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The Properties of Water by Rachel Connor

Winner of Linen Press Spring Shorts 2014

<http://linen-press.com/the-properties-of-water-by-rachel-connor/>

I hadn't expected to talk about physics, but that was how it started.

Or did it begin the time I first saw you? After twenty lengths, my thighs were shaky with fatigue. In the café, I chose a seat with a view of the pool and had to wipe away the remnants of the previous customer, crystals of brown sugar scattered across the table.

I watched the other swimmers: the mother in the shallow end, clapping animatedly when her toddler jumped in; the loose-fleshed pensioner drifting between lanes. But it was the woman with the cap and goggles and nose clip that I was drawn to: you, with the eagle tattooed across your back, its wings beating time with each stroke.

After a while, you hoisted yourself on to the poolside. One clean movement, and you were up on your feet. Then, a strange thing: you turned, paused, made to enter the water again. You focused on the exact place to execute the dive. Did you do it deliberately, knowing I was watching? When you hit the surface, your legs were in perfect alignment. They shimmered white in the pool's reflected light.

I've wondered whether I might have been pulled towards you by some intangible force. You wouldn't have believed it, though, so I never mentioned it.

Here it is, the objective truth of what happened: the day we met, I went to the garden centre because Tim forgot to pick up the plants. I had to drag the children there after school. Jack demanded that I push him in the trolley; Maddie disappeared down rows of weed killer and plastic planters. When, finally, I found her by the bird feeders, I bribed her to get us back to the queue.

I'll admit that the waiting irritated me. Would I have been more patient if I'd known what was to come? Or would I have bolted, abandoning the bedding plants in the middle of the aisle? All I felt was weariness, a need for home. What I wanted home to be, in any case – something solid and unquestionable.

They were training a new checkout girl. That was the cause of the delay. She was calm, in the face of it – taking instructions from the supervisor, finding her way around the till, fending off questions from customers and smiling through it all. I was fascinated by her body language, her

confidence. I long for that self-assurance, to be able to smooth my way through life. It comes so easily to you, of course. You don't doubt anything.

The girl's hair was auburn and tied in a top knot, pulled back from her face. She had skin you could almost see through. It made her unreachable, somehow; transparent, as though she might not quite exist. When we got to the front, I handed her the begonias, one by one. She turned them over – gently, so the soil wouldn't spill – searching for a barcode. The tendrils at the nape of her neck had escaped her ponytail and she had a tiny stud in her nose, hardly noticeable, half buried in the flesh. Her shoulders were lean, with a square sort of elegance about them. Just visible, through the V of her tunic, I saw the cleft of her breasts.

Maddie gave her the bird feeder. 'I'm buying this all on my own,' she said. 'With my pocket money.'

'That's great,' the girl said. 'Where are you going to put it?'

'I want to stick it to my bedroom window. And I'm going to keep a notebook of all the ones that take the food – so I can write down how much they eat. I want to make a – project.'

'Awesome. I hope you see heaps.'

The long vowels surprised me, the way her voice went up at the end of a sentence. Australia, I thought, or New Zealand. She carried on scanning the plants, running the laser across each one, placing them on the other side of the counter.

'You're not from round here,' I said.

'I always wanted to come to the UK.' She smiled. 'To study, I mean. You have the best Professors over here.'

'Right.'

'It's for my thesis? I'm a physicist.' She lifted the laser gun. The bleep filled the silence.

Then she looked up. 'You know, it's weird. You look really familiar.'

'Do I?' I remember the room fading, a fizzing of lights, like I was about to faint. Her eyes acting as an anchor but, all the same, things falling away from me – certainty, and truth.

'You must remind me of someone I know,' she said.

The trolley was empty. The girl turned to check the total. It suddenly felt too close, too intense. I tried to ignore the flush rising in my face, focused instead on finding my debit card, pulling at the zip on my purse that was too stiff. She handed me the keypad and I kept my eyes down, punching in the numbers of Maddie's birthday. There was a pause before the receipt printed; I could only think about how soon I'd get away. Then the paper reeled off the till and the girl handed it to me.

Our fingers made contact too quickly. I pulled back, felt the scratch, her nail catching on my skin. Then something snapped; a scattering sound, like rain, only lighter, more musical.

The glass beads from my bracelet bounced away from us.

