

*This extract is the opening chapter of 'On Silver Tides', a modern fantasy novel. Look out for clues introducing the time, place and magical world...*

## 1

Kelda's little sister seemed like a perfectly normal baby until her seventh day, when it was time to throw her in the river. Then they found out she couldn't breathe underwater.

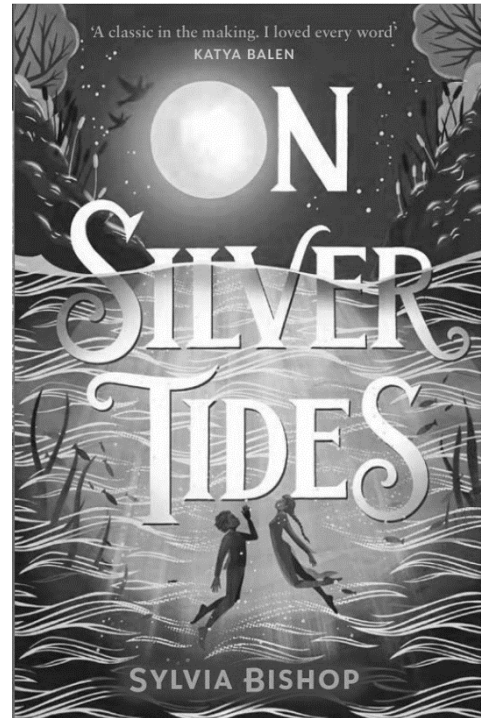
It took a moment for everyone to realise. When Kelda's mam emerged with the baby in her arms the family were all waiting at the side of the boat, and they threw petals and cheered, and Uncle Abe struck up something complicated and twirly on his fiddle. But then she handed the baby up to Kelda's father, and the little body was very still and tinged a strange grey-blue, and everyone stopped cheering.

The fiddle carried on, unfurling reels like streamers, because when Uncle Abe was playing he stopped really paying attention to anything else. Somewhere from an islet to their left, a reed warbler answered him.

Normally, Kelda's family were quick to respond to danger. They knew how to fix a boat's engine, and bail out and mend a leak; they could handle nymphs and grindyflow without breaking a sweat; they knew the cures for every kind of river worm and parasite. But none of them knew anything about drowning. Kelda's mam just shook and wailed. Kelda's father leant low over the little body, peering through his spectacles, and asking Mam questions in a low, urgent voice. Kelda's younger brother Firth nudged Uncle Abe. But none of this made the baby any less limp.

Kelda had seen a drowning man once. She had been left on the boat to practise knots while the others went silverside, as a punishment for cheek, so she was the only one who saw the man get scooped out of the canal. He wasn't limp like the baby; his limbs twitched horribly. One of the women had knelt down in a puddle of skirts, torn off his ridiculous cravat and collar, put her mouth over his, and breathed into him until he revived. She had reminded Kelda of her family – the way she knew just what to do, and set about doing it without any nonsense.

The others missed all this, only arriving in time to see them pull away in a motorcar, which caused great excitement. But Kelda had dreamed for weeks about the poor landman who spent too long silverside.



Mam let out an especially keening, broken wail, and Kelda suddenly understood that no one else was going to do anything. So she ducked her head under her father's and put her mouth over her sister's, as the woman had done to the drowning man. The baby was so tiny, she covered her whole mouth and nose. She breathed out.

She only gave a very slight breath. She had been marvelling at the sheer littleness of her sister all week, and instinct told her that those small lungs could not hold too much air at once. One tiny breath - two - three.

The baby was still.

She tried again – one, two, three.

The baby coughed, and opened her eyes.

That wasn't the end of the danger. They stayed up with her in the galley all night, keeping her close to the warmth of the stove, burning candle after candle as they watched her cough and splutter and squirm and, just as terrifyingly, sleep. But it *was* the moment that saved her life. And it was the moment in which Kelda, until then her own willful, wild person, was understood by everyone to have become her sister's guardian.

They didn't do the naming that night, of course. No one was really in the mood for it the next night either, but Mam had already made the bitter chowder, and it would go bad if they put it off any longer. The trouble was, the family were old-fashioned, and usually went in for water names – but it seemed cruel to give the little girl a name meaning 'strength of the river' or 'sea goddess' or something. Like they were mocking her.

Mam was the most pious of them, and she wanted to give her a water name regardless. They were still arguing about it while she lit the lanterns strung up along the deck.

"She's *got* to have a water name," Mam said. "She's part of the family."

"It's not right," said Dad. He hadn't said much else since the baby had spluttered back to life - at least, not in front of the children. He and Mam had held a muttered argument which they thought Kelda and Firth hadn't heard, but the walls of the boat were thin. Besides, Kelda was old enough to know what Dad suspected. In the end, it was Mam's piety that convinced Kelda, and it was probably what mollified Dad too. Keeping anyone of landman blood on board was absolutely forbidden, and the River would sicken and spoil. If the baby wasn't silverman through and through, Mam would never have her on the boat.

"Well, what do you suggest, Murphy?" snapped Mam. Her voice had the thick edge it got when she was trying not to cry. "Do you want to brand the poor thing as a freak?"

"There must be something watery that isn't untrue," said Uncle Abe, ever the peacemaker. He spread his large hands out, palms up, his favourite gesture. "She'll

still live on water, after all. Something about ‘near the water’, or...” - he floundered here - “‘On – on a boat’.”

The unnamed baby whimpered in Kelda’s arms. Kelda was inclined to agree. Her sister didn’t deserve a half-hearted name, which just said what she *nearly* was. She wasn’t a half-thing. Her name should feel complete.

There was no help to be had from Firth, who was leaning over the edge of the boat to watch the lantern-light dance on the black water. Mam and Dad, meanwhile, were strung up tight as fiddle-strings, and neither could bend from their position without snapping. So Uncle Abe turned his spread-out hands and spread-out smile to Kelda. “Well,” he asked, “What does the hero of the hour think?”

For a moment there was silence on deck, as Kelda considered this. The only sound from the river was the reed warbler, disturbed on its islet. Kelda loved river islands. They were neither bank nor water: they were a world unto themselves, with reeds and willow trees and nesting birds and secrets of their own.

She reached for the chowder, and took the first spoonful, even though that was supposed to be Mam’s job. Nobody protested. She had earned the right.

It was bitter and salty, and she had to work to keep the disgust from her face as she swallowed. Then, with her sister in the crook of her right arm, she emptied a second spoonful into the river, and announced:

“Isla.”

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**An extract from ‘Zoology’  
in: *The Waterways: Essays on a hidden world***

Amphibians can breathe both on land and in water. While a few have gills, most absorb the water directly into their bloodstream through their skin, taking the oxygen they need. It is difficult for a landman to understand what this feels like. Imagine if your skin could feel how peppermint smells: that’s quite close.

It is commonly thought that there are three orders of the class *amphibia*. The same zoological wisdom tells us there is one living species of the genus *homo* - *homo sapien*, the common or garden human. But there should be another species of *homo*, or another order of *amphibia* – or both.

You could call them *homo aqua*, if you want to think of them as people. Or *anura sapien*, if you prefer to think of them as an unusually wise sort of frog. Or you could just use their own word for themselves: silvermen.