The Black Queen

I found this eddy, just beyond the tug of the river's current. I watch it drift past. But without a thought and in an instant, I can dart back into its flow as I have done countless times before. I searched long for this spot; for its deep lucidity, where the gravel is clean and cool and stretches far out beneath me. It needed to be under an alder tree, shady and expansive where the flow slowly spirals into tiny eddies. Here, where leaving and returning gather to a perfect stillness, this place of calm holds my lingering thoughts and sleep. I found it here. A place to quietly watch the river pass. But now and then with a sudden fin-flick, I can join the river's racing speed. I must still hunt, but for now I rest. That was two years ago. Since then, I have lived in this eddy beneath the bridge. I have darkened in its inky shade, stretched myself out, lain suspended here for long hours. Sometimes I drift downstream as far as the waterfall. I meet the beavers who have joined us there; they fell the trees to teach the river tranquillity. Our young slip together into the tangle of branches, vanishing into their safety. But I always return here. I need my folk - the shoal, their shared pulse. Though I have lived alone for years, we trout are creatures of the swarm.

Above us swim the roach; sometimes I slip among them, held safe, comforted by the press of their bodies. But now I am old. I have known ten summers. Perhaps only two more summers and winters remain. My fin strokes have shortened. Now the chase demands more of me. I rest and watch the river, observe what it carries: its cargo of plastic bags, hats, a suitcase, last year's frying pan. And now the supermarket trolley, dragged out many times by human hooks. Someone has thrown it back again. The Hook-People extract a lot. It disturbs them, all those carpets, chairs and bicycles. But they also chase us with hooks attached to barely visible threads, baited with bread and corn. Or with shiny metal fish. I've been deceived a few times. So now, I circle twice before I bite and inspect closely any food that is offered. The Hook-People let me swim free. I don't know why. Other sisters have disappeared when caught. They pull them out and eat them. I've seen the river turn red and bloodied. But I feed on others too. Mostly the smallest roach in the shoal. They know and leave when I'm

hunting. Then I become quick, watchful, my body brightening with hunger. I spend the night before the hunt sheltering in a cave beneath the old millstone, the same place I hide during the floods; they come back harder and harder each year. Life is more difficult now: less and less water, the increasing summer heat. Houses tower where trees once shaded the banks. The excavators arrive first, tearing apart the riverbanks.

When the machines arrive we all suffer, the roach in the gravel, the spiny fish at the edge. We suffocate as the excavators pile up spoil on the foreshore and soil slides into the river, turning its clear waters to brown mud. We are blinded. My gills are filled until I can barely breathe. We shelter under trees and stones until the current runs clear. When I swim out to hunt the next day. I see that death has already visited: a dull blanket of silt smothers the river's gravel heart. We always return to that heart. It's where we were born, where the food is richest - where we find the freshwater shrimps that make us healthy and turn our flesh red. That is where we sleep at noon, hunt at dusk, play, rest and love - in beds where our eggs can breathe and babies hatch. Now there are many trout children. Earlier in the year, I carved out a hallow in the gravel with my tail and laid my own eggs there. A handsome stranger came and scattered his milk. We found each other immediately that night. He was my last love perhaps, my final tryst. I cherish it.

Then came grief: everywhere our hearts suffocate under the mud. Time after time, the people build on the riverbanks, never realising the destruction they cause. Sometimes in the summer heat we can no longer breathe, even in the cool deep eddies near me. Then the heat drives everyone here under my bridge. Our gills become sluggish; I watch my sisters. We don't breathe as quickly as the roach. We trout and our salmon kin, we need the cold- we need cool water. When the shade withdraws and the water dwindles, we gather in the depths; I see even the gill-covers of the roach move more sluggishly. Again and again, they clear the undergrowth and fell the trees on the river banks. The shade recedes and the summer sun heats the water. We need every tree to keep the river shaded and cold. Even so, sometimes a tree does fall into the Modau and is left to lie there, life gathers around it; the roach spawn

