

Ailbhe's Tale

A Short Story by Lynn Buckle

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Few women are employed in the tanning, currying, and dressing of leather. Ailbhe Sarah Kelly is one of them.

Not much survives the wharf, where tannins stain river water, leak through marsh, seep into feeders. The tannery harnesses ample water supplies, without too much loss of product.

In addition to creating potentially toxic wastewater, some tanneries produce large amounts of solid waste that contain chromium, including hide scraps, skins, and excess fats. The environmental impact statement recorded exceptional levels of contaminants in effluent samples.

TPA Fashions uses vegetable-tanned leather, rather than chrome-based products.

'You do realise that hides are from cows?'

Offal is the only intended loss. Oft flung across to the island which floats between river and bog. A place too wet for anything other than the dumping of rotten carcasses. The river being measured by the distance women can effectively fling dead, slippery things. The place at which the river bends is the widest. It is simple mathematics not to stand there but adjacent to the wooden bridge where the river is at its narrowest. However, flinging is banned at this point due to frequent near misses which result in an offal back-up. That changes the course of the water. Eels gather to feed upon the spillage. Some say it is the fault of Ailbhe Sarah Kelly.

Some say I was born a runt, that I would never amount to much of a thrower.

‘She hasn’t the heft to fling a carcass clear of six yards, nine inches, and three eighths (depending on rain). Any decent flinger could clear that gap with a large heifer.’

‘Unless they were lazy with the innards.’

‘She was told to keep her legs on the riverbank, get out of the water.’

‘She’s slow to listen.’

‘She must be feeding the eels.’

Gangers pooled around her, drawn to weaklings like eels to blood.

Eventually we post her on the far side of the river.

‘You might as well have went in the beginning, ’cause you had to go in the end.’

It is her job to haul the flung meat to the centre of the boggy island patch. The resulting pile of entrails, boiled bones, and bloated stomachs becomes a target practise for some. The pile undulates with its own gasses, legs waving involuntarily with each exhalation of methane and rancid fluid.

We find that peat is powerfully acidic and that it has analogous properties with respect to the tanning of leathers, quoad the preservation of dead bodies.

A stranger could easily mistake them, everyone says, for humans. Polite society avoids the wooden bridge with its indecorous views and stench, avoids the village. It is Ailbhe Sarah Kelly’s fault for being a deaf runt.

I watch to listen, and still they come.

The independent Standing Scientific Committee on Eels sets targets of quantities to be transported annually.

I left, eventually, conveyed on waters flowing eastwards.

The Bog of Allen is raised, at its highest elevation, about two hundred and seventy feet above the Liffey at low water in Dublin.

‘All downstream from here then’

There are prolific numbers of eel fish awaiting transportation to foreign markets, while the export market in tanned hides is decreasing.

‘Impregnated, she was, by the eels,’ they said, ‘her fault for standing in the water.’

But you, with your curse, are destined to wander alone.

She flowed with the Liffey into Dublin, where all rivers meet, her growing belly swelling.

The eels chased her still.

A map of Dublin waterways named after women. Researched and drawn by a bookbinder living on the quays. She found the many streams to be guided around the city using female lines, the spaces in between, the buried rivers and culverts

where she birthed and left her baby swimming, a translucent elver of a thing. Left to suck at inlets.

Adverse reproductive outcomes associated with maternal exposure to leatherwork include; an increased risk of prenatal death, spontaneous preterm delivery, low birth weight, cleft palate, [and hearing loss] (Garcia and Fletcher, 1998).

She stood under dock walls, to keep the water in her feet, and dipped them into ports. She submerged herself in harbours, swam around piers, until she knew the water swell and felt the salty tide pull her out and in. She was forever treading, testing, reading brine until one perfect night, when waves flattened out, and she swam into the Irish Sea and did not come back. Her strokes lifted phosphorescence from the surface and tine shionagh shone all about. Like will-o'-the-wisps of dancing light over bog water, they flashed of home. So she kept on swimming, with seaweed in her locks. She swam alongside sailors, past and present, who demanded her presence. They wrapped about her legs and pulled down towards dark fathoms, where all things drift. Where they mixed with elvers of glass and slipped between her toes. She raced against such tidal currents, among streams of migrating fish. It was no distance at all for the eels, who had come 3,700 miles, from Sargasso seas, to follow instincts. And she continued on, with her breaststrokes.

