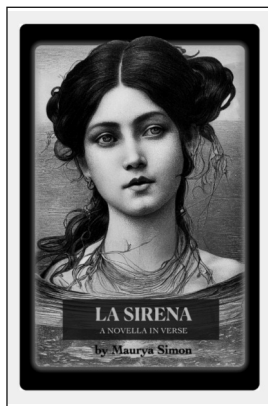

BOOK REVIEWS



La Sirena: A Novella in Verse, Maurya Simon, Cloudbank Books, 96 pages, \$25 hardcover.

In *A Room of One's Own*, her classic book of feminist essays, Virginia Woolf writes, "We think back through our mothers if we are women." As I spent time with Maurya Simon's rich, captivating new volume, *La Sirena: A Novella in Verse*, the thought kept occurring to me: "We think back through water if we are girls." The sea is everywhere in *La Sirena*; it is the site of freedom, the site of beauty, the site of desire. It is our realm of magic and our home, as the two short passages from other poets that open and create the ambiance of the book reveal. The first epigraph is from Pablo Neruda, a paean to the sea, which accompanies a monoprint titled *Mermaid II* by Simon herself. "O bright magnolia bursting in the foam," Neruda writes,

magnetic transient whose death blooms
and vanishes—being, nothingness—forever:
broken salt, dazzling lurch of the sea.

The second is a beautiful, tiny poem by Simon's mentor Bert Meyers called "Lullaby":

Go to sleep my daughter,
go to sleep my son.
Once this world was water
without anyone.

Beginning with Simon's opening poem, "A Blue Lagoon," *La Sirena* celebrates the ancient association of the female with earth and water, horizontality and fluidity, and the male with verticality, stiffness. It tells the mythical coming-of-age story of the book's protagonist Melusina—a composite of the European folklore figure

Mélusine, a female figure shaped like a mermaid who is associated with fresh water; La Pincoya, the beautiful Chiloéan water spirit whose fertility dances help preserve the ocean's abundance; and Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Mermaid," who gives up her life as a mermaid when she falls in love with a human prince—and it interweaves these with dreamlike aspects of Simon's own life as the child of artists who, with her sister, grew up near the Pacific Ocean.

Tenderly, Simon charts the stages of transformation from girl to woman. At first, Melusina "loves *el océano* more than anything," for like a mother it "holds her tucked in its wide lap, warming her body slowly . . . bringing her to tremors of bittersweet transcendence, as if she's flying backwards into herself" ("Mare Nostrum"). But with the advent of adolescence, this oceanic feeling gives way to object-specific desire—specifically, for the "swarthy sailor" whom she first dreams about and later meets and saves when he falls from his ship, and for whom she sacrifices her mermaid form and her voice in order to be able to live with him as a human. The story, of course, takes a tragic turn when Melusina discovers her prince loves not her but their friend, Karate Joe. "For him I forsake my voice," she cries, "for him my legs and feet sliced by knives!" ("Night Terrors,"). Bitterly she reproaches herself in the poem, "First Sink, Then Swim":

I'm a submerged cathedral
my chest a broken conch

I surrendered life-without-end
to become a two-legged grin

His fire blistering me
my waters putting him out—

Yet now the sea tenderly
chalices my body . . .

Remembering the vial her bruja gave her, she drinks the fiery potion, "her throat / burning with lye / but sound / slipping out" ("Vial") and is turned once again into a mermaid. She returns from the kingdom of love, loss, and death to her natal family, to the sea,

and to herself. "I give myself back to myself," she declares as the book draws to an end ("For My Return,"). Shortly before that, "Butterfly, Backstroke, Breaststroke, Free" celebrates Melusina's return:

As long as she can swim, she'll never outgrow
her salvation, for water's the purest baptismal:

it washes the suffering hours out of her senses—
its currents permeate her with zig-zagging bolts

of radiance. As she swims, her heartbeat sings
its tidal song, her skin glows like the inner rose

of a conch's labyrinth, her hope's a heliotrope
meadow bluer than the moon-laced shadows

streaming behind the two sisters. Submerged,
Melusina's born and reborn over and over,

till she's merely a reflection of inebriated sky.

And the book ends, as it began, with the first three lines from Bert Meyers' "Lullaby," which are followed by a new final line by Simon:

Go to sleep my daughter,
go to sleep my son.
Once the world was water
speaking in tongues.

This, more or less, is the story that *La Sirena* tells. But a short review cannot capture its rich polyphony of characters and voices, or the suppleness of Simon's writing. It is a book to treasure and to think about. There is triumph in the tale—Melusina regains her family, her voice, the ocean—yet there is loss, for though she will live forever, she will never know those other gifts: a man who can hear her voice, the comfort of mortal love.

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