

## Summoning the river snake: a death journey in five parts

*... in which the poet Dorothy Porter summons her muse and death messenger, a snake, and makes a final journey.*

---

*The poet narrates the journey; the snake (in boxed text) responds.*

**Fiona Britton**

## Summoning the river snake

---

I.

Serpent, show yourself.

I wait for the thin sound of your scale  
against the leaf litter: it is  
    the dry fall of papers  
    from a desk.

I will  
slash a path for us — through  
dead brambles, lead you  
    down  
    towards the water's yellow edge, where

motor oil collects  
in rainbow leaks.

This moon is a dollar  
to pay for our passage.

Snake,  
whisper your permission:  
    I must curl  
    these arms around your neck,  
    your pulse against my wrist:

we are  
a woman riding a beast  
  
in a dirty, moonlit creek,  
to the river mouth  
    where the dark channel  
    opens —  
where the sea begins.

## Your code

---

In myth  
it is always a bird —  
  
some garnet-eyed death agent,  
a quivering entrail  
clutched in its dirty beak,  
    muttering  
    a doomsday rant —

who hops and stares  
with freakish, ominous  
intent.

But you, poet, choose this  
travelling mate:

a slider, who drifted, took  
to the banks  
where the Black Land and the Red Land split;  
    listened  
    here and there,  
slept while the low-country flooded,  
waiting.

Friend, I yearned for you,  
— memorised  
your code:

A snake is an opportunity  
A kiss is an anemone opening  
A lover is a mystery  
A cancer is a minotaur in the labyrinth of  
bones.

## II.

In my hands your body is  
jewelled rope:  
a cordon, a partition — you are  
thin as an edge. Tonight,

we slip between  
the reeds, slice silent murk  
beside the bank — guided

by the barking frogs  
downstream.

See? The river gums  
have pocketed the moon;  
it is dark. Yet  
I know you,  
snake. You are

the simple line  
that draws itself at the end of life;  
the tube that begins *here* and ends *here*,

a problem  
unknotted: head and cloaca,  
the *ontos* and *teleos* of it all —  
simplified. Tonight  
    you are the line;  
    I am crossing over.

## Gemstones

---

Like me,  
you spent long days in the dark,  
dreaming of amusements  
    that shine and  
    snare the eye.

Our kind have perfected lairs:  
you waited out  
the southerly, sniffed the air  
for the lazy ozone taint

that hints  
at summer —

got your timing wrong  
a hundred times; emerged  
to fog and chill, accidentally  
    slipped a skin or  
    left a tooth.

Where diamond nails have torn  
    for love  
you were — you are — scored. But  
I am smooth to touch; each scale  
stitched tight as  
a lover's pact,  
    no gape  
    or fingernail chink.

To hear me, drift:  
swallow a dragon-stone — and listen,  
    your blue eyelid  
    against my cheek.

### III.

Snake, are you awake?

This flow makes us forget:  
we are not the creatures we  
once were;  
    nor yet the stuff  
    we will become.

You were kind, before — drew from me  
my proudest hours. Now,

in darkness, we  
ease ourselves into  
lesser shapes; seep and leach  
and fill the river  
with our taint.

Your death drug  
makes me woozy — the brimstone stink  
of old bodies rises  
    from the river in  
    sulfurous belches;

I should like to go properly, with  
the scent of chapel incense burning  
in a temple grate

or redolent figs ripening  
on a plate  
in the sun.

### Minotaur

---

The minotaur,  
    there in the heart of your heart's maze

is death:  
his beast reek rises  
from bristle and flank,  
sweat trickles  
    into the woollen rug.

But you prepared for this:  
    rolled a skein  
    of words, passed  
through antique towns,  
saw the stone walls of a city crumble

while the minotaur waited out the years  
dozing at his post  
like a drunken duty judge  
    for this — to prove

that mysteries, when probed  
collapse

into units  
of simple, mundane lore.

#### IV.

Hear this:  
it wasn't as you describe.

I took this life  
to town — showed it off,  
gadded it about,

swung it,  
gave it hot kisses;  
holidayed it

then rolled it lovingly  
in a tomb-raider's embalming cloth and  
tucked it  
between two sheets

then shot my pistol in the air.

#### Comet

---

You snuck, pen between your teeth  
shape-shifter  
half-chimera,  
into guises — a web-handed  
amphibian, a comet's tail:

*Let me end in fire  
on a night of low smog  
bright on the horizon.*

Desire strapped rockets to your feet  
and you went sprawling  
akimbo, staring —

rapt; saw  
that longings form galaxies; that  
all one's deaths are written  
and collude.

Apprenticed, you did magic —  
pressed your hands  
to your lover's body, then  
raised them aloft:

strange celestial fire  
trailed your fingers, filled  
the room  
with smoke.

## V.

Our old moon, our coin  
is spent; so snake,  
*adieu* — you are thin in my grip:  
    slight as  
    discarded skin.

This river grows cold. Salt  
on the tongue  
announces the sea. Before us  
everything lies  
open  
in a single channel: time, matter, space.

If Jupiter's Europa  
is lifeless then  
we should make for Io —

zoom out there,  
set the place alight —  
feast on the  
    ice dreams  
    of microlife, who  
chemosynthesise to live.

Better yet, let's fizz:  
be infinite, carbon, dissembled.  
    Start a fire;  
    be a breath.

## Nightjar

---

For you (and you only)  
a backward glance:

on the sea's surface  
in phosphorescent trails,  
I see the traces  
of your words.

And at the shore,  
a flying nightjar watches —

veers off-course,  
high on your heat and light,  
dreaming, perhaps:  
    of a ride  
    on a comet's tail.