

Breathe in the Water

By Penny Pepper



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(Painting: *Breath*, by Helen Gilbert)

They don't talk about the barnacles in the books. They crust on my aged tail like the corns my old Nana used to have on the Dry. My hair is no longer a fable. Not a wild plethora, a luscious siren whirl around me as I move. It's strings and tattered weed, and it tangles at the slightest turn.

When I first came, it was new and unexpected. It took me awhile to adjust but at least Finn was here. He scooped me, pulled me into his strong arms and cocooned me in his own ebullient locks that moved with the tides, issued seahorses and sea-snails from the twists, when he shook with laughter.

I recall my first Sea day. A death of one kind and a birth of another. The cliffs were not so high, but sufficient for the closure I required when I jumped. How cold it was, a terrible shock and the urge to fight was strong. I didn't break at once, as I'd expected, but bobbed and rolled and argued with the sea. But then, I let go. I breathed in the taste of salt, dragged in that cold surging element into my lungs. I felt water possess me and ravish my young bones.

Yet a spark came, a noise of lightest gurgled laughter and a woman of the water lifted me up and stroked my hair.

And Finn? He came from the Dry too. His beginning was as sorrowful as mine when his father took him in his wheelchair to the dock on a night so dark even the eyes of owls couldn't judge him. His father soothed him, sang a soft song and spun words about easing pain and suffering as he tipped his son into the deep. The father walked away from his son's cries, his desperate splashes and gave him away as easily as a casual stone dropped to the depths.

The waves loved Finn, and carried him to new parents. They caught hold his weak legs, grasped him and shook their sleek heads in shame at what the Dry folk do to those they deem different.

As was I, in my own way. Emotions out on my skin, raw from my eyes, bleeding fear and joy from my heart in equal measure. I did not belong with the dull every day on the Dry, and it was in the Sea I found my home. To love and live for many moons and many seasons, travelling with many – and consumed with love of Finn.

It is said by the elders, and the whales, that when *we* die we melt into the sea. We become it, it becomes us and as long as there are seas and stars and lost folk who want to believe in the extraordinary, we will prevail.

I breathe in the water and know Finn, gone since Spring high-tides, is within me again. Our children swam far to find lovers of their own long ago, and I know it is my time to rest in the waves, to smile as I dissolve, slow and soft, watched by red crabs and rainbow coral, into the essence of my love, my darling ocean love. Our two different troubled streams, now one, loved, absorbed by the accepting sea.

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Penny Pepper's website is <http://www.pennypepper.co.uk/> and her latest blog is <http://pennypepper.wordpress.com/2013/04/17/magaret-and-me-reflections-from-my-thatcher-years/>. She writes:

The process for writing *Breathe in the Water* started on a simple wave of inspiration, imagining an old mermaid, rather than the fabled beauties in their prime we often hear about. I am very drawn to take an idea, however iconic, and subvert it, to take the idea down unexpected paths. I live part time in Hastings and adore the sea. I never lose my childlike awe and pleasure from gazing at it. While the imagery came to me spontaneously, it probably reflects the visual aspect of my imagination and also the influence the writers of magical realism have had upon me, especially Angela Carter. Of course, I also wanted to thread into this piece the idea of difference and otherness, which is a subject very close to my heart.