She moved quickly from her seat. She bent over, looking for them. We were all on the floor: me, Jack, Maddie, trying to retrieve them.

'Don't worry,' I said, 'it wasn't expensive.'

'We'll find them, Mummy,' Jack said. 'We can fix it, can't we?'

The girl was on her haunches, searching underneath the next checkout. When she leaned over, I saw the back of her neck, exposed. A patch of colour, something purple or dark blue; a bruise. But it was etched onto her skin: the tip of a bird's head. An eagle.

There was the realisation of where I was; the checkout supervisor, my children, a trolley full of bedding plants. Of something colliding inside me. Of you.

How did you experience it, that moment? What did you make of me? I was aware only of you holding them out to me, amethyst beads, gathered in the well of your palm. When I took them, your fingers rested on the underside of my wrist and there was a rush in my insides.

You hesitated. 'Maybe I've seen you at the pool? I go on Thursdays. Thursday afternoons.'

Green eyes, flecked with a honeyed yellow.

I said, 'Oh.'

You glanced behind, aware of being watched. You stood up, and I followed, scooping the remains of the bracelet into a carrier bag. You took your seat again at the till, swivelling on the stool, smiling at the man in line behind me; ready with your laser gun.

Pushing the trolley back to the car, I wondered how I'd mend the bracelet. I tried not to think of your hand on the next customer's wrist; the contact of your skin on his.

*

You were later than I expected, the next Thursday; I waited longer than I should. I couldn't settle, kept scrolling through the emails on my phone – as though that would help; thinking of the children, thinking about the traffic. Wondering what I was doing, caught in the back and forth of possibility, a dance of desire. I'd convince myself to give it up – swimming, the longing for you – then be engulfed by the need to know you. I imagined us lying in a room, maybe your room, my fingers tracing the wings on your back.

There you were, though, pushing through the turnstile into the cafe, smiling in recognition. If you were surprised to see me, you didn't show it. There was no question of leaving now. The waitress had started her rounds with the bin bag, circling the tables, collecting napkins and buckled plastic cups. She looked at you but you headed, resolutely, for me. Did I imagine it, or did I read pleasure on your face? You pulled back the stool next to mine and a metallic scrape reverberated through my body. When you spoke it wasn't a greeting, or even a question.

'Tell me what you like best,' you said, 'about water.'

I wasn't prepared for that. I hardly knew you but here I was, looking for the right words, trying not to sound stupid. I wanted to say that it was beyond me, water. That, some days, it was easy to float under the pool's grimy skylight, while on others I strained at the water's weight and pull.

'You've heard of phase transition, though. Right?'

I shook my head. 'I was rubbish at science.'

I couldn't bear the expression on your face. It was as though I'd let you down. Your eyes were serious, still red-veined from the chlorine. I wondered if you'd forgotten your goggles.

'It's everywhere,' you said. 'Physics. It explains the stuff we use every day. Like – your kettle, how it boils, and how your freezer works.'

You picked up my spoon and licked the leftover froth from it. 'I love that though, don't you?'

'What?'

'That word. Transition'

You leaned towards me. I held my breath, knowing you were going to touch me, here in the café with its veneer worktops and aluminium seats. You reached out and found my bracelet. You fingered the beads, moving them along the gaps in the chain until I felt them loosen, and slide against my skin.

I sprinted up the incline to the playground. It was as though I was seeing it from another perspective. If you'd been there, standing under the line of ash trees at the edge of the field, what would you think of my life? What would you make of me?

It shames me to admit it, but what bothered me most wasn't deceiving Tim or lying to the playground Mums. I worried you'd find me too ordinary.

There was a small group of children waiting by the side entrance. Maddie was right in the middle. She wouldn't acknowledge me as I approached, but handed me her artwork, silently. The glue was still wet; I held it level so that nothing could fall off – the cotton wool balls and egg-box petals covered in yellow poster paint.

When Jack finally emerged, he ran towards me, caught hold of my thighs. I crouched low so he could nuzzle my neck. Did he sense the beginnings of my pulling away from him? I inhaled his hair, the familiar smell of dusty floors and canteen. How could I explain to you: how it filled me up, that love? It couldn't be replaced by anything. Not by you; or beads on a chain, or the contact of skin.

