by on either side, and spires rise up from the meadows in the distance. The river is quiet today, but the water has changed. It flows a dirty jade colour and, in lieu of reflections, it offers up a matte surface. On the way back it drizzles, and the academics open umbrellas or pull up plastic hoods. We pass a crumpled cigarette bobbing in the water.

People used to believe that witches could turn into hares, that to kill a witch you had to hunt her while she was in her animal form. These myths seemed grimy and feral to me, dark secrets whispered across torch lit taverns. The hares would steal the milk straight from the teats of the cows in the meadows, or suckle pollen and nectar from the crops so that they withered and died before they ever went to seed. At least, that's what the men of the village would say, scratching at their beards in the low sunlight as they looked out across their failing fields.

I help my passengers disembark and tie up the punt again. Max is also coming back in; I see him passing under the stone bridge, his description of it turning to echoes as soon as the words escape his mouth.

Grace still hasn't appeared. I wonder where she might be. This leads me to also wonder, briefly, if I might fancy her. I *could* fancy her. I could make it so. I've often thought about what we'll all do in the winter, when the punts have been beached and stored like shells kept in a box between cotton handkerchiefs. Whether some of us would see each other again.

The men would resolve to hunt for hares. They would start each dusk, when the moon and setting sun colluded to produce a hybrid light. At this time, hares could be seen flitting in and out of the hedgerows. The men imagined these hares stealing eggs straight from sparrow nests, or spitting feathers as they chewed on willow warbler chicks.

Sometimes they would wound one. Limping, it was still too fast for them to catch. The next day the men would claim the wounds had been exactly copied onto the skin of some village spinster. Didn't you see her, concealing her right arm? She runs as a hare at night. She floats in the millpond. She rejects menfolk because she is a witch, because her only lover is Satan.

They would imagine her dancing naked through flames.

"... frigid. That's the word, right?"

Max is talking loudly now, sitting with some of the other boys in the punt shed as they tie up their shoes. Trade has stopped earlier than usual today. The drizzle turned into a downpour, closing the punt station. We'd pulled tarpaulins over the punts, forcing them down with tie wraps.

"So, what did you do? You went home?" One of the boys turns to the others, grinning. "Cried yourself to sleep?"

"Nah, she just needed a bit more..." Max paused, once again trying to think of the appropriate word. "Yeah, she –"

I slam the door shut to get their attention. They all go quiet and look up at me.

"What you talking about?" I hardly ever speak to most of them outside of the capacity of equipment logistics. They're surprised.

"Nothing."

They shove their wet clothes into plastic bags and get up, walking past me.

"Lock the shed up, will you?"

If we kill the hare, we'll kill the witch.

I like to read about folktales and traditions, about guilds and worshipful companies. It gives me a comforting sense of continuity. I've read about the gondoliers in Venice, and London's watermen and lightermen. Sometimes I pretend that we belong to this clade of respected professions. But ours is a temporary job. No one comes back to the punt station. There can be no continuity from one season to the next. People here are like particles in a stream, always flowing towards some wider stretch, some river, some sea.

I decide that Grace is like the sea. She seethes raw energy, from the way she rolls her eyes to the savage clicking of her thumb against the spark wheel of her lighter. Eventually it might have happened, and I might have flowed into her.

Grace didn't come back to the punt station. The boys don't seem too surprised. I catch them laughing about her in the punt shed sometimes. My summer here is almost over, and the leaves are on the turn. The first fell to kiss the river yesterday, then floated on downstream.