

A painting of a night ocean scene. The sky is a deep blue with scattered white stars. A large, bright white moon hangs in the center of the sky. Below the horizon, dark waves with white foam are visible. In the foreground, a green, crown-like object with five points and a stem rises from a sandy beach. The overall style is painterly and atmospheric.

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## **Breath**

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n a time before history, in a land now long lost to any map, there lived an old couple: Nat and Tim. This couple lived in a small house, on the outskirts of a small village. They were a strange and mysterious pair. It was this pair that the three holy men now traveled to see.

When at last they arrived and knocked on the door, planting stern looks upon their already harsh faces, it was Nat who answered. She smiled, as though these were her own children come for a visit after a long time away. It's how she seemed to

look at everyone. It's why the villagers referred to her as Mother Nat, and her husband Father Tim. Ignoring the stern looks of her three visitors, Nat led them inside and offered them some tea. They declined, of course. These men were here on God's business, and they would not allow themselves to partake of any pleasure Nat could offer them.

When Tim entered the room, however, they almost reconsidered. He had that effect on people. He often caused them to question everything they'd ever done simply by entering the room. Still, in the end, they managed to refrain from sipping Nat's sweet smelling tea. She smiled in spite of this, but Tim glared with a frown, not uttering a sound.

The holy men were nervous and a bit afraid. They would have ignored the old couple indefinitely, had the townspeople not brought strange things, perhaps unholy things, to their collective attention. Nat terrified these men, simply because she had never bowed to their rules, and nothing could make her.

Tim they liked to ignore, for he was known for his severity, his wrath. Though he was a great healer, said to have the ability to heal all wounds, he never missed a death in the town. He was always there to play the undertaker. He was a great and mysterious judge, who often dealt out sentences of death. He was a man who had no patience for the world, except where his wife was concerned. For Nat he had all the patience in the universe. He let

her plant flowers and trees all around their house. Together they watched things grow.

“So,” Nat said at last. “What brings you gentlemen by?” She smiled with both innocence and an amused, knowing gleam.

The chief of the holy men spoke up. “We are here to investigate. It seems the people have been speaking of a strange child that lives here. They say he is your own son.”

Mother Nat chuckled merrily. “Yes. Of course! I do have a son who lives here. He’s mine and Father Tim’s son. What do you want to know?”

“Well,” the holy man continued nervously, “we have reason to believe he may be...abominable.”

“No no!” Nat laughed at this. “None of my children have ever been.” Tim regarded the men malevolently, looking forward to the day he proved them all buffoons. He had never respected clergymen of any sort.

“Well...they say he...” The holy man was unsure whether to persist. He looked at his colleagues, and they nodded, still looking stern. “They say he lives outside...in the...”

“In the pond,” Nat finished for him. “Yes. That is true.” She smiled and shook her head, bemused at their naivety.

The holy men all gasped and exchanged scandalized whispers. At last, their leader spoke again, “And *why* do you keep your son in the pond, Nat? It is this which we have come here to know.”

“Well, I keep him there because the well is too dark, of course.”

“But...why not keep him in the house? Why not let him have a room? Why not send him into the town to learn and play with others of his age?”

Nat laughed a great belly laugh at this. “How could I do such a thing? He needs to be in the water at all times.”

The holy men’s eyes all narrowed. “And why is that, my dear old lady? Why must he be kept in the water?”

“Why must *you* be kept on land? Surely you aren’t such great fools.” She smiled, but her husband uttered a harsh, quick laugh. She looked at him, and they seemed to communicate with their eyes. She turned back to their guests. “He needs to be in the water, because it’s the only place he can breathe.”

At this the holy men again gasped and muttered amongst themselves.

“We must see him, and we must hear how this came to be,” said their leader. Old Mother Nat agreed, and she took them out back to the pond.

Once the group had walked outside, Nat went to the edge of the pond and called gently into the water, “Gill!”

An almost human head popped out of the water with a smile. “Mom!”

The holy men all gasped and began whispering to each other in outrage.

