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600 words

Moonriver

I'm on a jazz boat in Lyon, and I am happy. In the bar's grimy mirror winking out at me from behind liquor bottles, I see my tipsy self, lips stained berry from the bottle of Beaujolais my friend Marloes and I split over dinner. It's the gastronomic capital of the world, so we splurged on crusty bread and onion soup and tender duck and soft potatoes. We are done with finals and trying to see as much of France as we can before Christmas, when I go back to America, when she goes back to Holland, when all of our friends return to their respective countries.

I'm on a jazz boat in Lyon, and I am happy, but I think I am a little sad, too. But that's okay. It's just that the night is so beautiful. I have a cold beer in front of me with foam fizzing over the slender brim. I didn't like beer when I came to Europe four months ago, but now I am drinking it on a boat on the Rhone while jazzy beats slap the air around me, filling my head that already feels quite warm. The beer tastes good and golden.

"Do you like it?" Marloes asks, nodding toward my glass. Her Dutch accent rolls over the vowels low and thick. Her voice is so distinctive that when I am alone I can recall its cadence perfectly, like a familiar melody.

"Yes, I love it," I say.

"We drink it all the time back home."

"I can't wait to visit you in Utrecht one day. You can introduce me to all your beers."

She laughs. "I definitely will."

We watch the locals and I try not to think about how long it might be before I make it to Utrecht. Suddenly, it's hard to swallow and I focus my attention on the band.

"Do you want to move closer?" I ask.

We find stools right in front of the stage and listen with tapping feet. The keyboardist and drummer riff off each other, louder and louder and faster and harder and it's just this beautiful mix that builds to a crescendo, a gorgeous staccato rhythm blending with saxophone croons and bass strums and all the musicians are looking at each other intimately, intensely, like they're the only ones in this moment and I know that look, I've felt it too, when it was just a few of us drinking wine straight from the bottle on the streets of Paris at midnight, when it was wide-eyed laughing on the top of a mountain with Grenoble spilled out beneath us, when it was three of us slumped in the aisle of a train at 4 a.m., freezing, exhausted, unbelieving but together. And the players take the music where it needs to go, and then, I don't know how, but then they know when to end. The music gets slower and softer and spirals and I can't breathe because I don't want it to end, and I don't know how to end with it, and can't we just hang suspended in this moment, in this jazz bar boat in Lyon on the river Rhone, forever? Can't this final note reverberate through time and hold us in its center, deep and long and infinite? The players stand frozen in that note, curled over their instruments that gleam in the low light, as the river rushes by the boat's windows. I don't know where the river is going so fast, flashing with silvers and slivers of moonlight; it is a current that carries the note away.