

LBRIS

We know
books

Also by Julia Armfield

salt slow

Our Wives Under
The Sea

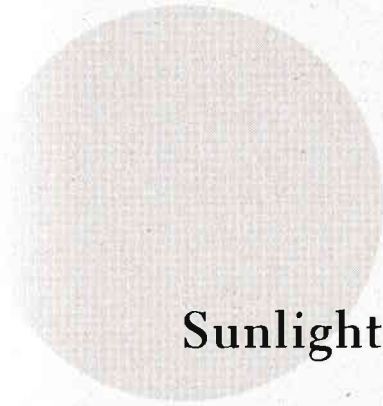
+

JULIA ARMFIELD

PICADOR

LBRIS

We know
books



Sunlight Zone

Miri.

The deep sea is a haunted house: a place in which things that ought not to exist move about in the darkness. *Unstill*, is the word Leah uses, tilting her head to the side as if in answer to some sound, though the evening is quiet – dry hum of the road outside the window and little to draw the ear besides.

“The ocean is unstill,” she says, “further down than you think. All the way to the bottom, things move.” She seldom talks this much or this fluently, legs crossed and gaze towards the window, the familiar slant of her expression, all her features slipping gently to the left. I’m aware, by now, that this kind of talk isn’t really meant for me, but is simply a conversation she can’t help having, the result of questions asked in some closed-off part of her head. “What you have to understand,” she says, “is that things can thrive in unimaginable conditions. All they need is the right sort of skin.”

We are sitting on the sofa, the way we have taken to doing in the evenings since she returned last month. In the old days, we used to sit on the rug, elbows up on the coffee table like teenagers, eating dinner with the television on. These days she rarely

BRIS | We know books

eats dinner, so I prefer to eat mine standing up in the kitchen to save on mess. Sometimes, she will watch me eat and when she does this I chew everything to a paste and stick my tongue out until she stops looking. Most nights, we don't talk – silence like a spine through the new shape our relationship has taken. Most nights, after eating, we sit together on the sofa until midnight, then I tell her I'm going to bed.

When she talks, she always talks about the ocean, folds her hands together and speaks as if declaiming to an audience quite separate from me. "There are no empty places," she says, and I imagine her glancing at cue cards, clicking through slides. "However deep you go," she says, "however far down, you'll find something there."

I used to think there was such a thing as emptiness, that there were places in the world one could go and be alone. This, I think, is still true, but the error in my reasoning was to assume that alone was somewhere you could go, rather than somewhere you had to be left.

+

It's three o'clock and I'm tilting the phone receiver away from my ear to avoid the hold music, which appears to be Beethoven's Battle Symphony played on a toy synthesiser. The kitchen is a junkyard of coffee cups, drain clogged with teabags. One of the lights above the cooker hood is flickering – muscle pulse in the corner of my vision like a ticcing eyelid. On the counter, the following: an orange, half peeled; two knives; a plastic bag of bread. I haven't yet made lunch, pulled various items out at random about an hour ago before finding myself unequal to the task. Stuck

to the fridge, a sheet of paper with the shopping list scratched down in purple biro: *milk, cheese, sleep aid [any], sticking plasters, table salt.*

The hold music buzzes on and I probe around the inside of my mouth with my tongue, feel the gaps in my teeth the way I tend to do when I'm waiting for something. One of my molars is cracked, an issue I have been ignoring for some weeks because it doesn't seem to be hurting enough to warrant a fuss. I draw my tongue up over the tooth, feel the rise and split where the break runs along the enamel. *Don't do that*, I imagine Leah saying – the way she used to do when I rolled my tongue between my teeth in public – *you look like you forgot to floss.* Most nights, though I don't mention this to Leah, I dream in molars spat across the bed-clothes, hold my hands beneath my chin to catch the teeth that drop like water from the lip of a tap. The general tempo of these dreams is always similar: the grasp and pull at something loose, the pause, the sudden fountain spill. Each time, the error seems to lie in the fact that I shouldn't have touched my fingers to the molar on the bottom left-hand side. Each time: the wrong switch flicked, my curiosity rewarded by a rain of teeth, too many to catch between two palms and force into my mouth again, my gums a bald pink line beneath my lip.