Tim simply witnessed the scene, showing no sign of emotion.

“Who are all of these people, Mom?” the boy in the pond asked.

“These are some men from the town, Gill. They wanted to see you.”

The leader of the holy men finally addressed Nat. “Explain this to us. What *is* that?” He pointed to Gill. “Why do you keep it in the pond?”

Nat simply smiled. “Well, this is my son Gill. I keep *him* in the pond, because he can only breathe while his sides are in the water. He’s kind of like a fish, you see. Sort of not quite a whale.”

“More like not quite a man,” said the leader of the holy men.

“I am man enough!” argued Gill, not realizing the seriousness of the men’s visit. “Hello, how do you do?” He held up a webbed hand and waved graciously at the guests.

Again the holy men were outraged. Scandalized.

“Is it true you can only breathe in the water?” the one who kept asking all the questions put to the boy.

“Oh, yes. I can’t even imagine what it must be like for you, walking around out there as long as you wish. Of course,” he considered, “I suppose you couldn’t know what it’s like for me either, never having to leave the pond, staying submerged as long

as I like.” He giggled at the thought of them choking in his home, as he’d once choked in the house of Tim and Nat.

“How did this happen?” The holy man demanded.

Nat shrugged, and so did Tim. She answered warmly, “Tim and I are always coming up with new kinds of children. It’s just the way things are.”

The holy men gathered in a murmuring circle for a very long time, by Gill’s reckoning. Nat and Tim seemed not to have noticed this at all, by the time the leader voiced their conclusion. “We have decided,” he said, “that this *Gill*, as you call it, is an abomination. It is so close to being human, yet so horribly *inhuman*. It can’t be allowed to exist. It is unholy. We have sentenced it to death.” With this pronouncement, all the other holy men nodded and grumbled their firm commitment to what their leader had pronounced.

Nat and Tim both began to laugh. Their laughter grew with every quake of their bodies, until tears of hilarity were streaming down their cheeks.

Gill and the holy men all were completely baffled by this.

“Mom! Dad! These men mean to kill me!” Gill said. “Do you think it so funny?” He began to weep, and he swam into the middle of the pond, where no one could easily reach him.

Nat wiped a tear from her eye, as she struggled to suppress her giggles. “Oh, darling, you’ll never understand. You just don’t

see things the way that we do.” She looked to him and smiled somewhat somberly. “It’s not so bad, Gill.”

The holy men, startled, looked to their leader. He spoke quite uncertainly to Nat and Tim, as they all backed away, “We will return in the morning, at the break of dawn, to carry out the law.” He bowed, as did the others, and they took their leave of the strange family.

Nat and Tim both waved to Gill, as he treaded water, horrified, in the center of the pond. They laughed a bit more and made their way back into the house.

Gill wept alone in the water. “Mom? Dad? You are both against me! I only have a day to live, and I haven’t the gifts of body to escape.” Gill sank to the bottom of the pond, and he spoke to the things that grew there in the little language he had invented for himself. He told them sadly that he would surely die.

That evening, as the sun was setting, Nat came out to the pond and called in a gentle, urgent voice, “Gill. I have something to say to you.”

Unsure, the boy made his way to the surface, lifting above only enough to see.

Nat laughed lovingly at this. “All the way up, Gill. I think we have to come to terms.”

Gill lifted the rest of his head above the water. “You mean to let them kill me, Mother?”

Nat struggled not to let laughter overtake her again, as she said through giggles, “Yes, my son. If they can.”

“Why is this so funny to you and Dad?” Gill was weeping again, and he was starting to back away.

“Come here, Gill, and show me your hand.”

Unsure on either why or why not to obey, Gill swam forward and held his webbed fingers out to Nat.

The old woman took hold of it and said, “Our hands are not the same. We each have what we need. You have webbing to pull you through the water. You also have these little black claws. What are they for?”

“I dig with them, sometimes,” he said. He pulled his hand away and studied it.

“Do you now? Are you good at digging?”

