# She Said

*Wake, Siren: Ovid Resung*

By Nina MacLaughlin

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***Reviewed by Noelle McManus***

"You look especially beautiful when you're scared," says the god of the sun to the mortal girl Leucothoe, before raping her. Word spreads of the assault, and, though she weeps at her father's feet, pleading with him to believe it wasn't her fault, he doesn't try to help her. No—he takes a shovel, brings her outside, and buries her alive.

Such horror stories are littered throughout mythology, though often overlooked to make way for tales of the gods and heroes. In her second book, Nina MacLaughlin has resolved to focus only on stories of women, following them through both the overwhelming joy and unspeakable terror that comes with interactions with the gods. Every plot point in these stories was designed by Ovid, and his masculinity plunges nastily through them. MacLaughlin's idea for the female characters—often victims—of the myths to speak for themselves is certainly interesting, but one question hangs heavy over it: Can a man's fantasy of female pain ever be made empowering?

As the book begins, it seems unlikely. It's structured as a compilation of thirty-five short pieces. Some myths are retold in the form of stories, with rising and falling action, but others are songs, rambling dialogues, speeches, or the incomprehensible gibbering before death. I organized the stories into a few categories, the most extensive of which being "The Woman as a Thing to Fear," "The Woman as a Thing in Pain," and "The Woman as a Thing without Form."

In my list of the Woman as a Thing to Fear sit Arachne, Agave, Echo, Scylla, Procne and Philomela, Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, Atalanta, Hecuba, and the Sirens—beasts if not killers, killers if not beasts, and, if neither, too selfish and strong for the society they live in. MacLaughlin refuses to paint each character with the same brush. While their stories often follow similar structures, the way we're meant to feel about them changes with each. My heart swelled as I read Hera, narrating Echo's story, say that her "eyes hold every moonrise and the spark and current of every ounce of menstrual blood released from all the women who bleed." It sank when I read Salmacis ready herself to rape the young boy Hermaphroditus, during which he notes, "She did not look like my mother. There was something hungry in her eyes." The women here toe the line between good and evil and, in doing so, call into question the ancient world's very definition of a woman. Not, as Aristotle once said, "a deformed male," but a person with faculties, one equally capable of both kindness and atrocities. As Arachne concludes her story, "Do you know? Who should fear the future? You." *You*, the men of Rome. *You*, the men of today. MacLaughlin glares down at them often.

Kelly Davidson

***Nina MacLaughlin***

The Woman as a Thing in Pain is a category that includes Callisto, Syrinx, Myrrha, Semele, Medusa, Caenis, Arethusa, the Heliades, Dryope, Alcyone, Egeria, Leucothoe, and Eurydice. They're characters who are, above all, wounded. Moving in line with Ovid's work, MacLaughlin has little room for variety in terms of finale. These women experience something horrific, are either punished or ruined, and spend the rest of eternity in turmoil. MacLaughlin does, though, give each a voice, leaving us with words that either drip with a slow, defeated ache or a tight, screaming sting—but many of these stories lack distinction. They do a good job of representing the horrid monotony female pain often becomes. "Each dusk: let this be the last night," pleads Leucothoe, forced to exist forever as an incense plant. "Let this become darkness without end." That monotony, though—that endless cycle of hurt and fear and hurt again—is perhaps a poor fit for fiction.

My last category, the Woman as a Thing without Form—populated by Daphne, Tiresias, Io, Sibyl, Alcmena, Baucis, Ivory Girl, Canens, Thetis, Nyctimene, Iphis, and Pomona—is the one that intrigued me the most and took me the longest to define. Little ties these stories together; they range from the life of a girl turned into a cow, to the lovely blessing bestowed upon a kindly old couple, to the graphic rape of a sea goddess. And yet, altogether, they hold a sort of enthrallment (and disgust) with the body. The body is a prison, MacLaughlin tells us, and yet it is also our home, one that—when torn away from us—could bring the greatest longing we've ever known. Is that not the very idea behind Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in itself? In tearing the tales away from their author, MacLaughlin transforms his narrative. She elevates her body horror to a point where I often found myself thinking, *I know what that feels like*. There's something innately female about these changes. To love the body, to fear it, to realize that some people seek to make it so it's not even yours at all. Inside this great, beautiful terror, MacLaughlin leaves us bits and pieces of hope. "I'm the movement," says once-girl, now-bird Nyctimene. "Then the owl. To see that wide squall of wing, that blur, is to see a state of mystery, to witness the moment before a form becomes what it is." There, in that state of mystery, MacLaughlin leaves us.

Having loved mythology since I was a small child, I met *Wake, Siren* with skepticism. As soon as I finished, I was recommending it to every friend I knew with any interest in classics. MacLaughlin's prose is funny, painful, and at times, utterly gorgeous. The book isn't without its awkward moments. Some stories feature anachronisms so silly they jarred me (use of the word "preggers" being one example), and others are padded with unnecessary exposition. But for every misstep there is a heartrending story that allows a lost woman to speak. A laugh, a shout, a whisper—Ovid's women, heard.

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