

Where the Water Goes

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In water, like in books—you can leave your life.

— Lidia Yuknavitch

Eventually all that is heavy becomes light; this is the alchemy of water.

My solitary train journey runs alongside the banks of a river, imprinting itself in my mind. From the train window, the river seems to flow imperceptibly, without even a current. In places, it seems languid, as if it isn't flowing at all. I can never escape the river.

My hair is red, and long and straight. My navy blue coat is wrapped around me. I write the names of boys on my pencil case. I am thirteen. My world is vast and crushing.

The river starts its life high in the mist of abandoned granite ruins, before flowing through the golden slopes of Dartmoor, not far from the English channel. Then the river turns east and becomes tidal, widening out as an estuary, then slowly flows to the sea. It's an in-between place, where a river starts to merge with the sea, where freshwater meets saltwater, and everything slows down. This is the place that shaped me.

It is the summer my mother died. June. I fell through a trapdoor inside myself. I entered a vast interior landscape because the world I had once known just collapsed. The loss made a cave inside my body.

The railway line runs from Exeter through Dawlish, in the southwest England peninsula. The line crosses the river at Teignmouth, across a railway embankment. From the train, you can see stark and shifting mudflats and the surrounding green hills.

I still remember sitting on the train, staring out of the window. It's hard to put into words, but I felt the beginning of an engulfing pointlessness settling over the world around me. I see now that it was sorrow but also the beginning of my depression, a soft forgetting of how to feel. I thought about my mother and tried to tend to the feelings inside me. My adolescent grief pressed against my chest, ancient and unfinished, sometimes in contest with other emotions like confusion and longing. It came in waves –deep, then shallow. I learned it was easier to be numb than to feel. I didn't cry as much as I dissolved, quietly and invisibly. This was the first lesson grief taught me: how to disappear.

My part-time job is in a cafe, in Shalden, a village on the riverbank of the estuary. My job is to carry cups of tea to small tables and try to not let all of it end up in the saucer. I am mostly unsuccessful because my hand is always shaking. Women on holiday pursed their lips in disappointment when I put the cup down in front of them.

On the way home, I walked across a long, low-profile bridge, over the wide expanse of the river and salt marsh, to the train station. I always stopped halfway to watch the sleek, black cormorants stretching their wings to dry their feathers. I looked for herons and kingfishers –bright flashes, silver-green edges of wings. The air was filled with a sweet, green scent.

In the mudflats, I watched dragonflies flitting over the shimmering surface of the water. I watched the river finishing its life in the tides, where the land took back its rushing current. What was river became marsh, then memory.

I missed my mother in ways I didn't have language for – in the quiet gaps of the day, when I sat on a train or stood on a bridge. The number of quiet gaps ebbed and flowed. Sometimes it felt like my mother had been gone forever. Other times I wondered if she had just slipped out of the room. I carried her absence inside me; I was water carrying sediment and soil; ice and snow. The loss defined a path that memory and sorrow could return to.

As I crossed the bridge, I imagined it was the start of my own independence. In time, grief will try to dismantle this false sense of separateness, teaching me to value connection, continuance, and entwinement.

My mother's body was cremated at the crematorium on the outskirts of town; the funeral was held in a mostly empty church in the parish of All Saints at Highweek. My mother had lived a life in which she kept to herself, but that's another story. Her remains were interred in the cold ground next to the northern wall of the church's graveyard, on a steep-sided green hill that overlooked the estuary. Here, the river reached its lowest point in the flats of a drowned river valley. My father would have found a way to talk about anything unrelated to what was happening – how the bedrock had been submerged by rising sea levels and flooded by the sea. How the dissolving bedrock created sinking streams, caves, and springs. How the river vanished underground, still flowing, but out of sight.

My mother was gone in June, she was forty-eight. Her body was inundated with exhaustion and the weight of her diagnosis: metastatic breast cancer, which had spread to other parts of her: lungs, liver, bones. My mother lived on in my pain after death as she had in life. She was like the river –flooding without warning, pulling, and holding.

My sisters and I stood at the grave to scatter the ashes. It was a windy day which made us break into hysterical laughter for fear the wind would carry our mother away. Then we cried so hard our make-up was streaking down our faces. We folded our grief, sorrow, and pain into each other; we were the ones who remained. We stood there watching the river, how it meandered through the lowlands of the river valley, scattered like silver threads. When the mist crept in, you felt as if you were in the clouds. The winds were always aloft there.

The river holds the ash that was burned; the sediment of every passing moment.

On Saturdays, the sisters walked into town to buy white and yellow freesias from the market, my mother's favourite flowers. On Sundays, with our father, we made our way through town, along quiet streets, lines of houses painted magnolia white with slate rooftops. Then we trudged quietly up the hillside to the old churchyard, first consecrated in the middle ages, older than the church we never went to. We only visited the rambling churchyard, where relic-like stone graves were dotted across a hillside. I wondered if people watched us.