The line sputters, a recorded voice interrupting the music to tell me for the fiftieth time that my call is important, before the Battle Symphony recommences with what feels like renewed hostility. Across the room, Leah sits with her hands around a mug of water – a curious warming gesture, the way one might cradle a cup of tea. She hasn't drunk anything hot since returning, asked me not to make my coffee too near her since the smell from

the percolator now seems to make her gag. *Not to worry*, she has said more than once, *it'll sort itself. These things usually do.* Sensations are difficult still – touch painful, smells and tastes like small invasions. I've seen Leah touch her tongue to the edge of a piece of toast and retract it, face screwed up as if in response to something tart.

"I'm still on hold," I say, for no reason really other than to have said it. She looks at me, slow blink. *In case you were wondering*, I think of adding and don't.

At around six this morning, Leah woke and immediately had a nosebleed. I've been sleeping in the room across the hall and so didn't actually see this but I've grown accustomed to her patterns, even at this state of half remove. I'd been ready for it, had actually woken at six fifteen, in time to pass her a flannel in the bathroom, run the taps and tell her not to put her head back. You could set your watch to it these days – red mouth in the morning, red chin, red spill into the sink.

She says, when she says anything, that it's something to do with the pressure, the sudden lack thereof. Her blood retains no sense of the boundaries it once recognised and so now just flows wherever it wants. Sometimes she bleeds from the teeth, or rather, not from the teeth but from the gums around the teeth, which amounts to the same thing when you're looking at her. In the days immediately following her return, blood would rise unheeded through her pores, so that sometimes I'd come in and find her pincushioned, dotted red as if pricked with needles. *Iron maiden*, she'd said the first time and tried to laugh – strained sound, like the wringing out of something wet.

I found the whole thing terrifying for the first few days;

panicked when she bled, jammed my shoes on and demanded she let me take her to A&E. Only by degrees did I realise she had been led to expect this, or at least to expect something similar. She pushed my hands from her face in a manner that seemed almost practised and told me it wasn't a problem. *You can't go out in those anyway*, *Miri*, she said, looking down at the shoes I'd forced on without looking, *they don't match.*

On more than one occasion, I begged her to let me help her and met only resistance. *You don't have to worry*, she would say, and then go on bleeding, and the obviousness of the problem combined with the refusal of help left me at first frustrated and subsequently rather resentful. It went on too long and too helplessly. The way that anyone who sneezes more than four times abruptly loses the sympathy of an audience, so it was with me and Leah. *Can't you stop it*, I'd think about asking her, *you're ruining the sheets.* Some mornings, I'd want to accuse her of doing it on purpose and then look away, set my mouth into another shape and pour the coffee, think about going for a run.

In the bathroom, just this morning, I passed her the flannel and watched her smear her hands with Ivory soap. My mother used to say that washing your face with soap was as bad as leaving it dirty, something about harsh chemicals, the stripping down of natural oils. Everything with my mother was always harsh chemicals – she filled a binder with clippings on the cancer risks of various meat products, sent me books on UV rays and home invasions, a pamphlet on how to build a fire ladder out of sheets.

Having washed her face, Leah stepped back from the sink. She patted her face with the backs of her hands, then the palms, then abruptly curled one finger into the lid beneath her left eye, then

the right, pulling down to inspect the oily sockets of her eyeballs. In the mirror, her skin had the look of something dredged from water. The yellow eyes of someone drowned, of someone found floating on her back. *Be all right*, she said, *be all right in a minute*.

