
April 2015

Narrow River

Justine A. McNulty
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview>



Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation

McNulty, Justine A. (2015) "Narrow River," *The Hilltop Review*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol7/iss2/14>

This Art is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Hilltop Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

Narrow River

Winner of Best Creative Writing, Spring 2015

By Justine McNulty
Department of English
justine.a.mcnulty@wmich.edu

Rachel had been missing for almost two hours. Or that's when we noticed she was gone. Orleanna had burst onto the porch with wet cheeks and fluttering hands.

"We have to find her, Richie," she said. "She's not big enough for the deep water yet."

Rachel was a skate Orleanna had found a week earlier in a tidal pool behind Aunt Charlie's house, down by the mouth of Narrow River. We always walked barefoot through the pools on summer afternoons, our pant legs rolled halfway up our calves, picking our way around prickling urchins and clots of seaweed.

Rachel had been tucked beneath a plate of live rock, algae and bristle worms infesting its jagged, pocked surface. Orli had reached right in when she saw the tail, thinking it was a dead shark pup. She squealed when Rachel thrashed beneath her touch, her body flapping in the tepid water, revealing the gray-white of her slick belly.

Orli tore through the sand toward Aunt Charlie's for a bucket. She trusted me with guarding Rachel. I squatted in the pool, my feet sinking into the dark sand. Rachel stuck her face back into the rock and wagged her finned tail in the shallow water.

Our mother had left about two weeks before. She dropped us off with Aunt Charlie a few times a year, and one of these times was almost always in late summer. This was the best time to be at Aunt Charlie's because the New England sea was as pleasant as it ever would be, clear and cool and steady.

Aunt Charlie was my mother's father's sister. She was eighty-seven years old that summer and had lived in Narragansett her whole life. She never had a good reason to leave, and I don't think she ever looked for one. Aunt Charlie never married, never had children. But she never turned us away, even if my mother disappeared for weeks on end. Family was family.

My mother had always loved the sea, but had been forced to move from Rhode Island to Connecticut when she finished college. Our father had gotten a job in New Haven, and she ended up finding work as a receptionist at a dentist's office. I think she relished the trips to the coast to visit her family as much as we did, even more so after our father left. The visits were few and far between, considering how close we lived. But they always lingered with me, into the fall and through the winter, so that I was always quietly yearning for the river, for the tide. I knew Orli felt the same way, and we would both continue to return to the sea again and again, even as we grew and separated, came closer to accomplishing all that we would.

Sometimes we would jump off the rotting wooden dock that jutted out from under Aunt Charlie's back porch and let the river carry us all the way to the ocean. The waves became tall and narrow at the mouth of Narrow River, the current rough and quick. Or we would trek through the dense grass that surrounded Aunt Charlie's and ran along the river, picking our way over dunes and along creekbeds.

We would see how far we could get, see if the grasses would end. We would always get just far enough that Aunt Charlie would inevitably appear on the porch to shout at us through the grass, as if the shuddering reeds themselves had given us away.

As I squatted by what would soon be known as Rachel, I tried not to think of what Mom might say about our excursions. She had always accompanied us on our riverside adventures when we were younger, never letting us out of her sight as we tore through the shallow current, searching for eels and sea slugs, spider crabs and dogfish.

She had grown up in Narragansett, only a short drive from Aunt Charlie's. She too frequented the curving beaches, the smooth dunes. She had trudged through the nagging tide of Narrow River, and she was familiar with its inhabitants.

She was the one who had told us about the man in the shack. She would point at it from the shore, back when she used to wade into the river with us to search for hermit crabs, back when Grandpa was still alive.

"You see that there?" she'd say, hunching down and putting her hand on my shoulder, stretching out her arm and focusing my gaze on the thin strip of sand that rose in the crook of the river, where it bent and swelled and shifted before emptying into the surf. Knots of brown grass huddled along the strip of land, the tide never reaching over its prickling tips. In the center of the island, a small cabin sat amidst the reeds. The wood was flecked with crumbling strips of white paint. The windows were crisscrossed with planks of sunbaked wood, rusting nails bunching along the edges. The door was low and had shrunk away from its frame so that slits of dark ran along the top and bottom. The swayback roof was bleached with salt and sun, the ends of the planks curved upward.

