

PLUTO'S PLUNGE

Rosa Watt

The chlorine-charged water swallows me. It threads my hair into silk, whispering muffled secrets that tickle my eardrums. Oh, and I listen and listen and listen even when they become a deep, clumpy confusion. I listen until my lungs beg for air. Then, I'm but a buoy at the top, except I don't mark anything important, really. I'm just carried by the still surface for no reason other than simply wanting to be here alone.

Suddenly, a sonorous voice echoes through the building, humming through the water and rattling the stillness; it tells me that we've been here too long and that we've gotta go. Feeling like a kid, my head bobs awkwardly above the surface as I glide to the rim and flop myself over it. Plodding one foot after the other, the water drip-drops from the tip of my nose and elbows as my arms wrap around myself.

Laughter and chatter hurl back and forth, crashing and melding into each other in the condensed changing rooms; if my backside could talk it would be joining in. Instead, I hide in a corner, unclasping my bikini top, letting my breasts hang like plums; puberty came and grew like a fire that couldn't be put out, and I feel stupid because everyone in the room seems to let the fire glow and radiate like they're the sun, but I just feel like Pluto or something. Pluto doesn't get to talk about sex and boys and parties. Pluto just sits on the outside and observes. To be honest, I think it's just how it should be, though, like some fixed hierarchy, because whenever I try to be the sun, all I want is for a meteor to carve a hole right through my insides so I don't feel so sick of myself for ever trying to be anything more.

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My palms trace my smooth, wet skin as the water finds its way over mountains and through caves, and I close my eyes until it is just me and the steady shhshhshhshh against the ceramic tiles. And for a moment, I feel fine again; just me under this small sky.

Bubbles spawn between my fingers and cling to my body, eating away at the pungent pool funk, evolving more and more into the smell of vanilla bean and coconut. The temperature's hotter than I usually have it, but I don't care and let it run and make my skin pink and patchy all over like acid kissing my flesh. I welcome it into my mouth until my jaw almost breaks and it tickles the flesh of my throat too.

It then follows me down the hallway and into my room, and not long after I hear my mum yell *shit!* followed by swift squeaks of feet slipping on the flooded floor. These feet then enter my room and I am lectured on how I'm old enough to know that I need to dry myself off as soon as I get out of the shower and not get the whole house wet. But the water also floods my ear canals, so these words muffle into a gentle mush. I pretend to listen anyway, though, head moving up and down in obedience like a naive dog, despite having heard this frustrated tune before.

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I don't sing *Happy Birthday* because I know I shouldn't be guided like a child anymore. I'm pretty sure I wash my hands for longer, anyway. Embarrassingly, not because I care so much about hygiene, but more because it temporarily relieves the peeling, strawberry eczema that paints my knuckles, unlike my cheap, flowery hand cream which only seems to make it worse.

Another distant bellow calls my name, forcing me to reluctantly go to its origins, where I find my parents sitting on the couch in the lounge. With a cautious tone, they tell me I need to get out more and socialise, you know, for my mental health and stuff. So, I say I'll organise something this weekend just so they can stop hounding me down over yet another thing like I'm five.

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Saturday, a bzzt sends waves through my skull, and my eyes open to my phone beside my pillow, with one new text: *hey omg so sorry but something has come up so i can't hang out anymore but lets hang out another time ok?* And I reply saying: *alg see you at school on monday :)*

We were meant to have a picnic, and I had already bought biscuits and chippies and whatnot, but she probably thought it was too babyish and I guess I don't blame her.

Drops of rain begin to knock on my window, and I lie there and answer with my ears, knowing that my friend will leverage on the weather as even more of an excuse. I feel stupid for ever listening to my parents, and I wish this time for a meteor to hit me right in the face, obliterating my brain, so I can stop thinking that people actually like me.

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The showers seem neverending. They aren't something reliable I can turn on and off like an actual shower; they stop on their own accord.

Miraculously, by the afternoon, they do stop, though, and I think *fuck it* as I grab a pack of salt and vinegar chips, and they crinkle in my tote bag as I bike along the gravel path. There's a secluded stream or small river or something like that down by where we were meant to have our picnic, which was largely why I wanted to go there in the first place. My Dad used to take me there when I was younger, but it was so long ago that it's a fuzzy dream, like a movie you've watched way back that the scenes have become incoherent and merge with other scenes from completely different movies.

The field is a vast, overgrown green mess. I don't care if it's still dewy as I toss myself amidst it so the sun only knows my backside, and the grass only knows my face. The water starts to seep into the fabric of my clothes, but all I am focused on is the stream as it whispers soft secrets to me that I know my friend wouldn't dare to ever share. Oh, and I listen and listen and listen.

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Obviously I don't take geography at school, as the stream is more of a river, and not even a small one. A murky cerulean snake, it rushes slightly downwards over bumpy rocks and stones. It's not like the lazy river at the pool.

Carelessly, I rip my shoes and socks off, tossing them behind me and staining them with mud. *I'm sure Mum will get the stains out for me, though.*

My feet make their way into the water, and it's cold, making it feel as though my toes could fall off. It's rough and smacks my shins as I take a few more steps, and then a few more, and a few more, until it takes me. I get what my mum means now as the sudden gush guides my feet and directs my posterior into a dull but pointed rock, and all at once I regret ever trying to be cool and adventurous like those girls in coming-of-age movies, wishing I just sat in my room mulling over why my friend cancelled.

My whole body is wet, and for once, it doesn't comfort me. Instead it sends chilling gushes through the hollow opening of my back collar, eating at the grazed skin along my spine, making it sting and sting and sting. For a brief moment, I lie there and close my eyes, wishing I was nothing, and not a stupid girl who just fell in the river.

Ironically, I pull myself up with the very rock that I fell into, finding the dull but pointed bulge an ideal size for my dry, eczema-covered hands. I sit on the bank, slouching over myself and rubbing my backside. Fixating on the merciless river, I open the salt and vinegar chips in an attempt to comfort myself, but they just make my mouth sting too.

The river rages, and I see it differently than I did before. It does not whisper; it gurgles and chokes on its laughter, and I feel like I'm in the changing rooms again. I'm not a part of this joke and I more or less feel like one. Like Pluto, I revolve around the Sun, yet I'm not worth much at all. I am like the Pluto in the stories that hides in the shadows, watching Olympus from afar while knowing I'll never get there.

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Through mountains and caves, the warmth kisses my sore back. And I cherish this comfort, because I know again that these mountains and caves will crumble when a tsunami or flood or storm hits, and I know that I will never be strong enough to withstand them.