# **“SALT SLOW”**

## JULIA ARMFIELD

October 24, 2019



The following is a story from Julia Armfield's collection salt slow. Armfield lives and works in London. She has a Masters in Victorian Art and Literature from Royal Holloway University. Her work has been published in Lighthouse, Analog Magazine, and The White Review. She was commended in the Moth Short Story Prize 2017, longlisted for the Deborah Rogers Prize 2018, and is the winner of The White Review 2018 Short Story Prize. She is also an occasional playwright.

They find the lobsters in white water. Bobbing belly-up, claws thrown out, like a strewing of tulips. That they float is unsurprising. The salt is heavy here—dead sea, its bodies buoyant. In the thin morning, the lobster shells gleam a slick vermilion, spreading southward like a bleeding on the tide.

It is a Wednesday, or what they choose to call a Wednesday. In truth, they have long since lost track. The numbering of days has been gradually sacrificed to more pressing concerns; the counting up of cans and bottles, the maintenance of nets, the catching and drying out of fish and strange crustaceans. Time, in its clearest sense, has been abandoned somewhere in the long sleeps and the hourless drifting. Months are all alike on the water, seasons marked by little but the clarity of the light. They label their days as they find them, names to correspond with the poem his mother used to recite to new parents on the obstetrics ward—Monday’s child is fair of face, Tuesday’s child is full of grace. Days of hard squalls and difficult rowing they call Saturdays, days of sunnier aspect they designate Mondays. Thursdays occur only when the horizon seems so distant as to be impossible. There are very few Sundays.

The day they find the lobsters is a bitter one, curling up at its edges like the pages of a book dropped and hastily retrieved from water. He is faint with hunger, ulcers on his tongue, and the ravenous panic with which he leans over the side to grab at the floating bounty is to her a kind of relief. For the last few days he has been listless, dark weight in the stern, and she has found herself growing increasingly uncomfortable. They try their best to ration, bottling anchovies and drying strips of cod to store in papery stacks beneath the seating slats, but their stores are meager, their little boat a constant rattle of empty space. He has always been quiet, was never voluble even on land, but the vast silence of his hunger is a different thing—stoppered and involuntary, as though his mouth has grown a skin. She has seen him on occasion, hunkered at the gunwale, chewing reflexively on the collar of his jersey. She can look at him in lean times and see nothing at all but teeth.

The lobsters are dead, of course, just like everything that floats on the surface of these waters. They have come across this countless times; the schools of black sea bass and bobbing jellyfish, the upturned rafts and coracles that they pillage for remains. I wonder what killed them, she will muse, and he will shrug a shoulder. Who cares. It was like this when they found the eels, the crisscross mile upon mile of them, knotted nightmare like the cords of a net. He had dismissed the sheer insanity of the scene—the glistening web of plaited heads and bodies—and simply reached out to disentangle them with the flat blade of an oar.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

What’s the name for a group of lobsters, he asks now, dumping an armload at her feet. You know, like a school or a smack. His sleeves are soaking to the elbows, fingertips already splitting from the salt. She tells him it’s a risk and he laughs his usual brief laugh, takes up his apple knife, and slits a lobster from tail to sternum.

\*

A long, wailing motion across the sky. The birds are growing larger.

The bar will be underwater now, of course.

They drift through fields of dead coral, knocking against husks of petrified crabs, their white meat eaten away. They don’t talk much about the shape of her, the way she has to wear his jumper now as her own no longer fits over her belly. It has been some time since the issue became obvious to both of them, the long sickness followed by the hard weight at her hips, but without a reliable means of counting the days, they can only watch and wait. She is no longer seasick, although the motion of the boat gives her bad dreams—thoughts of the ocean overspilling the sides of their craft and getting into bed with her, damp fingers against the small of her back.