My mother would lean down until I could feel her cheek against my neck, until her voice was close and full in my ear.

"You see that old shack? A man lives there. He wears sharkskin pants and straps horseshoe crab shells to feet. He ties the white strings of his hair back with seaweed and boils hermit crabs in turtle shells. He steams oysters in sea grass bowls and slurps out their bellies, grinds the pearls to powder between his teeth. He wades out into the surf at sundown, and he catches the seagulls off the rocks. He grabs them and he eats them raw and the feathers stick in his teeth."

Orli used to beg her to tell us about the man in the shack when we would go to bed at night, after she had returned from her trip and we'd left Narragansett, were safe in our own beds, far from the sea. Being the older brother, I would beg along side my sister, determined to be brave in the face of the haunting tales. My mother would tell us that we'd have to wait, that the stories only came to her on the river, when the man was close enough to hear them. We would giggle and whisper in the darkness of our room, swapping tales of the man we swore she'd told us the year before, things she'd only whispered to us as we waded through the brackish river, things we didn't want to forget.

When Grandpa died and Nana moved back to Iowa, our mother stopped staying with us in Narragansett during the summer months. Now we only went to the town when she was forced to leave on one of her overseas business trips. I tended not to mind the somewhat sudden vacations. Although far from the slow, seaside weeks spent with my Grandpa, it was still an excuse to stay near the shore. But as I got older, time away from school and friends got less and less appealing. Orli didn't mind. She was nine the summer we lost Rachel, three years younger than I was, and still as excited as ever to romp through the shallow tides and grassy undergrowth by the river.

Each summer, we would try to build each other's courage to swim out to the island. We would convince ourselves that the man was friendly, that if we were caught, he would not catch and eat us raw like the gulls, would not slurp out our watery stomachs like a steamed clam. We would stand on the shore and dare each other closer. We would shuffle into the water, creeping out as far as we could until our toes barely touched the bottom, until our chins skimmed the surface and we begged to be let back. The other would shout encouragement or

merciless taunts from the shore, until finally the brave soul would turn back and crawl from the water to shiver on the damp sand.

She came tearing back toward me down the sandy hill that summer day, the day we found Rachel, a red bucket flying by her hip in a clutched fist. She dipped the lip of the bucket in the water and coaxed the skate in. Rachel thrashed against the thin plastic, her eyes perched on her smooth back like gray marbles. Orli rained a thin layer of sand over her and stuck in a few lumps of dark seaweed.

“There. Now she’ll feel like she’s home,” Orli said.

We had Rachel in the garage for the first few days, and she’d seemed less than comfortable. Orleanna kept bringing her scraps of tilapia and chicken from our dinners, but Rachel never seemed interested. The strips of meat collected along the edges of the bucket and were beginning to stink.

“She needs more room, Orli,” I said. “She can’t move at all.”

Orli agreed and I helped her build a permanent tidal pool up near the dunes, back a bit from the actual shore. At high tide, the waves fed the pool some, but we built a high wall of shells and sand so that the water never spilled over. Orli said we’d just keep her a few weeks. Until she was stronger.

We checked on her daily, and Orli had even sat with her in the pool a few times. I noticed her one morning as I was wandering along the shore just after breakfast. I thought Orli was inside watching television, so I was startled when I heard a voice out amidst the sand. That far down on the shore, we were really the only ones. The tourists pretty much stuck to the shops and bars a few miles down, and no paved roads led out that far along the river

I immediately hugged the dunes as I inched toward the sound, my bare feet disappearing into the white sand. I hunched low and peeked over the embankment to see Orli’s blonde head resting on the rocks. I paused, listening to her chatter, and tried to move closer.

I lay flat on my belly and wriggled around the edge of the dune. I noticed movement, and saw Orli’s hand poking up from beneath the dark, wet sand. Shells topped her fingertips like thimbles. Seaweed was woven between her fingers like spider’s webs, trailing down to pool in her palms. She had rocks on her stomach, lined up along her body, down her arms and up over her legs, covering her pale skin that shimmered just below the shallow surface of saltwater. She had dotted her limbs with more seaweed. I saw shells topping her toes and running up into the hollow of her neck.