Now, in the kitchen: a jumbling noise on the phone. A sudden click and another robotic voice, slightly different to the one that has been repeating that my call is important, comes on the line to demand that I enter Leah's personnel number, followed by her rank number, transfer number and the statement number she should have received from the Centre on final demob. The voice goes on to explain that if I fail to enter these numbers in the exact order required, I will be cut off. I do not, as I have been attempting to get through and explain, have Leah's personnel number – the whole purpose of my calling the Centre has been to try to get hold of it. I enter all the details required, aside from the personnel number, at which point a third recorded voice comes on the line and proceeds to scold me in a tight robotic jabber, noting as a helpful afterthought that my call will now be terminated.

Leah.

Did you know that until very recently, more people had been to the moon than had dived beyond depths of six thousand metres? I think about this often – the inhospitableness of certain places. A footprint, once left on the surface of the moon, might in theory remain as it is almost indefinitely. Uneroded by atmosphere, by wind or by rain, any mark made up there could quite easily last for several centuries. The ocean is different, the ocean covers its tracks.

When a submarine descends, a number of things have to happen in a fairly short span of time. Buoyancy is entirely dictated by water pushing up against an object with a force proportional to the weight of the water that object has displaced. So, when a submarine sits at the surface, its ballast tanks are filled with air, rendering its overall density less than that of the surrounding water (and thereby displacing less of it). In order to sink, those ballast tanks have to be filled with water, which is sucked into the vessel by electric pumps as the air is simultaneously forced out. It's a curious act of surrender, when you think about it, the act of going under. To drop below the surface is still to sink, however

intentionally – a simple matter of taking on water, just as drowning only requires you to open your mouth.

Miri used to call these my *sunken thoughts*, tapping on the base of my skull with the flat of her hand when I grew quiet, frowning at some thought I was chasing in circles. *How'd they get so far down in there?* she'd say. *Next thing you know they'll be halfway down your neck.* When she did this, I would often catch her palm and keep it there, take her other hand and hold it to my temple, as though surrendering the responsibility of keeping my head in one piece.

It's hard to describe the smell of a submarine when it goes under. Hard to pin down – something like metal and hot grease and something like lack of oxygen, ammonia, the smell of all but what's necessary filtered away. Twenty minutes before we lost contact, Jelka told me she thought she smelled meat, which was strange because I'd been thinking the same thing – a hot unsavoury waft like something cooked. I remember I looked to my own fingers, half expected to find them roasting, bent to observe the skin on my shins, on my knees, on my ankles. There was nothing, of course, and no reason at all for the smell that seemed to hit us both with such force. When Jelka repeated her claim to Matteo he told her to hold her nose if she was so bothered and I didn't say anything to back her up.

At first it was only the comms panel, the crackle of contact from the surface cutting out and not returning. I remember Matteo frowned and asked me to try to find a signal while he dealt with the main controls. I held down the transmission button and chanted nonsense into the radio, expecting the Centre to come back online any second and ask me what I was on about.

Ten minutes later, when the craft's whole system went offline, it would occur to me that the comms hadn't faded like a wavering signal so much as been switched off, though by that time we all had more pressing things to deal with.

Miri.

She's been home three weeks and I'm mostly used to everything. In the mornings, I eat and she doesn't and then I answer emails for half an hour and ignore her wandering back and forth with wads of toilet paper wedged along her gumline to absorb the blood. I write grant applications for non-profit organisations for a living, and I've always worked from home, which never bothered me particularly until she went away and forced me into closer proximity with myself. Now that she's back – now I'm *used* to her being back – I can't decide whether to register her presence as relief or invasion. I make heavy weather over glasses left half empty on windowsills, over the bin not being taken out. I have near-constant mouth ulcers and complain about unhoovered floors. At night, I dream I grit my teeth so hard that they break off like book matches.

The people who live above us keep the TV on at all times. Even when I know they're both out, at work or at the movies, the noise bleeds through the ceiling – downward drip of talk, of title music, spilling down the wall like the damp that speckles into mould around the chimney breast.