He tends to fall quiet again after they find food, although it is a different kind of quiet, a digesting calm that doesn’t bother her as much. Sated, his pupils take on the blown-out look she recognizes from when they were newly in love and this heartens her, in an odd way, though she knows it has nothing to do with her. She occupies herself as best she can, sands the base of the boat where it is growing sticky, patches small sections of net. They repair and rebuild as required—like Argonauts, piece by piece and always in motion, an ongoing act of damage limitation with nowhere to stop and make berth. Only once, so far, has the boat sprung a leak, and when it did they worked without speaking, she shoveling water with an empty storage jar whilst he patched the hole with the last of the silicone caulk. Afterward, he had leant back in the stern and covered his face for several minutes, breathing like the sound of something rising through packed earth. She had shifted awkwardly along the edge of the boat to sit beside him. It can be hard, sometimes, for them to come together, the boat’s nervous balance easily upset without one of them each at bow and stern to keep it even. Moving is an act of faith, eyebrows furrowed deep. They cross the center and hope things won’t upend.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

The birds are gulls and guillemots and frigate birds; reeling and heavy-chested, the awkward cramp-necked camber of creatures grown out of their natural frames. They are oversized, bloated to albatross proportions, wings like the canvas-backed windcheaters she remembers from days on the beach.

Across the tall white scaffolding of sky, they stagger like drunks, unused to their own dimensions. They have grown, she suspects, to make up for the suddenness of water and the sink-down disappearance of safe places to land. There is almost nowhere, these days, for a flying thing to come down, little but the brief outcrops of sunken headland and the abandoned crafts on which cormorants throng like massing insects, piebald and slick as pitch. Bigger wings, she knows, are a necessity over the ocean as it is now. Bigger wings make it easier to stay airborne for weeks at a time. She watches with nervous eyes when they appear, tallies up different species with a notch of chalk along the baseboards and tries, with a flattened palm held up to the horizon, to keep track of how much larger each bird is than the last.

He talks mumblingly about fashioning a kind of butterfly net, catching and eating a seagull with a salted seaweed crust. She ignores him for the most part, packs her cheeks with lobster roe.

\*

When they first met, he had fixed her a Dark and Stormy and told her there was no charge. She had frowned at him, used to the condescending flirtations of bartenders—hollow winks thrown just north of her shoulder. She had pressed her debit card on him, eager to avoid the embarrassment of taking a joke literally, and he had raised an eyebrow in response. I said no charge. Shouting over the music. I’m hitting on you. Blue eyes, a deep drenched color. Even before the boat, he had smelled like the sea.

It can be strange, on occasion, to remember that they are not the only ones left.

The bar will be underwater now, of course. The university towns drowned quickly—porous stone, too much paper. The night he had stood her a drink it had been raining, though not the hard, drumming rain that came later (salt rain, sky-wide and tidal). She had abandoned her friends to sit perched all night on a barstool, bare legs painful on the vinyl, and he had invented cocktails for her; whisky blends with ginger beer and star anise and lemons, glasses cinnamon- rimmed and stuck with orange rind, spills of vanilla essence and Coca-Cola and Earl Grey tea.

Sticky-drunk, she had stretched her arms across the surface of the bar, palms up, and showed him the places where, as a small child, she had burned herself sticking her hands into an oven to snatch at her mother’s coffee cake. Impatient, she had said and he had licked her wrist and shaken tequila salt over it.

Later on, she had watched him wipe down the bar with a dishcloth, the sudden tawdriness of things in closing-time light. Sweeping peanut shells into a large plastic container, he had asked her to come home with him, leaning forward to pluck a highball glass from her hands.

\*

It can be strange, on occasion, to remember that they are not the only ones left. Easier, in some ways, to picture themselves entirely alone—owl and pussycat—and with no hope of rescue. In truth, there have often been boats; slim horizon shapes, usually rowing boats or dinghies, though occasionally they will spot a speedboat, outboard motor cut to bits. Only once have they come across a yacht, listing hard to starboard and eerily deserted, ghost ship surrounded by a shivering cloud of octopuses, clogging the transom and dragging themselves aboard with enterprising tentacles. They taste with their skin, she had said as they slunk up alongside, watching the liquid squeeze of one octopus as it felt its way up over the bowsprit, I read that somewhere.

