

Minnows

by Carol Novack

MINNOWS

1. Wonder Book

My wonder book came with six vanilla minnows in satin pockets and a crazy rainbow of Crayolas. So I colored my minnows tangerine, plum, mint green, and cherry red. My twin sister Hattie snuck off with my minnows when I wasn't watching and colored the other two black. I'd wanted lime and lemon minnows. I screamed such a tantrum my mother thought I'd stop breathing and die; she was beside herself rushing around the room like dull blades in a blender, screeching *do something, do something*. Hattie whispered *minnows are black; you're so stupid* when Mommy was beside herself, not watching.

Hattie's wonder book came with six white giraffes. Before she'd finished coloring them yellow and brown, I poured water on two of them. They were ruined forever yes for always and she cried for always, cried like a minnow so quiet you can't hear those minnows with whetted hooks in

their mouths, like plants when you cut their roots, voices of broken lutes, lobsters in hot pots. But I could hear her; put my fingers in my ears for always when she was around.

My wonder book was an ocean, hers a savanna. My minnows would play in water, darting in and out of rocks, safe beneath labile winds, oil tankers and battleships. The fish kissed and hugged and flew out of the ocean and into a sky I think I saw once when I was somewhere else. When I was somewhere someone else there the sky clapped and suddenly there were three baby minnows, wagging their tails. I told Hattie but she didn't believe me; I should've known. She went to the kitchen to make cookies with my mother: cookies with raisins I hate. She said minnows don't wave their tails. She said her giraffes eat raisins.

Daddy asked me what I was going to do with the babies. I sat in Daddy's lap while we discussed making extra beds for the mini minnows, whose names were Minnie, Mop and Mopetta. *Why are they all m's?* Daddy asked, sliding his fingers through the squeaky strings of my hair. *Because they're so small they remind me of M and M's*, I answered. *You are a chubby little Moppet*, said Daddy, patting my belly. I fled to my room and sulked, talked to my minnows. Daddy was a big bad whale. So I swam with my minnows where no one could find us, under the undulating green fingers of sea creatures, till Mommy made me go to dinner to eat cookies with raisins. Daddy liked giraffes better than minnows I know he did. I know he liked things where he could find them.

Before dinner we always prayed, maybe because we had nothing we could say with ease. So we prayed for ailing sisters of sisters and parents of parents in nursing homes. We prayed for far away children with no bellies, please dear god give them honey. We prayed for Mommy who had a tumor in her belly, prayed for the tumor. Her belly was growing like my baby minnows were growing already too big for their beds, beds of shoe bags hanging in my closet. My baby minnows were jumping all over the floor, gasping as I held the book open for them to leap into its rivers, so they did and we hid as the tumor grew, invading the house till one day the tumor screamed and there was big idiot Nod bawling like a blowfish, full of nothing but DNA, wanting to devour the house.

Baby Nod grew and devoured my wonder book. The minnows were gone, maybe into the belly of the sky. I combed the ocean for my minnows while Hattie's giraffes multiplied like spider plants, all yellow and brown on the dry yellow savanna, propelled by their gauche necks, awkward in their bodies, bodies rooted to the feet of the humming planet. *Where can a giraffe hide?* I asked Daddy; wouldn't he know? *There's nowhere to hide*, I said to Hattie. *Don't be ridiculous*, she responded: *Why would giraffes want to hide?*

I asked for lions for my birthday, prayed hard for lions bigger than Hattie's giraffes. When the big lions arrived, I colored them the color of oceans. I sent them to the savanna.

The lions are on their way.

2. Two Temples

I was content in the Temple of the Minnows till Rock happened with his hooks. Rock with his Bluefish gods insisted Minnows were not; he would not leave me be on Fridays would follow me to the Temple of the not Minnows. Rock would hide behind trees so I wouldn't see him. He was giraffe thin and much too tall but full of sinews; snapped proof of the nonbeing of Minnows with his Polaroid. When I was basking in the solar beams of the yes Minnows, he would suddenly appear in front of me, as though from the sky, shrieking and sobbing like a spider monkey on a starvation diet. And then he

laughed, but I wasn't fooled. He wanted moon, ached for moon. So much commotion!