Sometimes, if I listen very closely (sometimes, if I stand on a

chair), I can make out the show that's playing upstairs and tune our television to the same channel, which negates the irritation a little. They seem to favour game shows and programmes about people tasked with falling in love with each other in exotic locations for money. I enjoy these too, I suppose, enjoy their fabulism, the lunar tones of teeth. Contestants on a show I often watch in tandem with the neighbours have to stare into a stranger's eyes for four minutes, uninterrupted, as studies have apparently shown this is the amount of time it takes to fall in love. This often seems to work, at least for the duration of the episode, though once a male contestant threw his chair back after two minutes and walked off set, later stating that something he saw in his partner had unnerved him. I'm less fond of nature documentaries and tend not to bother matching my channel to the neighbours' when they switch these on. One evening, I fell asleep on the sofa and woke to the unusually clear sound of a voice narrating a programme on California pitcher plants from the floor above me: *Foraging insects are attracted to the cavity – or mouth – formed by the cupping of the leaf and are hastened down into the trap by the slippery rim kept moist by naturally occurring nectar. Once caught, the insect is drowned in the plant's digestive juices and gradually dissolved.* This was some months after Leah was first absent, when the phone calls from the Centre were still semi-regular – the kindish, professional-sounding voices telling me they were doing all they could. I remember I lay on the sofa and listened to the show for several minutes before reaching for the remote and aiming it at the ceiling.

Leah used to go up there sometimes, knock on the door late at night and ask them to turn it down. *They were nice*, she would tell

me when she came back, brushing her hands together to indicate a job well done. *Very apologetic about it, I like them.* They left the TV on at night to keep the cat company, they'd turn it down, no harm no foul. The noise from the television never altered but I don't think Leah even particularly minded this. Going up there seemed, to her, to be almost the whole point of the exercise, telling the neighbours to turn it down more important than the turning down itself. After she went away, I quickly became grateful for a noise I had previously regarded as irritating. Sunday mornings I would stand on the kitchen table and listen to soap opera music, to upbeat voices selling nasal sprays and Golden Syrup and non-stick Teflon pans.

"I can't stand this," Leah says suddenly. She's been sitting in the corner of the room for upwards of an hour, chewing on the collar of her jumper in an odd, reflexive gesture, like one might gnaw at a hangnail. I ask her what she means and she doesn't say anything, only gesturing upwards as the noise from the neighbours' television fades from the closing credits of a programme to a splash of advert music in a frantic major key. I go upstairs and hammer on the door but the neighbours don't answer, the noise of the television oddly quieter in the corridor than it seems in the flat below. It occurs to me that I have never actually laid eyes on the neighbours, that the whole time we've lived where we live I've taken their presence as a given on the basis of evidence that is, at best, circumstantial: the footsteps and the muffled music, scrape of furniture being moved around at night. I never asked Leah a single thing about the neighbours, never once after any of the times she went up to ask them to turn it down. Is that odd, I start to wonder to myself and then disregard the question. It barely matters, after

all, since my issue is not so much with my neighbours as it is with their TV.

I'm only gone a total of six minutes but by the time I get back, Leah has moved from the corner of the living room and is locked in the bathroom, running both the taps. This isn't entirely unusual. Quite often these days I will wake at odd hours and hear the bathtub being filled. 4am, grey twitch of morning in the sky about the telephone wires and water running in the bathroom, in the kitchen, in the room where the washer-dryer sits. More than once, I have come in to find Leah sitting on the edge of the bathtub, staring into the water with the fixed expression of someone barely awake. She is, as I often think at these moments, deliberating whether or not to get in, though at other times I interpret her expression as something more uneasy – the look of a person who has let their gaze drop too deep and now can't seem to retrieve it.

Standing outside the bathroom, I think of knocking, think of asking her to let me in. I imagine I can hear the water spilling down across the floor, pooling thick across the lavender linoleum. She has, it appears, taken the electric box she uses to sleep into the bathroom, the one that arrived in the post, no return address – a parting gift from the Centre – along with a pair of decompression socks and a book of aphorisms bound in PVC. I hear her turn it on, hear the shiver of sound it produces – swell and oom of something spilling, something seething, judder and groan of something building to a roar.

+

A long time ago, we met. I think that's important – the fact of a meeting, the fact I remember a sense of before. Meeting implies