As a general rule, they do not approach strangers. The few obviously peopled crafts they have spotted appear instinctively to keep a distance and they follow this etiquette. They are not altogether sure why they maintain such caution, except to say that the few fellow sailors they have encountered at close quarters have been those they have come across upturned from their vessels and bloated with seawater, boats plundered for their stores by other passing ships. She has turned bandit once or twice herself, although only after checking that whatever poor unfortunate soul they have come across is beyond help.

A small fishing skiff, painted purple, its crew shaken out like sardines from a tin. She had made him row a wide circle around the craft, tapping at each bobbing sailor with the tip of an oar like a spoon against egg before she would allow him to draw up alongside and heave a pile of freshly pleated net from the deck.

A long narrowboat, incongruous on open water, its lone blue-jerseyed captain flung halfway out over the port side, stove-in scalp like the hump of a fist punched through plasterboard. She had leant out from her side of the boat and pressed two fingers on his neck, very near the wet whitish mess of the wound, waited long minutes for any sign of life before she had set about dragging the jersey over his head.

She had hung the jersey out over the bow to air for several days and had finally exchanged it for the one she was wearing with a sigh of luxury, despite its crispy sundried texture and the long bloodstain that rimmed its neck like extra stitching. Its previous owner had been a large man and it was a relief to pull it down thickly over her stomach, to hug herself around the middle and feel a heavy weave of protection over the life growing inside. She hasn’t counted her months well, has no way of knowing how many more jerseys she might need to steal. On land, it would have been enough to notice a sudden change in mood, the taste of iron on her tongue, but out here on the water she is uncertain of her body, had only realized what was happening when there was nothing to be done but wait until the end.

From his corner of the boat, he does what he seems capable of doing; parcels her off the larger half of whatever food they come across, rows always in the direction of more equable weather. For the large part, he ignores the issue, inasmuch as he says almost nothing on any subject. He shivers in his under-shirts when she borrows his jumpers and doesn’t seem particularly bothered one way or the other.

He is better at night, softer. She thinks of it that way: with the dark, tenderness. He moves carefully into her end of the boat, rests his weight against her. They will talk, sometimes, as though they were at home, invent new episodes to television programs they used to watch together. He misses cigarettes and bread and butter, she misses the smell of shampoo. He will describe it for her over and over—vanilla and chemical cleanser and coconut—and she will kiss him hard, though his face is swollen and his lips are splitting at the sides. They are both lunatic on salt water. They sleep distractedly with the weight of her belly between them.

\*

Before, he had lived on a street that passed beneath a railway bridge and the gnash of the late-night overground was the soundtrack to their early time together. He had lived the way bartenders live, on an unsprung futon amid a junkyard of coffee cups, and she had spent her first weeks with him in a state of constant agony from sleeping on such an uncomfortable bed. Fall in love with someone who makes you ache, her mother had always told her. When I fell in love with your father my appendix exploded. I think it was the stress.

They had spent their time together watching movies and fucking and arguing about the movies they watched, which had turned out to be a thin but workable foundation on which to hang the best part of five years. She had loved him in a hot and cold way that relied on his eyes and his lazy way of doing things, the kindish planes of his wide-boned face.

The last October before the rain, he drove them down to the Jurassic Coast and they stayed for three days in a bungalow he had rented from his uncle. The previous week, she had had what her colleagues delicately described as a “turn” at work—blank fall, bloody horror in her underwear—and he had skipped his evening shift to stay with her. The blood had been viscous and livid in the toilet bowl and she had cramped terribly—an ache just like her mother had claimed accompanies love. His mother was a midwife and had asked him loudly on the phone whether she had drunk a lot of alcohol or taken too many baths, done something foolish or intentional to cause this catastrophic wringing out. You tell me she knew she was pregnant, that you both knew. You have to appreciate what that makes me think. He had scrabbled to mute the speakerphone and later had suggested the trip as a way to distract them both.