When we wed, Rock insisted on a Temple of Bluefish ceremony, he said *yes, bluefish you must say yes yes you must or I'll drown* and I said *yes till death do us in*. If I hadn't he'd have gone on and on, boring me to madness I would've had to close my ears for good. When you know about Minnows as I do you know they are everywhere in the open; thus temples are unimportant I said to self, hiding my sorrows in shoe pockets in my closet. Whereas bluefish, well, we know where they are; check your microwaves, chandeliers and mirrors, so loud and cunning those fish, taking over oceans. I could live without attending the community of the Temple of the Minnows knowing I was living with them always in spite of Rock and the cameras.

The Temple of the Bluefish reeks of rotted teeth, not like the Temple of the Minnows. The bluefish are a sickly hue inside an ash gray blue, they with their black robes. Minnows wear robes of many colors, iridescent happy child shades. Those bluefish move like stagnant water. You have to be watchful; there's an epidemic of suicides in the oceans. Bluefish dine on the diamonds of the dead.

Why did I let Rock why did I listen I have wondered since that time, it seemed a small sacrifice. He was a man who knew how to design his fingers around my body; like a new lute, my body sang in his arms. His whetted bones like those of bluefish bruised my belly, but he had a way, a way of looking into what I thought I was that made me disappear slowly like a jellyfish, disappeared like a jellyfish under a malignant moon.

3. Movie Review

Minnie and Nod met on Nantucket by the sea by chance or destiny; already with minnows in the first scene, in the bucket minnows hard silver no safe gray tones, bones like the cracks in my lips, too much light, unlike those tender dull zips in the boy's khaki shorts she unlocked from their moorings fast forward to unleash the expected catch..... *Ah, but now, my dear this is the first scene --don't rush me!* So we thought we thought anyway, you and I, she and he had to be

circumspect with the light, I announced her eyes were *too much color*, too pronounced like neon violet contacts: *this will end badly* but of course she's young so young, both leaping minnows. *A woman's film*, you whispered to me in a back row. *Must I sit through the entire god damn thing?* You were raising your voice. *Ssh* I said, *soto voce*, the popcorn, your dentures, *dear, I can't hear* every word, any to tell the truth. *Ay? There are no minnows in the sea*, you spat.

So Minnie beseeched him: *Put them back, please do!* She repeated her entreaty for the frantic minnows, slippery slivers of iridescence leaping out of the bucket onto the sand into the sky, fearing extinction she said *this reminds me of early death, please no please no!* The heavens turned dense ash blue like hospice hair.

The minnows were gone with an abrupt moon ascending to soften the glare of those gauche violet eyes and Nod tipped the bucket, obviously a gesture you wouldn't get. I know you didn't see she wanted big fish; remembering a shadow under the patio pool in Manhasset when she was nine, an apocalyptic clap of thunder, a spear in her father's mouth, lungs and lutes on the bottom of the oily red pool. She wanted more than a Nod.

Oh you slept through the scenes, you with your cataracts, acts one, two, three. After so many minnows who went to Yale and the Bowery and even Detroit, it was over and the last shot was Rock till there was a white sheet covering him and he looked like anyone without a face, but then you recalled the X rated vignette when you awakened, reaching for my breasts as the credits rolled, crabbing beneath my dress as you asked, *what about mine?* you old sea serpent in my pants. I did not say your Viagra falls, DNA disappointment, the sickness of Modern Medicine; I unlocked your zip so long ago, no surprise gift, but smooth as a minnow. *Then what? Into the sunrise they went?* you queried, forgetting you had asked, no, told me; you always told me everything without your hearing aid imagined you'd related the whole ostentatious synopsis as well as the start of it all with the minnows in the bucket no, not a bucket, a net that stretched from Nantucket to Nova Scotia. Imagine! But I was tired and couldn't be sure I actually recalled

stampeding giraffes, falling heliotropes, bloodstone storms, an old
child with no eyes, wrapped in waves; I couldn't; and you had
dropped like a minnow of a brittle star into my flat trap of a lap, my
darling sour ancient fish.

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