

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

Victoria Slotover
The Water's Edge

'Extinguish my eyes, I'll go on seeing you' — Rainer Maria Rilke

They said I was destined for great things, for a long time I believed them, and maybe I would have been if they hadn't told me I was. But they did and so in the end I wasn't. Promised prizes don't land in hands that don't grasp for them.

Maybe I would've tried harder if I'd wanted them as much as I wanted her. Rosalyn Thorner, her name a delicate flower, though one to be wary of.

She was Miss Thorner in tutorials tap tapping her pencil on a pad of paper, Lyn to her friends calling her from across the quad, Rosalyn as she dropped the punting pole in the Cherwell but to me she was always Rosaly, my reason and my existence, and I was her heart-pricked nightingale. Perhaps then it's only right that I bled for nothing, creating the perfect rose that only I can see the beauty of.

I think I first noticed her precisely because she hadn't noticed me. I was so used to girls coming up to me, talking to and about me, that her indifference, which at first I thought must be feigned, was refreshing.

It wasn't that she was shy; she was always in the centre of a knot of friends- checking her pigeon hole in the Porters' Lodge, queuing at Hall for lunch, wandering over to the College Library. She simply wasn't interested in me, which of course made me very interested in her.

She wasn't beautiful in any obvious sense; her look was more subtle than that. Her hair was the colour of wet sand, that indefinable shade that lurks somewhere between blonde and brown. Though in a shaft of sunlight it was golden, the few flyaway strands on the top of her head, that she could never get to lie flat, glistened like an electric halo. Her eyes were forest green, racing green, and later when I was able to gaze at them I felt as though they were a pool I'd slipped into. And her mouth, bow shaped and permanently pouting, was always moving- chewing a bottom lip when she concentrated, wide open as she threw her head back to laugh at something silly I'd said, the tip of her tongue showing as she worked, and of course soft and full as she kissed me.

We were sitting by the river, I was snapping twigs and throwing them in, pooh sticks floating upstream- this of course after we'd got talking, started seeing each other- after I'd fallen in love with her. The sun was setting, its red orb hanging between the trees, and a pair of frogs gibbited to each other from a hiding place on the banks. I wanted to tell her how gorgeous she was and referenced some quote or other to sound poetic.

'Spare the quotes,' she said. 'What is it about Oxford that makes people think they need to spout them all the time?' She looked at me and laughed. 'Don't look so crestfallen, I think it's sweet of you to say it, but I'd much rather hear what you think than some crusty old poet!'

We returned there often, it's where she first kissed me and later left me. There had been some party, we were both in black tie and bored of the

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

music and dancing, or at least she was- I was just happy to have an excuse to slip away with her. We'd wandered, slightly drunkenly, down to the river at the bottom of our college gardens. In the white light of the moon it looked like a stage set waiting for action. The willows wept into the water which was black and still save for the occasional pond skater rippling across it, as the night birds and grasshoppers chirruped in the grass and trees. She lay down, her skirts spread wide around her. I lay next to her listening to her breathe.

'Look,' she said pointing up to the stars, 'if you focus with all your might on a single one, after a while you feel your soul float upwards. Try it,' she said, her breathing slow and deep. We lay there for a while, her floating up to heaven, me in heaven beside her. I reached out and touched her fingertips with my own. She turned her head towards me and smiled and for a moment we just looked at each other until I finally dared to do what I'd wanted since the first moment I saw that she hadn't seen me. Even now, years later, if I try really hard I can still taste that kiss, the taste of Gin and Tonic and her and I can still feel its soft pressure and then its urgent warmth.

There were many kisses after that, and even at the end there was a kiss. She was a linguist which meant she'd have to go abroad for a year, and in those days the only way to keep in touch was by letter- hard to imagine the agony of waiting for a response which could take weeks, in the days of instant gratification that email has created. But so it was, I heard from her every few weeks, and towards the end even less frequently than that. I analyzed every word she wrote, every nuance. I felt keenly the absence of the heartfelt emotion- 'I miss you', 'I long for you'- that littered my letters but reassured myself with reminders that she wasn't a 'soppy person', her words not mine when I challenged her. Did she think I was soppy? Obviously so as it turns out.

When she returned I could see that she hadn't really, a part of her was still there. She was cool with me, she didn't want my kisses. 'Walk with me,' she said. So of course we walked down to the river where she told me she'd fallen in love with a professor at the university in St Petersburg and they were engaged to be married. 'I wanted to tell you in person,' she said. I don't think I said anything. She held my face in her hands and kissed me gently on my mouth. I, who had yearned for her kiss, didn't want her kiss, didn't want the kiss that meant 'goodbye'.

It didn't begin the moment she left me; I didn't start looking for her then. I didn't need to. I knew in whose arms she lay. At first I simply sleepwalked along the path they always knew I'd tread. I didn't have to jostle for candidacy or a safe seat. It was as if they were mine already, hanging in my closet waiting for me to put them on. Everyone said the fit was good, it suited me, and like Narcissus I fell in the water gazing at my own reflection.

Who knows? If it had been harder I might not have been so easily distracted. I was on holiday in the Riviera enjoying a glass of Pernod under an umbrella advertising Stella Artois. I cupped my hands around my mouth to light a cigarette and inhaling deeply, I saw her looking at me over the top of her sunglasses. She tilted her head back and laughed- deep, throaty and full. It wasn't her laugh which always sounded like the

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

wind chime she hung in her college bedroom. It wasn't her. But it could have been. For a second it could have been her, she could have been looking at me.

After that I started to see her everywhere because, unlike my Destiny, it was what I really wanted. I searched for her so I could feel again what I had felt then; that she had been returned to me.

I started making excuses to skip constituency surgeries just so I could wander the streets, peering through shop and café windows, at passers-by. Occasionally I glimpsed her out of the corner of my eye, only to find, as I turned abruptly, that I was looking at someone quite different- a mother pushing a pram, a girl handing out leaflets, an elderly woman even. I saw her all around me; everything brought her back to me.

Once I spotted a mannequin with the same whimsical smile and stared at it for so long the shopkeeper actually came outside to ask if I needed any help. Embarrassed, I hurried away, half walking, half running. Later that night I came back with my camera. That was the first picture I took, though now it's half obscured by all the others that line my overflowing mantelpiece. I like black and whites because they're the easiest to believe. Looking at them through half closed eyes they become her shadow.

After I'd got into the habit of missing surgeries, it was easy to avoid debates too. I bounced calls from the Whips' office and hid from my colleagues. It was around that time that I started to find her in more solid objects; a piece of glass kicked to the kerb was the tear I'd watched work its way down her cheek as she said she was leaving me, a skeleton leaf, flimsy as a moth wing, was a reminder of her fragility, the rose petal that landed on my sleeve as I walked through St James' Park was her kiss. I collected these and others, and arranged them on my mantelpiece with the pictures.

I've lost my seat, I've lost my friends, but I don't care. You see I've discovered that lost things have a way of returning- just like Rosaly has found a way to come back to me.