She loved the bungalow for its proximity to the water, for its salt-frosted windows and the way it groaned and whickered like bones. During the days, she went on long walks along the beach and tried to isolate a clear emotion for the accidental thing which had bled out of her as if aware of how unwanted it had been. He left her there to swim in the water in his uncle’s wetsuit and when he emerged she wrapped him in a picnic blanket because it was all they had thought to bring. She found herself trying to apologize to him without wanting to, mulish sentences that started with I’m sorry I wasn’t ready and tapered off before but you don’t seem to mind. At night she took his hands and devoured them, kissed the tip of each finger and tried each knuckle with her teeth.

\*

The night is mauve, deep lavender. Storm colors. They circle on the water, searching hopelessly for the best direction to avoid the rain. It is a Wednesday to end all Wednesdays— frantic winds against a thrashing tide. She is exhausted and fractious and terrified of the coming downpour, slaps at his hands when he fumbles an oar stroke. Keep going, we have to stay clear of the storm. He glares at her in a way he will apologize for later. Don’t give me orders. I’m tired of listening to you talk.

On nights like this, she finds she thinks of her mother at Christmas, reading to her from Under Milk Wood: the wide waters and moonless night, starless and bible-black, the deep dark falls and despairs and seas of people’s dreams. She has mentioned this to him before but he is Scottish where she is Welsh and he has never read it, and she doesn’t remember enough of it to recite. She wonders sometimes whether the text still exists anywhere, whether any of the sailors on any of the crafts they never approach might have been circumspect enough to grab a copy when the rains came or whether the collected works of Dylan Thomas are now universally drowned.

By little more than chance, they come at last upon a raked white outcrop which, on closer inspection, turns out to be the tip of an otherwise submerged lighthouse. It is some minuscule hour of the night. He leans forward over his oars and his voice, when at last he speaks, is fanged with nerves. A light-house means this was a shoreline, once. Maybe that means the storm won’t come in this far. She looks at him uncertainly but he is so tired the oars are slipping out of his hands and she has to jerk forward to catch one before he sets it adrift. The boat rocks with her movement and she leans back, holding herself awkwardly. Beneath the skin of her stomach she feels sudden pressure, a movement like a curling and uncurling that seems to follow the boat’s frantic tipping, stilling only as the boat stills. It occurs to her that she isn’t sure how she is going to give birth, out here on the water, though she shoves this thought aside with the oar which she heaves up onto the baseboards.

Sorry, he is saying now, shaking his head over the remaining oar still held loosely in his grasp, I’m too tired, I’m too hungry, I don’t think I can go any further. She shakes her head and makes a noise which isn’t an apology, though he seems grateful for it nonetheless.

They throw a rope out to the tip of the lighthouse—a painted iron finial like a candle on a cake—and tie themselves as fast as they can. They sleep like that, circling on a short cord around the drowned tower, ignoring the groan of creatures below. Things down there, growing.

\*

They cross ice floes. Struggle their way through a long sequence of Thursdays in which the horizon seems always to maintain an unchanging distance—white waters at the tipping-off point of the world. One morning, they pass a curious structure which on closer inspection reveals itself to be a kind of floating town. A tottering collection of huts are stacked like treehouses atop a wide central platform, insulated with sealskin and roped around with knotted flax and cheerfully incongruous bunting. The huts are joined together by rope ladders, as though the inhabitants of each little box might have made an easy habit of clambering up or across to a neighbor and knocking on the wall. Of course, there are no neighbors. The raft is deserted. They spend an hour looting the deck for jars of whelks and lichen and hacked-up turtle meat, though neither of them has the heart to clamber up to the huts and start foraging there.

Afterward, they brave their little boat’s tilting to sit together in the stern, compiling a list of the things they miss. There is a curious tinge of competition to it, a friendly tennis match for which both nonetheless keep silent score.

I miss chocolate. I miss my hairdryer. Roast chicken. Newspapers. Paper money.

Audiobooks. Fresh fruit. The sound of post arriving. Morning runs. Eating slowly. Cafetières. Frozen peas. The thought of going on holiday. Electric lights. Dogs. Wrapping paper. The way you used to look.

