

Ichthyology

by Michael Hartford

The doctors said, when she was born, that the gills would eventually fade away on their own. Nothing to fear, they said; no more unusual than the rare child born with a tail, or a dense pelt of fur, or a single sharp tooth jutting from its new pink gums. We carry, after all, the genetic memory of our furred and finned and feathered ancestors in our twisted strands of DNA; dreams of ancient seas are bound to surface now and then.

Her parents noted, with relief, that she was terrified of baths as an infant. The sound of water pouring from the faucet was enough to send her into paroxysms of tortured screaming. Both her mother and her father had to bathe her, one holding her tiny arms and legs while the other quickly but gently ran the yellow duck wash cloth over her flawlessly smooth skin and carefully cleaned the tender gills on her throat. Though they both noticed the translucent membranes stretched between her round toes like the shimmering skin of a soap bubble, they chose not to mention this discovery to each other.

In time she lost her fear of baths, and to her parents this too was a relief. Her fear had been so all-consuming, her attempts to hurl her little body out of the water so desperate, that they were frightened and exhausted themselves when bath time was finally over. By her second birthday, she not only climbed into the bath willingly, she stayed there for hours, watching her pudgy arms float in the bubbles while her parents freshened the bath with warm water. This change happened so gradually they never thought it strange.

When she started school, the girl still sported gills on either side of her neck, barely visible when she wore a high collar. From a distance they looked like thin gray streaks. Getting closer, they began to resemble scars, but perfectly smooth and straight. Only right against her neck, close enough to kiss her goodnight, were the gills recognizable as such. And only from that nearness could one

hear the faint, high-pitched whistle that accompanied the air drifting across her throat.

She made few friends in her early years of school, preferring her own company on the playground, dancing in dusty shafts of light behind the swings. Her solitude was not due to her gills, though; she wore turtlenecked sweaters, high stiff collars, silk scarves, and no one ever came close enough to hear the whistling draw of extra breath. No one teased and taunted her, called her “fish head” or “little mermaid.”

Though she longed to take swimming lessons with other girls her age, to progress from Guppy to Minnow to the dizzying heights of Shark, her parents would not hear of it. They chose for her, instead, music lessons. Piano proved too difficult, because her fingers balked at stretching wide across the keys. And even with a thick sweater, the violin pressed uncomfortably against her gills and made her face turn violet with exertion. But she excelled at the cello, clutching the wood between her knees and coaxing out the sonorous rumble of a deep, slow river. She was a common sight on the street where she lived, lugging the cello case that was nearly as tall as she was, the collar of her shirt stretched up to her chin even at the height of summer.

Her parents never knew that she would also have been a common sight on her street in the small hours of the morning, had anyone been awake to see. Had anyone looked out their dark windows, they would have seen a ghostly figure running barefoot through the streetlights' yellow pools, bound for the shallow pond in the park. There she threw off her nightgown and slipped into the green water, her little body twisting and undulating until she reached the deepest spot at the pond's center.

She would lie on the muddy bottom, listening to the long sounds of water lapping at the weedy shore and the short sounds of minnows' tails snapping in the dark. From the floor of the pond, the moon was a wet silver disc that pulsed in the night. When she felt she had luxuriated long enough in the water tickling her gills, she would push herself back to the surface and run home, naked and

wet with her nightgown flapping behind. Outside her window she left only a small puddle, and slept dreamlessly until her mother woke her for school.

Only once did she visit the pond in the winter, when it froze and was plowed flat for skating. She pressed her cheek against the smooth, silent ice and wept for the small things trapped in its hard embrace. She never learned to skate.

When the girl was on the edge of womanhood, she made her first friends. After school she stood by chain link fences and cinderblock walls with the girls who dyed their hair black, tore their jeans and shirts, and smoked long cigarettes and burned small scars on their hands.

She listened with terror and longing to their stories about what they did to boys late at night in vacant lots and burnt-out buildings, and what the boys did to them. She entertained them with the trick of rolling down her high collar and taking a deep draw from a cigarette, letting the smoke billow out from her throat. Sometimes she did the trick in reverse, lodging the cigarette in a gill and blowing the smoke out her nose, but then her throat would sting for days afterward and she couldn't lie for long on the bottom of the pond.

One summer night she slipped away to join her friends at the pool where she never took lessons. They snuck over the fences and around the gates, staying in the shadows and giggling quietly until they came out into the open where the pool glimmered blue and white under halogen lamps. Then they ran shouting and laughing, hopping clumsily as they slipped out of their clothes, and splashed into the water.

The girl with gills felt like a child surrounded by the curved and tattooed flesh of her friends, and when no one was watching she squirmed to the floor of the pool, pushing air from her lungs to make herself sink faster. From her place at the bottom of the pool she could watch her friends' limbs stretched in the light that penetrated to her depths and hear their shouts like the lonely echoes of whales.

