A close up of text on a black background

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**Excerpt: Lying Perfectly Still**

by **Laura Fish**

shortlisted for the 2022 SI Leeds Literary Prize

She stares in disbelief at the figure balanced on the high wall of the road bridge. His arms raised to shoulder height, hands outstretched. Given the amount he usually drinks how has he achieved such a feat, climbed that high? His feet edge across mossy stones. He cannot swim. Her heart is a clenched fist. Does he realise what he is doing? The pendulum of time stops swinging. Moses’ body, a T shape, shifts to the highest arch above the river. His drunken legs buckle. The bridge is a heartbeat away.

She screams and, like a stone dropped from a wall, Moses falls all the way down to the river.

She is bounding between trees in short bursts of explosive speed. Down the grassy slope, between tall bulrushes dappled with sunlight, dashed with shadow. Down the bank through thick and silent air. She reaches the pebbly strip of beach, scans the murky depths where the bridge’s middle arch slices the water’s flowing skin. Here the river is broader, deeper. Where is the splashing, the gasping, the thrashing? Where is he?

She slips her sandals from her feet and wades into the icy flow. Ducks dart skyward in a quacking whir of wings. Something glistens on the riverbed, mottled, fleetingly crimson and mustard-yellow through disturbed silt. Her stomach tightens; red waves of emotion build. Time is passing. She wades until waist deep, thrusts forwards from the bank with as much force as she can, launching into an extended glide then panicked breaststroke. Swirling water buffets her chin. Circles of foam swirl across the river’s thick green face, coagulating in the middle, twirling downriver into a turbulent white gush. Moses’ body bobs up in the bridge’s shadow where there is an ominous absence of light. Koliwe’s arms are sculling, her feet flutter to tread water, stirring memories of his last painting. The face of the artist submerged in the river professing his own death. The most troubled face she has ever seen screened by spear-like reed heads.

His forehead surfaces, the skin varnished with water; a blur of blues, browns, greens. She swims against the current. His half-submerged body rises, with his face angled upwards, the eyes drained of life. She reaches out. The whale-like mass is too heavy; he will pull her to the depths beneath the bridge. Already the current’s force is dragging her deeper. She lets go. There is the thump-thud-thud of her pulse in her ears, the gurgling, gulping river, a giddy sickness of guilt and grief. Water roars in her ears.

She scours the river’s course to the curve downstream. Close by, her father’s striped shirt balloons up, deflates and recedes from sight. As his face rises, again, one final time, she reaches for his collar, grabs at his nose. Her heart flutters with determination. But the sodden mass sinks. As swiftly as he appeared, water washes back over. Unbearably, he vanishes. He is gone.