At the graveside, I prepared the flowers carefully, cutting the thin green stems at an angle and trimming away the leaves. I focused on the task as it was something I could control. Grief tried to impart the lesson that control is an illusion, but I was not ready to learn that yet.

When we stayed at the churchyard for a while, I wandered along gravel pathways next to rows of graves. It felt like a miniature medieval city laid out in straight lines. I stopped to read the names on the weathered headstones, imagining the unfortunate – the young and short lived. One of the tiniest gravestones belonged to a five-year-old girl, her name—Lucy—was faint beneath a soft layer of yellow lichen. We counted the ages of the dead on our fingers; we searched for the oldest grave we could find. Sometimes I opened the door of the church by myself, breathing in its ancient cold air.

My father kept his eyes fixed on the distant view of the estuary. I couldn't help but study the movement of his shoulders, searching for a sign he was crying. But he did not show his emotions. Rather, he took deep, jagged breaths, swallowing his grief instead. I stared at the water glinting in the light. I concentrated on trying to understand how the river mingled with the sea, how one moment became another. I felt as if I was floating in the air.

After the first year, we went to the churchyard less often, perhaps every other week, sometimes even less. When we got there, I dreaded seeing the flowers from our last visit. I felt so guilty seeing them – brown and withered, their petals curled and faded.

I emptied the stagnant flower water, pinching my nose because of its sour smell. I washed out the metal vase in the stone outdoor water font, the water cold and icy. I quietly fought back tears, then broke down fully because my mother was slipping further and further away from me. I cried because I was afraid of becoming like my father; he had started to live without her.

For a while, I went to the churchyard by myself. My body had learned to lock the grief inside. I trimmed the flowers and arranged them meticulously. I had started to bring scissors and a teatowel. I focused on the objects in my field because they were tangible and concrete. I took to sitting on the nearby bench, thinking how I wanted to find a way to restart my life or rewind it. I didn't know it then but I was like the river, wanting to reach the sea and let go of everything I had been carrying: memories, hurt, clutches of abandonment; silt and broken branches.

The river begins its life in a light cold rain that mists over the granite ruins at Dartmoor. The ruins had been abandoned long ago but the river continued to form there, from ice-cold drops of rain, trickles gathering in the bogs and mires of the moors. I know my roots are in these mysterious and magical places.

As a child, I didn't fully understand how the river could have a beginning or an end because I thought things, like rivers, went on forever. I didn't think about circles and cycles, release and return.

The river runs quickly at first, impetuous. When young, it rushed its cold self through lost villages hidden in the hills. For much of its journey, the river remains hidden from view, rushing over shiny granite rocks. Swans nest along the edges of its banks; dippers fly swift and low, skimming the water's surface with rapid wingbeats. In the valley's lowlands, the river settles before it reaches a steep-sided narrow gorge of deep forest. The river rushes through it, heading towards the sea. I wonder what the river saw in its journey. Did it shiver inside a dark cave? Was it worried or afraid, filled with self-doubt?

I visit the grave by train, usually from London. Often it's the same line I took when I was thirteen. I learn how grief folds time, making the past feel as if it is still happening. This is one of grief's hardest lessons to learn.

On one occasion, the grave was so overgrown with bright green limescale and soft moss I thought it had disappeared. What had been sharp edges of granite now sloped into murky soil, softened by rain over time. I had to carefully cut away the moss, scrape away the effects and erosion of time and rain, neglect and forgetting. I felt as if I was tending a magical garden with a rusty gate into the past. I tried to clean and polish the granite square, extracted and cut from a nearby quarry. I imagined the river winding through an abandoned quarry, once washing over the very stone in front of me.

The etched black words still convey an unalterable reality –two dates, written as years, separated by a dash. My mother's short life from birth to death is summed up in one line.

An orange orb disappears into the river's edge. I inhale the cool evening air. I hear a train in the distance. Migrating birds fly overhead. In the spring, there are swallows and house martins, swifts and warblers; common terns and little gulls.

Each year I visit, my disbelief is strangely greater. The grief feels heavier too even though it seems like it should feel lighter after all these years. Then I see all that I am still carrying, tied up with identity, memory, and longing. All things unspoken and unresolved, missing and abjured. My mid-life grief presses against my chest, ancient and unfinished, sometimes in contest with other emotions like remorse and regret. It settles inside me, accumulating like silt in a riverbed.

If you don't let go of grief, you must let go of yourself to be able to carry the weight.

I wonder how I want to live, knowing how this ends?

Night falls across the estuary as the river seems to absorb the darkness.