Joe was ahead of us. He did the school run on Thursdays when Sarah worked and, the truth is, I always enjoyed talking to him. He stopped by the gate to re-tie Adam's laces. When we caught up, he looked over and smiled. 'Nearly Friday,' he said. 'At last.'

'Yes,' I said. 'End of the week. What a relief.' I couldn't tell him that it was Thursdays, now, that I longed for.

'So when do you want us?'

Joe, with his fine cheekbones, his direct way of holding your gaze. What effect, I wondered, would he have on you?

'Sorry?'

'Dinner. Tomorrow. Sarah said you'd invited us.'

We reached our cars, parked behind each other on the street. Joe opened the door for Adam to climb in, then hesitated, looked back. He prompted: 'You'll text then, to let us know?'

Adam must have said something because Joe looked away, and it was gone, the connection. I was left to fight with the wind. Holding on to Maddie's painting; trying to stand my ground as I leaned in to strap the children into their seats.

*

After Joe and Sarah left, I stayed up to stack the dishwasher. I rinsed the remains of chicken casserole from the plates; brushed crumbs into the plughole, watched them turn soggy under the running water. I closed my eyes against the memory of your body, diving; your shoulders, butterflying up and down the pool.

I placed the plates in the rack, completely parallel. How was it that on Thursdays we never coincided? Didn't you want to spend more time with me? Each week, I'd swim, then wait in the café; you'd swim, and afterwards I would still be there. We drank weak coffee, perched on high stools, and talked about things that mattered.

States of matter. A scientific law, you said, that regulates everything. I had an impulse, just then – as though it might unlock you – to read about it, to know more.

Upstairs, I stood on the landing, next to the children's open doors, listening to the feathery sighs of their breath. The door to the office was ajar, and I closed it behind me. I left the lamp off, but pressed the button on the desktop. It was dated now, slow to crank up, but eventually the room was illuminated by the glow of the screen.

I found it on Wikipedia. Water melts when there is a change of force. Molecules, invisible to the eye, detach and begin to collide. Phase transition: the definition I hadn't known existed. Not until you gave it to me, like a gift.

And today; today is another Thursday. The weather has turned and the air is sticky with early summer. When I pull up at the lights I feel the fabric of my skirt clinging to the backs of my knees. My new costume is in my bag – red, retro, halter neck, with a bow that ties at the back. I wonder if I'm being ridiculous. But, still, I feel the pressure of your fingers on my wrist, at the garden centre, in the café.

It's hard going today. At the end of each length, I look up, expecting to see you come out of the changing rooms, fiddling with your locker key, pinning it to your chest; walking on the balls of your feet, like you do, to avoid slipping.

In the changing rooms, they still haven't fixed the pressure on the showers and the plughole is clogged with gunk. I resist the urge to unblock it. I dry myself, pulling the towel between each of my toes. It's when I look at my clothes, laid out on the bench – a jersey tee shirt, a dark skirt, flat black pumps – that I realise. Was it the endorphins, maybe, that you always talk about? In less than two minutes I'm dressed, ramming my wet costume in my bag, shoving in my hairbrush and moisturiser. I push through the turnstile, past the café, to the car.

The only parking spaces are in the overflow section. There are balloons and banners tied to the fence, advertising special offers. But I can't go in yet. I reach into the glove box for the Marlboro Lights I bought on the way, removing the gold strip around the cellophane. The match doesn't light on first go but eventually there's a spark, a familiar smell of sulphur and smoke. The rush of the first nicotine hit; welcome, long forgotten. You wouldn't approve but I want to share it with you.

I send Sarah a text. Caught in traffic. Could you collect M&J? She's always offering; she won't suspect anything. But when I pick them up, will she detect it? Chlorine mixed with nicotine; the smell of guilt and lies.

At the entrance, customers wheel out their purchases – hanging baskets and sacks of compost – hopeful for a warm weekend. A grey-haired man heaves a trolley with a faulty wheel, his wife's hand on his back, guiding him to their spot.

The question: when you dived into the pool, that day, did you know I was watching?

I stub out the second cigarette, keeping holding of the butt until I reach the bin by the entrance. I've forgotten to lock the car, I realise, but keep walking anyway, because nothing else matters now. I hear the hydraulic suck of the automatic doors. They open, obediently, to let me in.

And I am entering. I'm searching the tills; trying to find you.