

Rusalka

Kathryn Simons

The water is like air on my skin. My long hair cuts my vision into ribbons. I watch it like I used to when I was a child. The days bleed into one another. The ache in my neck has faded yet I remain in the in between. For a long time, I listened to the fish and birds whisper their tales, frayed by time and kept together through their telling. To the fish I listened most intently. Although I had spent my life marking the soil with my feet, I now felt kinship to those of the river. The fish spoke of Upes Māte, she who commands the waters of river and streams alike. They nudged me, they promised she would guide me as a daughter of the river.

I called upon Upes Māte, I prayed to her as if to my old God. Tell me what to do, show me my place, I begged. Tell me how to move beyond the end of my own story. But I received nothing but strange whispers in return.

Now as I look to the sky above, I wonder if the whispers mean anything at all.

I can still leave the water. Pulling myself from its currents, I climb onto the land. It is hard and unforgiving on my soft feet. The air is dry to my lungs now, so used to the smoothness of the water. I sit on the bank, in a pool of clear summer light, twisting and untwisting my hair. It has grown unnaturally since I made the river my home. As I hum the tune I sing in the river, a plea to Upes Māte, I am reminded of the stories of a peasant girl whose beautiful voice attracts the king, at once freeing and trapping her.

Voices startle me from my thoughts. My instinct is to slip back into the safety of the river, but I hesitate. I hide from the villagers I once lived with; something warns me of the pain and fear I would cause. But I often wish I could reach out and touch them. Few venture this far up the river, only the curious, the idle or the foolish. The voices sound close but they do not appear to be moving towards me. Curiosity pulls me closer. The pitch of the girl's voice reminds me of my own. It jolts me, stirring my memories up like a pebble thrown into a pond.

‘Andris, please, stop being funny.’ The girl laughs but it is unnatural, forced. My mind becomes muddy with fear and I feel water burning my throat as memories bleed into my vision. My hand goes up to my neck, to the faded line. I stumble as I feel myself ripped apart again and the forest betrays my presence.

‘Who’s there?’ a male voice calls. My vision clears enough for me to see them, the man and girl, across the clearing. They both look at me in something like fear, astonishment. I know my appearance, my long hair and deathlike skin, is like something out of a story. I have wandered too far; the thought is sharp in my mind.

The girl takes advantage of my appearance to squirm away from the man’s grasp. Her fear steels something in me. I hold the man’s gaze, even as the fear leaks from it and it takes on another edge. I feel the girl disappear and only then do I dare turn, hurrying over uneven ground. A muffled shout comes delayed, but I do not look back. My feet touch the river. Its currents embrace me, and I know I am safe.

The girl has unsettled me. Her look, her fear, her voice. She has awakened something in me and now, even as I feel the safety of the water, I carry the memory of its cruelty in my throat. I wander the forest more frequently. The fish worry at me as I pull myself out of the water, they warn me, not understanding that I am not like them.

It feels like months since the girl, but it might have been days. Without sleep to mark the days, I cannot hold time down. I have continued to pray to Upes Māte, but perhaps she cannot hear me from wherever she rests, for all that answer me are the constant lapping whispers.

I settle on a blanket of freshly fallen leaves, still soft yet already touched by Lapu Māte’s hand. The mother of the forest has begun her travels through the forest, slowly turning the leaves to announce the coming of Veļu laiks, the time of the spirits. My senses are dulled above water. While the river used to soothe me, now I find the way the air muffles my memories until the sounds are merely a strange melody more of a comfort.

I think of those stories, told in the dark months, where the characters always had a purpose, a pattern to follow. My mother used to tell me life was a story; we all had our own

beginnings and ends. Remembering my own end might be more bearable should it not feel so jagged and untidy. Yet now I think of the girl and, while I have spent the past days resenting the pain the sight of her has caused, I realise she also gives me a kind of strength. The river saved me, and I saved her in turn. The river seems to appreciate the thought, as the whispers sharpen, and I can almost make out words.

The leaves warn me, but I am too slow to react. When I turn, I see him standing there. I recognise him instantly. He looks bewildered.

‘I have been looking for you,’ he says. I stand, wary of the look in his eye. My skin prickles; I feel as if I am seeing with double vision. My memory covers my eyes like the running water of the river distorts the rocks on its bed. He speaks but I don’t hear him. He comes closer and I feel the shift in the air. He grabs at me. I pull away and my foot slips into the river. Its touch jolts me, whispering along my skin. In my fear, the whispers shape into words and tug at my mind like a forgotten story. Long hair, deathless, hunted and hunter. I finally understand. My anger comes swift, like a river after rain, and with it something strange, a power now acknowledged.

‘Let me go,’ I say. The words are barely above a whisper, but I give him a chance to run, to leave. A chance I wish I had been given. He claws at me like a beast from a fairy story. Both my feet are in the river now. The whispers of Upes Māte are loud in my ear. I smile at him, and he loosens his grip. He does not notice the water swell around him. He pulls me towards him, and I pull him under the surface, my hair wrapping around his limbs. Finally, his face turns from desire to fear. I hold him until the river fills him. Upes Māte’s words ring in my ears, whispering through the water.

Rusalka, the water whispers, *Rusalka*.

Kathryn Simons studied English and Art History at the University of Adelaide before writing her Honours thesis on revisionary feminist mythmaking. Her fiction resides within the Fantasy genre and explores the mythology and folklore of Poland and Latvia, death, and the fictionalisation of real people.