

# Listening, Listening

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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Anyone who sang out sweet and high over the waters of the lake might bring up the monster if the light and air were right, but none of the men living in those rough cabins were willing to sing out in a voice like a woman's, and they weren't about to let their women do it, either. No, they would say, whatever is meant to be seen will appear of its own accord and will rise when it is meant to rise. What lies in our keeping is the fruit of our traplines: the fox, the hare, the mink. If our roofs were beneath the lake, our traps would be there, too. We will not disturb the sleep of anything we don't mean to kill.

So the women met by night, slipping from the sides of sleeping husbands when moon and mists were as they had to be. They gathered on the rock that rose, shiplike, from the farthest shore, and they held their breaths to hear the sound of coils unwinding underneath the waves. Then some one of them would softly sing a note as clear as water, and another voice would join hers, and another after that. The men, still asleep in their beds, would dream of masts and sirens.

Sometimes a shadow would glide beneath the surface. Sometimes not. Sometimes the waves would clash with ripples that rose up from below. Sometimes not. And then on some rare nights, the monster, dripping water from its nostrils, would raise its head into the glowing mist to listen to the one-note song.

And then the giant head would slip back beneath the waves. The steady song would slip back into silence. The women, silently, would slip between black trees, back to their cabins, back beside their husbands.

Among themselves again in daylight, the women would exchange no glance, speak no secret word about what passed in the night, even after the men, with traps and chains rattling from their shoulders, had made their way into the shadows of the trees.

Once a man who dreamed of sirens reached for his wife and, not finding her, woke up. He rose, naked, and followed the sound, the one high note in many voices, until he came to the water's edge. Out across the lake, he saw the women singing, saw the water ripple underneath the moon.

The moonlight shone whitely on his body, and he let the cold air in through his nose and out through his mouth. And then, without meaning to, he lifted up his voice, singing with the voice of a woman from the body of a man.

The water did not froth in the center of the lake. The great head did not rise into the mist. At last, one by one, the women fell silent, until the man was the last one singing. He stayed there on the rocky shore, sending his voice out over the water long after the women, even his wife, had made their way back to their beds. When he stopped singing, he crouched beside the water, unable to go home. When the eastern sky began to pink, his nakedness drove him back.

His wife was waiting up. She had a fire in the stove, and she looked at him strangely when he came in.

He stood confounded for a moment, and then he lowered his brow. "What was that nonsense you were up to last night?" he demanded. Then he put on his clothes. "I can't look at you, woman," he said. "I'm ashamed of the things you do. I am so ashamed."

He never spoke of it to her again, but some nights he would wake to the sound of singing. He would not stretch out to feel the bed empty beside him, but would lie very still and angry, imagining what it looked like, the massive head held high above the water, listening, listening.

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