

River by Night

A Performance for Six Voices

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Voice 1: Dave

Voice 2: Aparna

Voice 3: Nimaya

Voice 4: Divya

Voice 5: Florence

Voice 6: Lainey

Voice 1: The river at night is safety**Voice 2:** the river at night is danger**Voice 1:** The river at night is**Voice 2** (*stage whisper*) *Hush***Voice 6:**

fishermen move small furtive lights (as though smaller lights cannot be seen, as though clumsy stealth cannot be heard). The zip & click of their reels is a nonsense. You would not eat a fish from this river: not salmon, nor trout. Fishermen leave broken tackle – line and hook – hanging from branches by the bridge under blacktattered flags of balewrap

Voice 5 (*touches ear as though wearing an earpiece, broadcasting, has upbeat but nervous voice*):

We come at night to broadcast on narrow bandwidth, rippling and inconsistent: who is listening?

Voice 2:

I can listen, listen to the wind at night.

I can look, look at the stars in the sky.

I can hear, hear myself through the silence of the night.

I can feel, feel the emotions of the moon.

I can think, think to the silence of the night.

Voice 1:

the river's roar midwinter loud enough you hear it in every room in the house. It sounds like an engine running. You can't sleep and when you do you are caught in the river alderleaves stopping your mouth you are one layer down above the rolling shingle the sky is river too

Voice 5:

What lies in the river at night?
 When the shadows grow larger,
 When the mist grows thicker,
 Surrounds us and gulps the light.

The river at night is safety

Not one thing can see me

The water erases

My clumsy traces

* * *

The river at night is danger

I can't see no thing

But the shadows in the water

What lies underneath the rippling?

Voice 1:

the fox crosses the river after dark
 to reach dungheap rats the other side
 it is a thinflanked thing
 it is a glitch your neighbour would fix

Voice 3:

Maybe there are other timestreams
where language makes the shape
of stories you've never heard.

And this is one of those stories, which slipped
as some do,
into our river.

It lay there
in the rocks
by the bank
where girls
poke the world with sticks.

The story was stabbed up like a fish
speared
on a strong stick
with a splash and *Ahha!* for all to hear

Then the fishergirl sat down
for the mountains had found the sun
and her west squeezed the light until it ran dim
and she pulled the sodden story from its spear
and cooked it on the fire

and the story fed,
and as it did, the story said,—

Voice 4:

upon the periphery of this delicate aqua
sing our ancestors
gathered tonight
in honour and yearning for
the blessings of the bodies
from an aperture beyond.

the bioluminescence of their souls
fused in unity seems
enough to enchant the echoes
submerged within the stream -
a harmony of silence and music,
music in silence,
silence of music -
and with each spirited calling
they m o v e
away from their past flesh,
towards their shared destiny.

the echoes, once faint,
now mould into howls and moans
as if seeking
a bountiful void,
an epicentre of domestication and freedom at once.

the movement mustn't give in
for when the neap tide is orchestral
can their united souls begin
to rebel and revel,
expand
and emerge

into time, space, and liminality of being.

i, an audience to the voyagers' neology
and *my* nostalgia,
must decide -
whether to inhale the night horizon and
dive into the stream
on a journey beyond the dichotomy of
yesterday and tomorrow
dusk and dawn
r i p p l e s and lulls
or to
b/r/e/a/k the fourth wall
on behalf of *my* ancestors
and become
their riverine,
their RITUAL.

[pause, count silently to 4]

this section said with urgency, but not necessarily quickly, each response barely waiting for the previous one to end: it needs to be clear that they cannot hear each other

Voice 6 (*assertive but desperate*): darkness ripens in the riparian

Voice 2: (*angry whisper*) it was *your* dog that led us here

Voice 5: even the hollows under your eyes

Voice 1 I could not see her eyes, only lips, moving

Voice 3 (*agitated, trying to stay calm*)

you left the land

and pulled away

lanternlight on the water

on your oars touching the water -

Voice 4 (*said singsong*) wild garlic, lesser celandine, pink purslane and dog's mercury, wood anemone, butterbur and primrose

(all crouch and wince, hold their right ear, as though shrill static has come through an earpiece)

[pause: count silently to 3]

Voice: 2 (*speaking to themselves*):

The nights get longer, my thoughts stay longer.

