

Matahiwi

Nadezhda Macey

Matahiwi, the switch edge blade of your eye, glinting from the hill's ridge. An SOS and a surrender. A pretty young thing, always there and always watching.

To cook the damper in the embers is to have flushed cheeks like a signature of the bonfire on your face. To feel the feverish heat and believe you might combust. So we push the stick into the dirt and let the spiral of damper float above the hungry saliva and spitting of the flames and let it cook, peacefully, because we are safe. Safe like Father, who lies out of reach of the red light, flat on his back like a hidden body in the grass. A coffin shape formed by the long flattened blades. They bend and wave with the wind, playing over him and against his bare arms.

She wears a short summer dress with pink stripes. The thin straps rest on her collarbones and climb the hill of her freckled brown shoulders. Blue socks go up to her knees past the black rubber of her boots. She bends over to wash the soup cups in a bucket, the red blood of tomato soup mixing with the river water, cold with night. Her dress so short you can see her knickers. The boys and the farmers watch intently, frozen in place on the other side of the fire, as she dances her principal role in the ballet of *'The Observed'*. They are unmoving from their seats in the audience, sheepdog eyes on the lamb through the flames.

On other days Vita sleeps in the dark of the alder trees. She is my sister, on her stomach with her cheek turned to the side. The shadows of the grass play in the sunlight on her back. I wake her with the sound of my running feet, heading to the river. We go in every half hour, taking refuge from the hot day. We run down the path screaming 'Wait for me!' We see who can get in and out the fastest. The summer has shrunk the stream and widened the riverbed, so now you have to get down and lower yourself in, a paddle more than a swim. The bushes on the side watch, sitting in their own hot silence. We sit, in our silence, backs against the bank. When we return to the kitchen house we might wash a peach of its furry skin, or a plum of its cloudy grease, or, we might see the farmer. For now we close our eyes,

the only sound the eels in the water. They push the light in ripples from side to side to side to side with the curl of their grey skin.

Dead lamb dead lamb dead lamb.

Makes me think of Tom killing the lamb in the river.

The farmer was atop his tractor, looking down at us in our summer dresses, fresh meat standing on the yellow burnt grass. 'How long can raw meat sit out in the sun?' He cupped my face with his left hand, holding my blushed cheeks tight in his huge old man hand. There was hunger in his body. Hunger in the ring on his finger, I felt it in the hard silver that dug into my face. His hunger burnt into my eyes, because he was standing with the sun behind him, and the sun was white hot. I had mountain dew in my veins, sparkling and fizzing, like if he cut me I would bleed glitter. The words lie heavy on my tongue. I want to say, 'You are a sheep dog that kills'. But my teeth and tongue and my blood are all made of silver. When I try to speak my spangly plastic mouth slips down my throat and through my fingers to the edge of the river among the stones and the eels. It floats, a pool of shining. And he winks at me, like all he wants is to be a shard of shining above the water, all he wants is to catch the light. 'You've got some cheek girl, better watch yourself.'

He slinks away with canine teeth and I fall into the wall, where the chipped white paint of the wood is warm. It holds me, like a hand cupping a cheek, and Vita sleeps under the trees, lulled by the many voices of Matahiwi's spell.