

The Brook Lamprey *Lampetra planeri*

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Brook Lamprey *Lampetra planeri*

John Bingham

To say that you're strange doesn't do you justice but then neither does calling you a fish. Cold-blooded and limbless you may be but you lack a hinged jaw, a swim bladder and paired fins; you don't have any bones and your skin is bereft of that signature coat of scales. You have a snout, a pair of eyes and a nostril on the top of your head. Your mouth, if we can call it that, is a small round hole in the centre of a suctorial disc. Your rasping tongue works like a piston but you don't have the rings of sharp teeth that enable your glamorous cousin to latch on to fish, suck their blood and hitch a ride out to sea. You'll never know the taste of blood or salt; this is as far as you go, maybe fifty yards from the muddy backwater of your birth. Just as well, since it's not clear you can even swim; yours is more a slingshot motion to propel you upstream, anchoring to pebbles as you go.

I watch you at work in the gravelly shallows head-on to the current, stuck to a stone; green-blue-grey, eel-like, snake-like, thin as my finger, long as my hand, straightened in the water's flow, riffled by light. You haven't looked like this for long.

Most of your life you've been an ammocoete; an all but blind feeding tube sunk upright in mud snagging diatoms and debris on the mucus strands in your pharynx.

Yours was a brief silvering in a metamorphosis telescoped

into a few months in the last year of your life.

You had to dismantle your younger self before adulthood could begin.

Even as your gonads grew, your gut atrophied; you can't even eat. And gifted those eyes for so brief a time, you still shun the light.

After maybe six or seven years as a filter feeder, an algal grazer, your adult life sucking on stones long enough to spawn and die seems a punishment worthy of Tartarus.

Even so, you may have had the last laugh.

Your sedentary, risk-averse, hermetic life has served you well. You go back a long way.

Your agnathan ancestors were here when the world broke apart. You've seen off the dinosaurs, ice ages, floods and droughts.

I guess you'll see us off too.

Not that it matters to you. Or me.

In a few weeks, after heaving stones, whipping up silt-storms to make a hollow, sculpting a crescent-shaped downward ridge ready to protect your eggs; after the writhe, wriggle, thrash, tail loop and squeeze of the act itself, you'll drift downstream past your offspring who will have the where-withal

to know a river margin, the shade of an alder, the touch of soft silt in slow waters, where to dig in.