“Yes!” Gill answered with pride. “Very good.”

“So you could dig then, perhaps, all the way over to that stone wall, if you chose. Am I right?”

Gill looked to the great stone wall in the distance. “Yes. I suppose. If I wanted to. I could dig a shallow channel and drag myself right to it. Even touch it. But why would I...?” Then it dawned on him. “Mom, what’s on the other side of the stone wall?”

“The sea,” Nat answered, a twinkle in her ancient eyes. “First there is sand, then there’s the sea.”

“What is the sea?”

“It is a never-ending body of water. Like the pond without a barrier in sight in any direction you look. It is a dangerous thing, a place where you might meet your death.”

“But so much water...” Gill contemplated. “Mom, I could *live* there. The men from town couldn’t catch me in the sea.”

“Is that so?” She asked. “Then what are you doing still talking to me? Get digging, boy!” Gill swam off excitedly to the edge of the pond closest to the mighty wall. Nat watched him swim and spoke quietly into the gentle wind, “I give you determination and hope. Let’s see where it carries you.” She breathed in a great breath of the night air, and she went back inside to await the morning.

Gill dug for hours, and the water filled his shallow channel, just as he’d hoped it would. He dreamed about the sea, about escape. He dreamed hard, trying not to think about the wall itself—a challenge he was not equipped to conquer. Then at last he reached it. Gill held out both of his webbed hands, and he touched it. “The stone wall,” he said. “And on the other side lies the sea. Freedom.”

“Really?” came his father’s voice.

“Dad!” Again, Gill began to cry. “Mom has helped me, but you would let these men kill me!” Gill felt helpless, unable to swim quickly away in the water-filled ditch.

Tim struggled, just as his wife had, not to let the laughter overtake him. He chuckled a little, as he spoke. “Yes, son. If they can.”

“Please!” Gill spoke, angry now more than hurt. “Tell me why you and Mom find this so funny! These men mean to kill me!”

“So they do.”

“Whose side are you on?” Gill asked in a fury.

Tim shrugged. “No one’s. I will help you, if you find a way to use me to your advantage. However, if you are still here, staring at this wall, by dawn, I will hand you over to the holy men without a second thought.”

Tears again threatened the boy. “But, Dad!”

Tim ignored the sorrow of his son. “What is the problem, son? Why aren’t you on the other side of this wall yet? Why aren’t you in the sea, where you already know you can live?”

Gill grabbed hold of the wall, and he struggled against it, trying to claw his way through it, then contemplated pulling himself over it. “I can’t, Dad. It’s too hard. I haven’t the power in my limbs!”

Tim nodded. “If this is true, then I will see you die.”

“But, Dad!”

“You *will* die,” Tim said without care.

“But I want to live!”

“Things come to pass,” Tim said. “Either you will do as you like, climbing over that wall, or you will die in the morning when the holy men come for you. I will watch you, whatever path you choose. I will not mourn you, nor will I celebrate you. I will simply watch.”

“But...”

Tim regarded the work Gill had been doing. “I watched you dig this channel, son. It is very shallow. How did you ever manage to get this far?”

“I dragged myself, with my arms.”

“Was it easy all the way?”

“No. I got stuck a number of times. Stuck in weeds. Stuck in mud. Even stuck beneath a rock.”

“Then how did you manage?”

“I pulled myself! Every time, it was harder than the time before, but I made it.”

“What was it like the first time, with the weeds?”

“Oh!” Gill said. “It was terrifying! I thought I’d never break free of them. I had never been stuck like that. I was very surprised that I managed to pull out of it.”

“So then the mud should have been no problem, if you’d already been through the weeds.”

“No!” Gill protested. “The mud was even worse! It tried to suck me down! It made the weeds seem simple in hindsight.”

“And the rock?” Tim asked.

“It was even *worse* than the mud! It was so heavy! It was crushing me! After that, I could never be afraid of the mud again. The rock was by far the worst.”

“So you grew stronger on your journey?”

