

Fishwife

By Jennifer Jean

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I believe
what I've been told

about the vanded hallowed well;
how it let loose
a monstrous breaker
that drowned a kingdom and spawned a lake.

How the breaker bore down
on a hilltop beyond the serf lands
and seized royal Liban and her mudslung pup,

swept them through to luminous
undersea caves so secreted
only God could find them.

He lit and warmed the stony haven
while she prayed in love
as always, as if

in meadows and near cliffs
near her damned castle walls,
her doomed faithless family.

Ground down by seclusion
over three crazed days,
she filled in the gaps of her faith

and wailed new prayers
to the Maker who is the Mother

God. "Make me play like salmon!" she keened
till hoarse and wrung and pure
enough for power and grace.

"Make me swim with close knit shoals!"

The Mother and the Father
God heard her.

They slickened the pup first,
thickened him into an otter called Pelt.

Liban they bound like I bind,
swathed her in scales,
and flung her new form on the sea
where she knew the world for 300 years.

One day along a River of Rushes,
Liban skulked ashore,
untangled Pelt from river delta nets.

As she soothed the fearful familiar
a voice came like air
in the rustling rush.

Know me, said the Mother
God. And Liban heard. Then
the Father said, *You are wanting*.

Love and grow as Woman,
save and be saved
by Man. And she believed,
like I believe.

From that cover of reeds, she took in
a bright tenor
in a fervor—a man who'd been a bard.
She found him

sweating for his bread,
straining to carve keels and masts
to earn his keep.

She let him catch her,
as is our way. And they loved and warred
and lived by the shore of the River of Rushes.

Soon, she learnt his noon song—learnt his tongue—
and it moved sweetly between her lips.

There too her old words flowed—
an undercurrent
foamed over by his verse

torrents. In this wash the two
mingled—made

language. One

I have known.

“Trust me,” he’d sing,

leaving Liban on late mornings
to climb
and fix colossal shipyard ships.

She’d kiss him and clutch
her heart, and trust.

“Trust me,” he whispered

that morning he fell from a mast loft
and died
on the ground. She hated the ground
and wept and went to sea again.

Wading 'neath typhonic waves,
she let that bard's seeds swim
through her womb

—let in the Father, the Mother—
bore and suckled their children
at sea—

salmon and catfish and starfish
and all that was kin to the best of that man.

And in this way his song
lit on all ends of the globe.

Yet, there was one
of the brood
who did not wade away—

a shapeshifter,
one daughter, Liban's mirror, a creature

who shadowed her
nearly healing Liban's heart
as offspring do by being,

by bearing a mother's mantle—her abiding
wounds and charge to band with Man.

They swam abreast
in gray Eastward currents
till Liban chose to give up the ghost—

till she breached and crooned
near a grand gold vessel,
let men delight
in her bosom and fins; all the men marveled
and one murdered Pelt—

then they, and their bishop, called her a Saint;

she died
in that bishop's holy stone hall,
fin intact, fully divine—believing
she was all alone.

Knots away, her daughter

shifted about, mated,
then hated that lover, that soul of a gallant man
wrapped up in a chitty, slick dolphin;

she bore him seven calves and one
blessed daughter
who fumbled at love
with a man above water, a blacksmith;

later, that daughter's one cursed girl
jilt a mason; and the next one
as well, could not cross the bounds
into whole hale love;

and the same with the next,
and the next, and the next;

and so on; till my own mother

could not bear to ever be
above water
like those of her mothers who'd tested Men
then tossed themselves back to the sea;

till my mother broke and hoped,
and mated with the dark
thing of a deep, still trench—

till I was born
and rose and tried new forms;
I a bird and a crab, then a bass,
then warily the woman

who speaks now for Liban.

My father, the dark
senseless creature
no man
may meet,

housed the silt
of the soul of a wounded
sort of soldier.

He loved my mother

briefly, drew her in
to a livid hadal trench.

They mated, then sunk
where only he could roam, blind
and addicted to the bottom
of all things. She rose,

labored, bore a legion
and me. She
clung to shallow currents
but lived most days
in seahorse silhouette,

while I shifted
from thing to thing seeking
a fit—finally finding myself
bearing in mind the air.