His face is a terrible thing to her now, weather-ravaged and unpleasant. It is as though a layer of him has come loose and is flaking away to reveal a tightness of salt; a sanding-down of some hard central structure. She misses his old face—a grief she hadn’t expected. He’s handsome, in his way, her mother had told her, after they had first been introduced—coffee just the three of them one afternoon in May. He had excused himself to go to the bathroom and her mother had launched into a whispered skittle of impressions: I like his hair, I like his accent, I think he favors his left hand. Her mother’s approval had made her feel proud of him, like some precious item she had been clever enough to spot in a sale. When he had come back from the bathroom she had folded herself into his side and grasped his wrist while her mother asked if either of them wanted to split a slice of cake. He had smiled wanly at them both, bleary off a 3 am shift. I’m sure he’s even better on top form, her mother had whispered in parting, souring the afternoon a little with guileless implication.

Sitting beside him in the stern, she feels the now-familiar swimming sensation in her belly and resists grabbing at his hand to ask if he feels it too. There is a sudden shriek of an oystercatcher, monstrously outsized, and he shifts backward to watch it pass overhead. We should get moving, he says, and she knows he is growing increasingly anxious of the scale of things, above and below. Sometimes these days they see lights below the water, the bioluminescence of anglerfish and vampire squid grown too large and too close to the surface.

It occurs to her that all of them, birds and fish and sailors, have been out on the water too long. Her feet are growing webbed, although they don’t talk about that. Sometimes at night he takes his apple knife to the delicate membranes between her toes, but they don’t talk about that, either.

\*

When she was a child, she had inherited a ratty canvas tent which her mother had allowed her to drag down from the attic and sit inside. The thrill of a pretended journey had been enough to entertain her for days at a time, zipped up with her books and a beakerful of cranberry juice, imagining strange shadows dancing on the fabric walls. You liked it because you liked four walls around you, her mother told her later, you liked to have things where you could see them—your little books and toys and pencils—to zip them up with you and keep them close. It was a point made without malice and accompanied by a shape drawn in the air with fingers—an encompassing square or circle intended to illustrate a room, a tent, a boat.

She had done this once in his flat. Years later, arranging blankets and pillows into a kind of fort. She had waited inside for him to find her, coming home late smelling of pretzels and cherry brandy, peeling open the flap of her makeshift tent with one hand. What’s this, then? He had clambered in beside her and she had put her hands in his collar, thumbed at his jaw, told him they were camping in the wilderness, the Arctic tundra, somewhere wide and flat where the sun only set once a month. Travel, change, interest, excitement, she had said into the dip of his neck, pack a bag. Wherever the wind takes us. They had been back from the Jurassic Coast only two days at this point. On the afternoon of their return, his mother the midwife had called to ask how she was doing, whether she was still cramping or spotting. She’s fine, he had said—his voice like bad weather in another country, profoundly distant and unconnected to her—I told you, it’s better this way.

On the bed, in their makeshift tent, they had made love in an unhurried way—his fingers, her wishbone legs. She had felt a tenderness at her hips, somewhere deep and sore, a pulling and releasing as if on some internal bell rope, and afterward she had rolled away from him and kicked savagely at the hanging blanket until the whole structure came down on their heads. It had started to rain that night, sea rain that crusted the bricks of his apartment building like a gritting of lye, and they had slept thrown away from each other on opposite sides of the bed.

\*

The whirlpool is a great, grinding Charybdis—teeth in the ocean and no clear way around it. The current is wild, dragging them in with an insistence that is something like pleading, and she screams at him to pull the boat around. He does so with the near inhuman strength of panic, wrenching them backward with a heave of oars. She tries to help him, uses her hands—their new and delicate webbing forming paddles in the water. She watches as a bobbing school of silver mackerel is whisked past them, churning down toward the vortex.

They have to row a solid mile before they feel free of it and when they finally stop, his hands are cut to pieces by the handles of the oars. They sit panting together, bow and stern, trying to regulate their breathing against the slack easing of the current. The sky is the pink of fingertips, a tender color. It had been a Sunday until they drifted into danger.