“Yes...” Gill understood what he’d just explained to his father. “I grew stronger with every obstacle I passed through.”

“And what is the stone wall before you? Is it like the weed?”

“No.”

“The mud?”

“Worse!”

“The rock then?”

“Dad, this stone wall is the most difficult part! But, I guess it is simply another obstacle.” Gill shook his head then, finally seeing the wall for what it was. “No. It *is* like the weed, and the mud, and the rock; and these adversities I’ve met before have prepared me to overcome it.”

Gill took a great breath, then leapt out of the water and took hold of Tim’s sleeve. He pulled himself up, climbing his father as if the man were a mountain. He got over Tim’s shoulder and took hold of the top of the wall. Tim stepped away, leaving his son hanging on to the stones. He spoke quietly, into the predawn darkness, “I have given you a sense of urgency. I have given you

strength. Let us see where you let them take you.” Having done all that he would, Tim went back into the house to watch what came to pass.

Gill pulled with all of his strength, until he could see over the top of the wall. He saw the sea, beautiful and vast, calling to him. His body burned for breath, and he struggled not to gasp at the awesome sight of the water touching the horizon. He pulled himself up, and he got his webbed hands on the other side of the monstrous stone wall. He pulled himself farther and farther. His lungs felt like they were going to burst. He saw all the sand between the stone wall and the sea. He knew that if he threw himself over the side, the pond would be forever in the past. He would only be able to move ahead. He could die on the sand. He was suffocating already.

He took the plunge, hurling himself over and rolling in the sand as far as he could. When his desperate body finally stopped moving on its own, he reached out into the sand and pulled himself. This was much worse than pulling himself through a watery trench. His body was heavier out of the water. It was too heavy, but why should that stop him? He couldn't turn back. He could only succeed or die. He kept crawling, tasting the sand in his mouth, struggling against the fire in his lungs. Everything began to grow black in his peripheral vision. The sea was shrink-

ing before his very eyes, being swallowed by the darkness. It was too late. He was going to die.

No! Gill reached out with the last of his strength and not only pulled but *threw* himself towards the sea. He managed this only three times, and just as he threw himself forward for the third time, everything went black. It was done. He could go no further.

He landed, and that's when he felt it. Precious water crashed onto his side. Gill took a great breath, as he let the waves roll over him, carrying him into the sea, embracing him. His vision began to return, and he reclaimed his life, thrilled by every breath he took. He carried himself farther out with his webbed hands and feet, until he could see no land. He was where no man could find him.

Gill heard a voice then, apparently trying to get his attention. It was strange, because it wasn't the sort of voice he was used to hearing from anyone else. It was someone calling to him, using the very language he had invented for himself.

As the sun broke over the horizon, the holy men returned. "He's not here," Nat said. "He escaped."

"What? How?" the leader of the holy men asked.

“He went over the wall in the night.” Nat smiled. “Now he’ll live with the others, and he’ll be happy. You can’t rule over a creature whose very existence defies your laws.”

“*Others?*” the holy man asked. “What do you mean...?”

“Of course!” Nat said. “You didn’t think he was the only one, did you? The sea’s full of them.”

“But he’s an abomi—”

“No, no, no, son. You’ve got it all wrong. And my husband will prove it to you, if you hang around long enough.”

The holy man spoke angrily, “We will guard our shores against these creatures then. We will never have dealings with them. This guard will be kept sacred forever.”

At that, Tim and Nat fell over on their sides with laughter. They laughed and laughed, even after the holy men had left in bewilderment. They laughed until it hurt. They found it ridiculous enough when men made rules regarding who was fit to exist and what sort of breathing was to be tolerated, but nothing ever struck them so as the men who planned forever.

## About the Author

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of ten books, including the novel *Cry, Wolf: Shadow of the Werewolf*, the short fiction anthology *The Great Debate*, the Gothic horror series *The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas*, and two fantasy series: *Metrognomes* and *The Legends of Nod*. He lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is currently hard at work on his next book.

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