and babies are born. But then the people come and remove them; perhaps the disturbance and decomposition offend them. Sometimes, after the long rains, our strong younger sisters come and join us; jumping over the weirs in their mighty strength. We meet them at night under my bridge and swim together. They tell me of their journeys. Over the years, very few have reached the great river, the Rhine. They tell tales of the sea, which I have never seen. But once, I was like them, I wandered far. I crossed two weirs. We have to roam; it is in our trout nature to journey, to love and then return home. Upstream, to where the gravel banks wait, we hollow out our egg shallows, we make love. But now, I have settled here. This spring after two flash-floods, a new sister arrived from the Rhine. She was fine and beautiful, her spots bright red and her dress so green. Her pale olive-belly scarred, torn open as she swam over the concrete of the third weir. She thought she wouldn't survive, she was forced to turn back. But then she told us of a new channel that has opened up, another way - a tale I could hardly believe. The Hook People have built it, circumventing the great weir by the mill near the meadows; we can swim the old ways again, we are free. And now there are Mill Bullheads living here; newcomers have come to swim amongst us. The hook people brought them. Sometimes the people take, but sometimes they give. Two moons ago, an excavator removed rocks from the river downstream. Now the riverbanks are as they always were. We can swim further when the water levels rise. Last moon, we found a garden underwater. I swam there with my 'Red Dot' sisters and we ate earthworms drawn from the drowned flowerbeds. They were so delicious. I never thought I would live to see such days. And still, I hunt. Perhaps I am the Black Queen, as the newcomer called me yesterday.

Maybe this winter or the next, I will swim to the river's edge and stretch out my fins there. I will let my head slowly sink to its bed, into clean gravel I hope, and my belly will rise towards the sun, to watch the failing light. Just as the Old Queen did here in this pool, that winter, when she knew she was leaving this life. I watched her passing.

So, when the final tide trembles through my lateral-line, I know that my sisters and their children will be swimming into the future. Knowing this, I can release my life less anxiously.

The river is so imprisoned, as are we all. There has been so much sorrow. There have been many deaths amongst us, among the roaches and the freshwater shrimps. Yet now, as my end approaches, I feel hope slowly rise again, like clear water in the May-time green after red-mud rainy days. My older sister once met a strange, large trout in the Rhine, behind the old bridge near Gernsheim. She told me about it.

They circled, eyeing each other, but then she realized that this wasn't just one of the river fish. The arched lower jaw - silvery, almost a meter long. The fish told her that she had swum up from the sea and was just resting here, under the protection of the bridge. But she needed to journey onwards quickly; many brothers and sisters were following her on their way up from the Rhine. Now, suddenly there were Bypass Channels around the weirs up in the mountains, and many new river-ladders to leap up, past the towering revetment walls. Something had changed, said 'Salmon-Woman', slapping her tail fin powerfully.

Then she swam on, towards Mannheim. I hope she succeeded. And all the others too - the new arrivals from the Rhine. My sturdy younger sister, the one who recounted all this, was eaten by a catfish a few days ago at the mouth of the Modau and the Old Rhine. The kingfisher told her story to me. The ever-eccentric grey heron too; that a trout relative had been snatched from the community. The catfish had probably waited for her in the shade of a tree. And snatched her at dusk. I will mourn her and her tales of the journeys that we all hold within us. But we eat others. Even the little catfish down there. And others eat us. Catfish, pike, the heron. We are all transformed. And then we return.

But today, here under the bridge, the water smells very strange. Since last night my gill covers have grown heavy. The water has been turning blue for the past hour. A sister drifts past me, her belly facing the sun. Perhaps it is the buckets. Some of the people leave coloured buckets along the shore. Once, years ago, the heavy rains washed one of those buckets away. Some of us died. The water turned red. From the buckets and later from our blood. I don't know what's happening today. Tonight, I'll swim to the cave. For safety. Not so long ago, I

remember that the river was always turning red, blue and green. None of us lived here then. Death lurked. That's what the Old Queen told me before she stretched out her fins in the winter and swam into our hearts; sinking down to the gravel.

But for now, I will honour my salmon family, all of us tracing our origins back to the Rhine: we voyage, we swim, we spawn. The heart of our world are the breathing gravel-beds from which we also learnt to breathe. From thence I came and from there I will return.

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Epilogue from: Torsten Schäfer: **Die Wildnis in uns.** Von ungezähmter Natur und inneren Landschaften. 2026. ISBN: 978-3-98726-514-3

English translation By artist Sara Mark