She looks at him and sees him lean down to wipe his shredded hands on the baseboards.

His hands leave marks, twin smears which, to her, create the illusion that some sea thing has scrabbled its bloody way across the bottom of the boat before either heaving itself back overboard or being stopped in its tracks. She is overwhelmed with tiredness. She feels heavy and stretched all over, worries increasingly often that whatever is growing inside her may be slowing or running out of space. She refuses to look at the bare skin beneath her clothes these days, isn’t sure what she might see pressing up against the surface of her stomach.

From the floor of the boat, he looks up and squints at her, as though seeing something quite contrary to what he had expected. She meets his gaze, wants to say that where there is a Charybdis, there ought also to be a Scylla, but it seems an unwise thing to invoke.

\*

When it happens, it doubles her up on the baseboards, a thrashing of legs and flexing hands like the beginnings of a curse. It is early morning, bruised about the eyes. She had never read baby books at home, had barely paid attention in biology, yet her body seems to follow some strange internal rhythm that feels numbered and learned by rote. The pain is overwhelming, a vast ooming, waves over her head. Lurching forward from the stern to grab at her, he sets the boat rocking with a frantic jolt that makes her grit her teeth and beat him back. What do I do, he asks her, trying to hold her hand but finding it webbed and intractable.

The pain thickens and floods, a clenching like knuckles interlocked with knuckles, and she finds herself screaming and trying to bite her lip all at once. Black wetness, a taste like copper on her tongue. The boat careens and she finds herself thinking with a sudden sort of lunatic panic that they haven’t yet labeled the day. It is too early still, too quiet to tell whether the morning will stretch its legs into a Monday or a Wednesday. The pain hits her in a fresh tide and she buckles down off her elbows, clawing fingers into the baseboards and into the skin of her own knees. A heave, a dark weight and the urge to push back against it. She clamps her tongue between her teeth until her mouth floods.

When it finally comes, it comes out writhing and not right. Too long and too thin and something less like legs and more like tentacles. It has eyes, ears, a face that recognizably echoes hers from certain angles, but its skin is not skin and its movements are the increasingly frantic thrashings of something drowning in air. A sound like a night on the ocean seeps, liquid, from the sides of its mouth. She is too dazed to react, still wreathed in pain. She finds she can only stare at the thing now moving wildly, struggling itself in useless spirals around the bottom of the boat. It is mottled all over, its movements so like the swimming motions she has become used to feeling inside her that she registers a twinge of recognition. As it shifts onto its back, she notices its spine, the dark ridge of red along the center of its body, and she remembers the shape that had bled out of her once before—the almost-form of the thing she had not wanted inside her and hadn’t known how to safeguard or to mourn.

It is only at a noise from the stern, a grunt followed by the scraping of some heavy object being lifted, that she manages to raise her head. As if from a great distance, she sees the way he is standing and what he is about to do to the thing between them. She opens her mouth to protest and finds her tongue too deeply bitten to cooperate. He has clubbed things before—large fish and great gray moray eels which he has heaved aboard with his hands and hammered at with the flat of an oar until they ceased their struggling. She knows the way his body moves before he does it, drawing in like a wire spring twisted up to full contraction before he raises his arms to beat something down.

\*

When they had first fallen in love, she had kissed him with an intensity which imagined him already halfway out the door. A grasping period—nights spent holding him overlong and too tightly, the ravenous dig of fingers into skin. Over time, this sense of frenzy had eased as she had gradually grown more confident in his staying power. It had still been easier to sleep with one hand at his wrist, but the depth of her panic had subsided a little. Most mornings, it had been possible to wake up without immediately reaching for him across the center of the bed.

