

## Mrs Quasimodo

I'd loved them fervently since childhood.  
Their generous bronze throats  
gargling, or chanting slowly, calming me-  
the village runt, name-called, stunted, lame, hare-lipped:  
but bearing up, despite it all, sweet-tempered, good at  
needlework;  
an ugly cliché in a field  
pressing dock leaves to her fat, stung calves  
and listening to the five cool bells of evensong.  
I believed that they could even make it rain.

The city suited me; my lumpy shadow  
lurching on its jagged alley walls;  
my small eyes black  
as rained-on cobblestones.  
I frightened cats.  
I lived alone up seven flights,  
boiled potatoes on a ring  
and fried a single silver fish;  
then stared across the grey lead roofs  
as dusks blue rubber rubbed them out,  
and then the bells began.

I climbed the belltower steps,  
out of breath and sweating anxiously, puce-faced  
and found the campanologists beneath their ropes.  
They made a space for me,  
telling their names,  
and when it came to him  
I felt a thump of confidence,  
A recognition like a struck match in my head.  
It was Christmas time.  
When the others left,  
He fucked me underneath the gaping, stricken bells  
Until I wept.

We wed.

He swung an epithalamium for me,  
embossed it on the fragrant air.  
Long, sexy chimes,  
exuberant peals,  
slow scales trailing up and down the smaller bells,  
an angelus.

We had no honeymoon  
but spent the week in bed.

And did I kiss  
each part of him –  
that horseshoe mouth,  
that tetrahedron nose,  
that squint left eye,

that right eye with its pirate wart,  
the salty leather of that pig's hide throat,  
And give his cock  
A private name-  
Or not?  
So more fool me.

We lived in the cathedral grounds.

The bellringer.

The hunchbacks wife.

*(The Quasimodo's. Have you met them? Gross.)*

And got a life.

Our neighbours- sullen gargoyles, fallen angels, cowed  
saints

who raised their marble hands in greeting

as I passed along the gravel paths,

My husband's supper on a tray beneath a cloth.

But once,

One evening in the lady chapel on my own,

Throughout his ringing of the seventh hour,

I kissed the cold lips of a Queen next to her king.

Something had changed,

Or never been.

Soon enough

he started to find fault.

Why did I this?

How could I that?

Look at myself.

And in that summers dregs,

I'd see him

Watch the pin-up gypsy

posing with the tourists in the square;

then turn his discontented, mulish eye on me

with no more love than a stone.

I should have known.

Because its better, isn't it, to be well formed.

Better to be slim, be slight,

your slender neck quoted between two thumbs;

and beautiful, with creamy skin,

and tumbling auburn hair,

those devastating eyes;

and have each lovely foot

held in a bigger hand

and kissed;

then be watched till morning as you sleep,

so perfect, vulnerable and young

you hurt his blood.

And given sanctuary.

But not betrayed.

Not driven to an ecstasy of loathing of yourself;

banging your ugly head against a wall,

gaping in the mirror at your heavy dugs,

your thighs of lard,

your mottled upper arms;

thumping your belly-

look at it-

your wobbling gut.

*You pig. You stupid cow. You fucking buffalo.*

*Abortion. Cripple. Spastic. Mongol. Ape*

Where did it end?

A ladder. Heavy tools. A steady hand.

And me, alone all night up there,

bent on revenge.

He had pet names for them.

Marie.

The belfry trembled when she spoke for him,

I climbed inside her with the claw-hammer,

my pliers, my saw, my clamp;

and, though it took an agonizing hour,

ripped out her brazen tongue

and let it fall.

Then Josephine,

his second favourite bell,

kept open her astonished golden lips

and let me in.

The bells. The bells.

I made them mute.

No more arpeggios or scales, no stretti, trills

for christenings, weddings, great occasions, happy days

No more practising

for bellringers

on smudgy autumn nights.

No clarity of sound, divine, articulate,

to purify the air

and bow the heads of drinkers in the city bars.

No single

solemn

funeral note

to answer

grief.

I sawed and pulled and hacked.

I wanted silence back.

Get this:

When I was done,

and bloody to the wrist

I squatted down among the murdered music of the bells

and pissed