The nights get shorter, my thoughts get a little shorter.

The silence brings to me peace, peace from a busy outside world.

The silence brings me hope, hope in the silence of the night.

Voice 6:

men with guns stalk the riverbank at night --

a meeting with a lover spooked a deer

& a single shot rang out that sent us cantering

before we stopped moving

through long-grass like deer

Voice 1:

the lamp swings whether there is wind or not
your bitter bottle rises and falls in it
twilight to black

Voice 6:

grey that has weight comes down on the river
To deepen darkly under alders' watch

Voice 1:

its brambles undo your bootlaces
it whorls its own fingerprints
in the pool that follows the rapids

Voice 6:

you find on the shingle a pheasant's egg cold as a stone among stones, leave it behind to
sustain something else

Voice 2:

I flow through it all, in hopes of finally meeting the sea.

Some days, I flow because it's the only thing I can do.

And some days, I flow because i long to meet the sea.

I can hear myself glide everyday,

But hear myself more during the night

Voice 1:

otter & dipper; kingfisher; half-desperate people with lowhung heads; grey wagtail; sandpiper in summer; neighbours with dogs, yes, just before dark; rats as long as your forearm; grey squirrels yes; stormdreck decks the branches; the runoff greenfurs everything by July; mayflies and diving beetles; stoneflies, yes; fallow deer falling over themselves; march oystercatchers (*pee-peek-pee-peek?*); mink take eggs; uneasy; badgers dig worms and holes to shit in, they snuffle and grunt and drink the river like hooch

Voice 2:

As the salmon fight against the dams, the riverdolphins get hunted from myths, and the elephants go missing from drinking my waters

Voice 3:

she had a brother who died and became a crane, she said, I see him in the otter creek under the bridge, I used to run with the otter creek away from home every summer but I always got tired, every summer the yellow perennials still smell to me like a botched escape, the otter creek is the river I stepped in twice or thrice, teenage summertimes, couldn't get out of, how many times I saw the crane, his careful silty steps saying, "couldn't help but come back"

Voice 4:

oh Mahseer, the tiger of freshwaters, your periled roar is subdued, how unjust; dearest forest owlet, are you a phoenix risen from the screams of chaos? So Sarus, proud crane of this wetland, your mate for life is a bygone, deepest condolences; Panthera, your cubs await in thirst and hope, the stream has run dry, your reflection faded; the river howls and drowns all night; the river cries, tearless; the river is no longer as the river once was.

Voice 5:

The clocks changed but the rains did not come; we had one season for months, dust in all channels, wind instead of water moving through the creeks it was as though -

Voice 6:

A brook, a creek, a burn, a river; fast moving over smooth rocks it is quiet, be silent to listen, what is it saying? The insects land on it, the animals drink from it, I wash my hands; What is its color — green from the algae, gray from the stones, blue from the sky; The mountains uplift it, the wind shivers in the aspens above it, the plants and animals, I, take from it; The river roars on — summer and winter, day and night, it moves down down down.

[pause, count silently to two]

Voice 1: The river at night is

Voice 6: safety

Voice 2: The river at night is

Voice 4: not safe to be near

Voice 5: (*touching ear as though wearing earpiece*): hello? Riverrising, over. hello?

Voice 6: The river at night is where

Voice 3: you left the land

and pulled away

Voice 5: (*urgently*) We come at night to broadcast

Voice 6: (*positively, with relish*) narrow and rippling

Voice 2: I can listen, listen to the wind at night

Voice 1: it sounds like an engine running

Voice 3: we are here by the river waiting; are you listening?

[pause, count silently to two]

All (*prolonged*): *Huuuuushhhhhhhhhh*