Something moved on Orli’s stomach, and I saw the vague outline of Rachel shift on the rocks. Orli chattered on in the pool, her chin making tiny ripples along its smooth surface. She was laying perfectly still, her body niched among the clumps of rock and sand we had piled into the water for her skate.

“We are going to go into the shack. This summer,” I heard her saying. “Richie tells me that Mom wouldn’t want it. But I know better. I know that she would.”

Rachel began to glide along Orli’s body. She settled between her ankles.

“The man in the shack is just lonely, Rachel. I know he just wants someone to talk to. Why else would he stay living there all these years? He has to know we are watching him. He’s just shy,” she said.

I squatted in the grass and moved quietly back toward Aunt Charlie’s porch, the sound of Orli’s voice fading amidst the tide.

“Come on, Richie. She’s a baby. She’s probably just terrified,” she said as I dragged my feet through the shallow water so I wouldn’t accidentally step on Rachel or one of her relatives if they happened to be lurking in the dark sand.

Orli decided it would make the most sense to check in the little creeks that fanned out from Narrow River, back into the reeds. The water was calmer and shallower, the perfect place for a baby skate. We picked our way through the dry grass. Orli was determined to find Rachel before nightfall.

“Do you think she made it to the river?” Orli said. She was swatting bunches of grass from her face. A few brown bits of rotting foliage were glued to her calves with sandy mud and sweat.

“Maybe,” I said, “there’s really no way of knowing.”

We were steadily moving upriver, away from the crashing waves and open air of the bh. Heat clung to the grass in an unmoving haze. Mosquitoes swarmed our mouths and noses, and we spat and swatted to keep them away. I pushed wet hair from my forehead and moved down closer to the small creek we’d been following, trying to stay closer to water.

“Orli, don’t you think Rachel is happier this way, maybe?” I said. My sister didn’t turn to look at me as she marched along the shallow creek, scanning the divots and crevices along its sloping bank. “She lived in the ocean before we found her, after all. And she seemed to be doing okay.

Orli turned to look at me, her face a flushed, scrunched scowl.

“She’s too little,” she said. “And she won’t last out here. I just know it.”

I followed her in silence. We moved toward the river and bent with it through the reeds. We stepped into the water as the river widened and the banks sloped steadily downward. We waded deeper.

Orli paused. Her hands had disappeared beneath the surface, and little ripples fanned out around her wrists and waist as the tide tugged at her.

“Do you think the man in the shack caught her?” she said.

I looked to the island. The shack stood amidst the dry grass. The tide was low, pulled back from the sandy swell of land so that it sloped steeply into the river.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure he’d want her,” I said.

“He might want to eat her. She’s small. He could boil her right up,” she said. I could hear the tears choking her voice as she started to move deeper into the river.

“Orli, the tide is coming back in. The current is going to get too strong and we won’t be able to swim home.”

I followed her into the water. We had both kicked off of the bottom and were swimming, thrashing through the tide as it dragged us toward the sea. We were still wearing our shorts and t-shirts, and even these light summer clothes were too much in the swift current.

One summer about two years before we lost Rachel, we made it to the island. I had dared Orli to go, and shouted at her from the shore until she was swimming, gasping and whining back to me until her knees scraped sand. She crawled up onto the shore of the island, grabbing at patches of grass, relieved to be out of the tugging river. I told her to come back, that getting to the shore was enough. She shook her head.

“I’m going to open the door,” she said. She stood and began to pick her way over bits of wood and grass. I ran into the river, water thrashing at my ankles. I paddled to the island, chest heaving as I clawed up the sand and stumbled toward her. She was halfway to the shack, her back straight, arms stuck to her sides.

“Stop,” I said, running to catch her arm. “We have to go home. Aunt Charlie is going to be upset if we don’t answer when she yells.”

“You are being a little chicken,” she said. She yanked her arm away and glared. Her cheeks were red and patchy, hair matted to her forehead and cheeks by the salt of sea and sweat. A little curl of it wound up along her neck and towards her jaw. “You go in.”