She felt herself among them but not of them, a fish of a different species making its way through an alien school.

The urgent, frightened face of a girl snapped her from her reverie, a face pressed close to her own but obscured by bubbles. Hands roughly grasped her shoulders and she was dragged up into the air and she had the sudden sensation of drowning, lungs burning with the hot, dry air being forced into her. She lay at the center of a circle of worried, frightened, angry faces, gasping for water while the girl who dragged her to the surface smacked her chest with an open palm. When she could breathe again and sat up, the water drying fast and cold on her skinny limbs, the circle opened and faded away until she sat alone on the deck in her own shadow. She never joined them again at the fences and walls where they traded in open secrets.

She went away to college, to a city on the ocean, and could often be found on the littered, rocky shore below the port with her cello between her knees, making plaintive cries to the pilot whales far out in the bay. Though she tried, she could never get used to being submerged in the ocean; the salt stung her eyes and lungs, and the rolling waves made her dizzy. She found instead a pond in a city park where at night she could steal past the ducks that slept on the shore with heads tucked under their wings and slip into the still water.

While in college she began to take lovers, nice boys from good families who handled her gently and cautiously as though sipping tea from delicate china cups. She never bared her throat to them; she wore silk scarves or wide leather chokers, sometimes with matching gloves that stretched to her elbows, and boots that came to her knees. These accoutrements often were misinterpreted by her young lovers as signals of sophistication and experience, and they would grow fearful and still in her presence. These sessions ended with the boy apologetically slinking away, eyes downcast, fearful of her half-revealed nakedness; she watched at her window until the boy disappeared into the night, and then she ran through secret

alleys to the pond in the park, threw off her scarf, and let the water lap against her gills.

Sometimes her path to the port took her through the city's old fish market. She would pause for a while and watch the groaning nets being winched onto the docks, the barrel-chested men hurling marlins and bass to each other while laughing and swearing. The sour smell of fish dragged into the air filled her nose, and she would lean drunkenly against old brick walls and remember the night she almost drowned.

One morning she noticed a young man who threw fish like the others, but not quite like them, either. He was somehow faster, rougher, but more precise; where the others waited for the still-squirming fish to smack into their chests before wrapping thick arms around it, he seemed to pluck it from the air mid-flight and balance the fish on its fins before sending it to the next man in the chain. He was silent, focused, and deft.

She went back to the market in the evening and saw the young man again, arranging fish on a long table. He held a cruelly curved knife in one hand, and she watched in horror and fascination as he slit open the white bellies, scooped out the pink guts, and carved a perfect circle beneath the fluttering gills. His knife was a blur of fast, graceful motions, and soon he stood ankle-deep in viscera and skulls. Her gills and stomach tingled with each cut.

When he was finished, she approached the table, ashamed at the way her hands shook but unable to turn back. His eyes—amber, ringed with red—stayed fixed on her own, and she had to break the gaze when she reached him. With a still-shaking finger she pointed at one of the gutted fish; he put his hand out, palm up, and for a moment she thought he meant her to take it and step up onto the table, lie among the carcasses with her arms thrown wide, and wait for his knife to slice through her blue silk scarf. But instead she set down her cello, fumbled in her purse, and handed him a crumpled bill.

She carried the fish, wrapped in yesterday's newspaper, tucked under her arm until she neared the college. Then she ducked into an

alley, carefully unwrapped it, and left it next to a drain spout for the cats to feast on its flesh. Back at her dormitory she stood under the shower until the water turned cold and the other girls were rapping on the door for her to come out.

So it went for days, then weeks: the deft evisceration, the shaking purchase, the offering to the cats, the long shower. Until one evening when he put out his hand she took it in her own, and he led her into the shadows of a cobbled canyon that emptied into the brackish port.

He was as quick and dexterous with her as he had been with the fish, as sure and rough, and when his fingers found their way under her scarf and pushed into her gills his eyes showed no surprise. She imagined that he had known all along, had seen through the flimsy fabric from the start and now was only confirming the obvious fact.

His fingers against her gills were more intimate than any afternoon with the timid boys, more intimate than those long-ago baths and her parents' gentle touches, more intimate even than the soft waves of her favorite ponds tickling her while she lay in the mud. Still slick with the blood of a hundred murdered fish, his fingers traced the shape of those hidden organs and coaxed whistling gasps from her throat. His eyes were open, unblinking, and she had to look away to keep from drowning in the dry air.

And as quickly as he began, he was finished. She felt a cold salt wind on her gills when his hands left her throat, and she fell onto her knees. Her scarf had dropped into a muddy puddle, and was streaked brown and gray. His footsteps echoed off the dingy gray bricks as she let her cheek rest in the puddle. On the puddle's surface she could see him walking away, but upside down, as if his feet were on the clouds and his head had dipped into the deep waters where she lay.