They had been together four years when she had realized she was pregnant; something she realized very quickly, almost within days of it happening. She had known her body better back then, attuned enough on land to its rhythms and weathers to notice when something was out of synch. In telling him, she had grasped at his arms and apologized and he had said very little, only releasing himself from her grip with an absent wriggle and asking, it seemed a long time later, what it was she wanted to do. That night, she had slept in strange hot fits on his futon and woken in the red-eye of the morning to find herself alone, realizing after several bleary moments that he had left the room and closed the door behind him. She had lain where she was a long time that morning, tracing idle lines across her stomach and ribs and listening to him moving about in separate parts of the flat—boiling the kettle twice and leaving it, testing the smoke alarm, talking dully on the phone.

Ultimately, of course, she had only been pregnant a grand total of three months and seven days, that first time around. Even so, the memory of that morning had persisted well beyond the bleeding. A very slender sort of betrayal, the deliberate absence from a room.

\*

They float. A stretch of unlabeled days. The base of the boat grows tacky with blood and very quickly begins to smell. A predatory wheeling of birds.

Without the energy to return to the bow, she remains where she is, presses her webbed hands flat against the sides of the boat as though holding herself in place. The silence swells like something bloated and threatening to spill. He sits in the stern, holding loosely on to the oar he so recently used as both club and shovel, to beat down and to heave overboard. The violence seems to have left him as swiftly as it rose, though the smell of his damp hair is an acrid reminder. Sweat. Relief and irritation. A strange reminder of nights when he’d come home from the bar wet through and complaining of rowdy patrons. Glass in between his fingers from breaking up fights.

Her mind wanders. She murmurs snatches of Under Milk Wood, finding she remembers more easily now, as though a block has somehow loosened in her mind. She thinks of her mother at Christmas. The smell of pear cider and cinnamon, the rattle of objects wrapped in tissue paper and placed beneath trees.

Listen. It is night moving in the streets, the processional salt slow musical wind

The boat groans, heaves over the back of some vast passing creature. They hold tight and braced to capsize, but the boat only tilts for a moment before coming down again, unscathed.

\*

They have seen all kinds of creatures since they first set out, one washed-out morning when they woke to find it no longer possible to cling to the land. They have passed over the heads of sea monsters, fleets of twisting cuttlefish, sea bream and Humboldt squid, dead cod and dead oarfish, miles of knotted eel floating on the ceiling of the sea. They have seen colossal things, antediluvian, too close to breaking the surface. Great Loch Ness fins and tails. They have witnessed the way things have stretched and mutated. There are things down there, growing. She had briefly been one of those things herself, although now she is once again her old size and shape, dwarfed in the endless increase of the sea.

The eyes are something they have never seen before. Perhaps the last thing—lambent pupils on the water. It is a night crested gray and navy and the creature which rises before them moves in a way she immediately recognizes. The swimming motion she had felt in her insides and later witnessed in the bottom of the boat. It is the same but different, unimaginably larger. Tentacles the color and consistency of candlewax. Elongated, sheen-skinned body and a face which seems to bear some unsettling resemblance to her own. If she squints, she can make out the place at the crown of its head where the oar was brought down, the battered point from which he scooped it up and tossed it overboard, bare minutes after it was born.

The night is cold, iced about its edges. In the stern, she hears him scrabbling himself upward yet finds she cannot look away from the thing now reaching toward her. She feels a pull in her insides, that same pull she felt long ago—the tug on some internal bell rope. Somewhere low in her hips, an ache is spreading, though it is only the ghost of a pain, a shade of something already passed. She remembers it was a Tuesday on land when her first child bled out of her, though by the time the second came on the water, she was no longer very certain of time. I’m glad you came back, she wants to say, whatever day it is.

She can hear him somewhere near her, saying her name and scrabbling again for his oar, though she chooses to ignore him. Only shakes her head a little as she reaches away from him, leaning out over the side. The creature’s skin, where she touches it, is warmer than expected, its reaction slower, calm beneath her hand. The boat rocks, keeling closer to the surface of the water with every passing swell. The sky is gory with stars, like the insides of a gutted night.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

From “*Salt* *Slow*” as published in [salt slow](https://www.panmacmillan.com/authors/julia-armfield/salt-slow/9781529012569) by Julia Armfield. Copyright © 2019 by Julia Armfield and reprinted by permission of Flatiron Books.