I looked at the shack. The gap between the door and the frame was jagged and winding. Up close, it looked more like a tear.

“All right,” I said. I walked up to the side of the shack and touched the wood. It felt dry and brittle. I moved towards the window. It was just over my head, and I knew that if I stood on my tiptoes, I would be able to see inside. I heard Orli shuffle her feet in the grass behind me.

I laid my palms against the wood, and it prickled my fingers as I leaned into it. I craned my neck to see into the dark window, the tide roaring in my ears somewhere along the shore. Tears pricked my eyes, and I could feel saliva collecting along my gums when Orli began to whimper.

“Richie. Richie, can we go home now? I want to go home,” she said. I turned and she was hunched there in the sun, her white shoes gray with sand and water, soggy and heavy on her feet.

I spun toward her and marched away from the shack. My back tensed, and my throat felt small and tight.

“Come on,” I said. I grabbed her arm and we jumped into the river, splashing our way toward shore. It took us a long while to catch our breath as we sat on the sand and stared back across the river at the dark windows.

We had not ventured back to the island since. We stopped talking as much about the man. Our mother hadn’t mentioned him since the last time we had come to visit Grandpa and Nana. We began to forget about him, or forget that he was something we shared. We recreated him in solitude and in silence.

I swam after Orli toward the island. The sun was beating down on the river and the water was bright and flashing as I kicked my way to the shore. We crawled up onto the sand, and Orli was on her feet, jogging to the shack. I could see something along the far edge, back where the island butted right up to the shack, where the wood almost touched water.

Since the tide was out, there was more sand to buffer the shack from the surf, but whatever was behind it was bunched up along the side, dark and crumpled. Orli had noticed it.

“Is that a net?” she said. She began to run. I followed her, careful not to slip on any of the seaweed that had washed ashore. She stopped short, and it took me a minute to come up behind her and look over her shoulder at the mass. Her eyes were wide and glossy and strained. Her mouth fell open, and I heard a thin whistle of breath amidst the distant tide.

Jutting from the mass was a gray arm, a web of fine brown hair swaying in the shallow water that lapped up over it. The arm was buoyant and bloated, resting in the bit of the river that had already begun to creep back up over the island. The fingers were knobby bulges along the ballooning palm.

I followed the length of the mass and noticed a bobbing orb of brown hair. A white, round face was turned sideways in the shallow water, resting on the sand. The cheeks were swollen, the lips a pale, puckered circle, curled out and up like a fish. The eyes were open and bulging, the whites of them flecked with the grit that floated in the water around them.

The legs sprawled out and up on the bank, black boots coated with a fine layer of sand and salt. Dark pants and a thick coat clumped around the bloated frame.

“He’s dead,” Orli said. Her voice was small and far away at my side. “The man in the shack. He died.”

I stared at the swollen body. I wondered if his stomach had burst beneath all of those layers, what could be crawling and wriggling inside of it. Where was the thin white hair? The seagull feather teeth? The horseshoe crab shells tied to bare, cracked feet?

“We have to go,” I said. The sun beat down so heavily on my shoulders that I could feel the heat running down my back and down my arms in flashing waves. My throat felt dry and caked with salt, and I was afraid it would close up and I would begin to choke. “We have to go right now.”

Orli started to cry and I pushed her into the river. She hit the water with a smack and started screeching as I yanked at her shirt, her arm, her hair, pulling her away from the island, dragging her away from the shack and the dead stranger on the shore. She gasped and gargled and choked on the saltwater as I hauled her toward the opposite beach. My tears mixed with the river, and I swore I could hear the dead man's breath every time my ears dipped below the surface. I could hear the slow dragging as he sucked the heavy water into his lungs, the whoosh as he forced it out again.

When we finally reached the reeds, far from the shack and the current and the bloat, Orli was wailing into her arms, calling out for Rachel, for my mother, for the man in the shack. She curled along the sand and recoiled when I tried to touch her, backed away until I reached out and grabbed her. I held her to my chest and pressed her head so hard into my ribs that she had to give in, had to collapse against my wet shirt, wail into the hot, dripping fabric as it stuck to my body with salt and sweat.