

*Ebb and Flow* by Niamh Whelan Y9

“Every year,” Grandma says, “she comes back here.”

“Why?” I ask. “She could go anywhere.”

I can see the shadow of Grandma shrug.

“If I was a swan,” I announce, chin held high, “I would see the world. I would fly to every country and swim in every river.”

I am sat on my haunches, watching her intently through the gap in the winding brambles. Her feathers are a cluster of pearls against her nest. She studies me with an amber eye, one pale wing held over her ivory eggs. Eight of them.

In all my pigtailed, sticky-cheeked curiosity, I simply did not believe my grandma. Why, out of anywhere in the whole world, would she come back here?

“She came to this river once and kept coming back.”

Summer rolls through the countryside, and I am crouched in a field of wildflowers, a pleasant wind disturbing the leaves of the willow tree, shielding my head from the beating sun. Insects chitter, grasshoppers leaping between blades of grass. I peek over the riverbank, scanning its surface for any sign of her. I hear her first – a squawk, a rustling of feathers, and then she glides across the water, followed by eight fuzzy shapes. They cheep at one another and flap their little wings. In the distance, through a copse of trees, I see the shapes of Mummy and Grandma, exchanging words with an emotion I can’t quite unpack. Mummy turns from Grandma and stomps away from her through the trees, toward my hiding place. I sink further into the field - hiding from what I know is to come. Mummy seizes me by the arm and drags me away from the river. I fight to steal a glance at my swan, but she is gone. Not even a ripple remains.

Autumn blows by, leaving the trees bare of their summer clothes and mushrooms sprouting from between the fallen branches. I am stood on the canal side, braving the biting breeze with youthful determination. The leaves drift across the begrimed water, painting the surface with a carpet of ochre, deep maroon and muddy brown, a true image of autumn-time. The signets navigate the waters in a winding trail, following their mother at some distance now. They snap and squawk at each other with greater intensity, as if realising they are old enough to do so. Behind me, a shadow is cast across the water, a wavering image on the surface beside my own figure. I turn, half expecting my grandma, but I’m met with Mum. Her scleras are scattered with red lines, like scarlet bolts of lightning. She brings a hand up to my shoulder and together, we walk away.

Winter arrives and they are gone. Jack Frost takes his icy fingers and trails them across the hills and horizons of the countryside. Hares retreat into their burrows, squirrels skittering through the dewy fields and up the stripped trunks of trees. Crystalline shards of ice create a jagged mandala across the surface of the water, snowdrops bowing their graceful heads over the bank of the river. I find myself missing them - I begin to understand, with each passing season, that Winter’s arrival means their departure. Before my journey to the river, I stand outside my mother’s bedroom door. The room is swallowed in darkness, the orange glow of the hallway light breaking the black. Sorry, not this time, love, she murmurs from beneath the covers. I turn and leave without closing the door, picking up my car keys.

Each year is the same, though each year I seem to lose something more. The tide of the seasons comes in its regular ebb and flow, never pausing, never waiting. Eventually I stop coming to the river.

One year. I stand beside a tower of cardboard boxes, teetering precariously before the boot of my car. Mum watches me from the front door, arms wrapped around herself.

A year later I sit at my office desk, bringing my coffee to my lips. The steam rises off its surface in tendrils, reaching the ceiling and dispersing.

Another year passes and I'm stood, hands clasped, surrounded by people I may have met before, or may have not. There is uncle, I note distantly. Her favourite song plays over the speakers - a familiar trill.

By next year her face seems to be covered by a shield of mist in my mind. I wake up each morning and feel an absence of sorts that I cannot fill. I decide to return to the river.

I scour the shrubbery, kicking up leaves as I navigate the beaten footpaths. I find the places I happen across vaguely familiar, as if they have appeared in long-forgotten dreams. Perhaps I had thought it up in my childlike wonder, days by the rivers shrouded in a golden haze - untouchable. After a while, I give up. Through my disappointment I feel a certain amusement. After all I had endured: adulthood, tricky relationships, colleges and classes, I find myself back at this place. This exact idea rings a distant bell in my mind. *"Every year, she comes back here."*

That's it!

"I get it now!" I call out to her; my voice is carried by the whistling wind across the canal. "I understand!"

I am met with silence. Was she ever even here at all?

As my chest rises and falls, I gather myself and prepare to leave. This was a silly idea. I can't ever get those days back. Time passes despite our efforts, our resistance. Why should I try to fight it?

A squawk.

From behind the winding thorns, I see her. Her feathers are fallen snow among browning foliage and carefully entwined twigs. Beneath her wing are four eggs of ivory, gleaming in the shallow Spring sunlight.

Despite harsh Winters, pounding Summers and unforgiving Autumns - she came back here. Right here. To where she had always been.

Despite everything, she came home.