The European Court of Justice prohibits Ireland from suing the UK before the Tribunal of the Law of the Sea on the grounds that it is polluting the Irish Sea with nuclear waste.

Milling the waves, her arms rotated as blades through wind and she imagined great farms harnessing wild powers. For rest she lay on her back, otter-like, and cracked shells with hardened teeth.

If only I consumed less energy, I would not be in this predicament.

She swam for so long that she swallowed salted, jellied eels and heard their souls a-calling. She could not stop listening, for laments are easily felt through the skin. There were so many choruses near rocky outcrops that she swam about them, taunting the persistent eels. They chased her into the English Channel, which she traversed so quickly, and into Northern

waters. The accent of water may have changed, but its flavour remained the same. Eventually they turned into Yarmouth's Yare, a maiden voyager with eels in her hair.

Eels are one of the most demanding species of saltwater fish. Which would be nice, if transporting eels were an end in itself. But the object is surely to increase the eel population, and I note that the minister had nothing to say on that subject. Nor did he tell what the stock of eels was. So, we have no idea whether all this activity is achieving anything, and responsibility is diffused amongst the members of a Standing Scientific Committee on Eels, none of whom seem to have any stake in the matter.

Even the Norfolk Broads were infested with fresh and mature species. They snaked through reeds, and hugged silt after winding there from chalky reefs. Always stalking.

She swam the River Wensum, and all its connecting waters, under dulling suns and heaving airs. She out-swam the predators who cat-called and whistled from the banks. She heard them when she heard them not, as she dredged the riverbeds of their scum, unblocked their ditches, flooded fens, unleashed reinforcements against floodwaters. As she swam

and you keep a kayak for this purpose in your back garden, for the floods will surely send you elsewhere on eventual tides of climate change. Send you from one tannery to another as rivers, canals, bog waters, rise and you flow to apprentice tanner Saint William of Norwich whose trade came down maternal lines. Learning his sainthood from the gaps in between all of these.

Ensuring water quality in rivers and Broads can help only remaining populations.

Ailbhe Sarah Kelly built her own tannery, on pilings driven into the Wensum, sinking sounds and muffling vibrations. She caused ripples building a business and a quiet life, using

vegetable dyes and mineral-free techniques. When questioned about her methods, it was her marital status they meant, her finances, her industry. Her liberty. She turned her head away that she may not see what they said. When pressed, she replied,

I do not need to pander to you while eels still turn about my ankle. You say I do not hear. You do not hear my fears.

‘I like that idea – remind me to go and do some digging in the river. Where are you getting all this information from? Eels are not men.’

Dr Raymond Pendergrast says there are no elver traps operating on the River Wensum.

Pike and three-spined stickleback, bitterns, stoats, and water voles in habitats preserved.

Otters being the gateway animal to public sentimentality, the soft drug of conservation.

She fought acts of Parliament which raised capital for river navigation improvements. They made savage cuts to her re-wilding work as they re-built embankments, re-routed and buried her water.

This greenhouse effect, land is melting away.

They closed-off her direct channel to the cathedral, Pull’s Ferry, for fear she would taint its holy grounds. They could not close her off. She let the water free again.

A local businesswoman has outraged public decency under common law and has been charged for immersing herself, fully clothed, in marsh waters on the outskirts of the city of Norwich. Following two warnings, she was arrested on foot of a bill issued by local yeomanry who became alarmed at her continuous presence in the water. When asked if she understood the charges brought against her, the woman declined to comment and kept her head turned to the left. She did not see her sentence being read.

She swam underwater after that, eyes wide open, looking for cleaner waters and knew her years spent starboard in foreign waters were coming to an end. Flailing, swimming, building, never listening, she was never really held by those tannery's wooden pilings. She yearned for other watery foundations, for warm smells of softened beer smoking over cobbles, for Dublin's channels, wet Midland's pastures, her native bog water for tanning, and for swimming.

& there is a rare place, where the water and the wind unrefrains.

Returning to her home-country, Ms Kelly becomes the canal's first incumbrancer, funding it to the sum of £135,000. Were it not for the diabolical atrocity of 1856, the spinster would still be whoring her mortgage of the Grand Canal.

She financed the canal's construction, beating the eels at their game. Swimming.



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