So, I considered air but only briny air
and the albatross
bachelors who mate for life.

To reach their incisor isle

both fins tensed and thrashed.
Up and up;

then warm; then out.

I strode their reef
on fast forming fowl feet.

Untried plumage sprung
from my spine craving a climb—
still, I turned

to courtship. I bounded
with all those gams of birds
possessed by sailors lost at sea

all these days that Men have drowned.

My first mollymawk
enclosed an ensign's soul.

He fussed and gamboled warily
guessing I may hesitate
to love our fledglings
with food from the pool
of my former kin. He broke me
a little.

The next one, the Royal,
was aged—an admiral;
he waltzed four days
belching bombastic caws,
bowing and bill rattling
to perched crowds.

This meager seaman
never looked me in the eye.

A latter few lurched or scuttled,
pecked my keel curved breast—

every almost man an ego
in a feathered snare,

a monster clam
without pearls.

Nearly bleak from the fluttering
dead and their sunken scores,
I took wing—

rode a zephyr, loved a zephyr—

hovered a blink—then dove and the sea
embraced my slickening mantle
as it shed down;

I spread gills as wide as worship,
and dove and dove, seeking
you, my helpmeet.

As I reeled near the bottom—
fighting feral tides and caterwauling
like the fertile black drum fish—

I caught my second wind

and looked to be more than
mutable.

When we marry—late evenings

I reveal
swelled curls
pinned,

my scaled nape bowed
into a thin shoulder. It is tender
topography.

Firelit and lovely like the mother
of pearl of oysters,

I am your warm
haven,
always. The heat,

from soup suspended
above a hearth blaze,
rushes around my jaw line

like wintry froth or
a holy fogbow.

Weird gills bloom
to bear this air

while my sleek fins fold
into flexible soles

we invent together.

As fishwife and fisherman,
we take turns voicing
verse or Psalms,

in the crimson evening.

You treasure
my words

in the scarlet dawn,

till they devolve
into brief shrieks,
into petty scraps, and you fall
silent through the day.

These are the difficult days
we must reshape.
Again and again, we must begin
beginning

so new mouths may

inhale the given air—divine air—
that is
binding love.

So sons and daughters,
as mooring chains
replacing ropes,

may become Liban and her bard—
yet,

restored.

About the author

Jennifer Jean is the author of the poetry chapbook *In the War* (Big Table Publishing Co., 2010). Her poetry, essays, literary interviews, and reviews have been published in numerous journals and anthologies, including: *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Awakenings Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Southern California Review*, *Caketrain*, *Relief Quarterly*, *The MOM Egg Journal*, *Two Weeks*, and *Megaera*. She is also a feature writer for the arts and lifestyle magazine *Art Throb* and has received an Agnes Butler Award from the Academy of American Poets. Jennifer directs Thursday's Theatre of Words & Music artist's performance series and is the librettist for the Fishwife Music Project. As well, she's an active member of the committee producing the Massachusetts Poetry Festival and she teaches writing and literature at Salem State University. For more information visit: <http://www.fishwifetales.com>.

About the editor/publisher

Nic Sebastian hails from Arlington, Virginia and travels widely. Her first collection, *Forever Will End On Thursday*, was edited by Jill Alexander Essbaum and published by Lordly Dish Nanopress. Her work has appeared in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Anti-*, *MiPOesias*, *Salt River Review*, *Mannequin Envy*, *Avatar Review* and elsewhere. Nic blogs at *Very Like A Whale*. She is the founder and voice behind the audio poetry journal *Whale Sound* and the founder of *Voice Alpha*, a group blog focused on the art of reading poetry aloud for an audience. Whale Sound Audio Chapbooks has also published *Handmade Boats* by H.K. Hummel; *Studies in Monogamy* by Nicelle Davis; *Cloud Studies* by Christine Klocek-Lim; *Dark Refuge* by Edward Byrne and *Threatening Weather* by Howie Good.