

Broken Wing

by Paul Mason



The loch was silent that morning. The only sound was the soft slip-slop of wood meeting water. The boat pushed through the reeds, rowed by an old man – his grandson at the stern. Soft fog enfolded the vessel like a shroud, and the shoreline vanished as if it had never been there.

“What does Grandfather have in mind?” Hew wondered.

“It’s time you met Broken Wing,” the old man said.

“Broken Wing?”

“My companion. It’s time I showed you my fishing secret.”

“Is that why I was pulled from my bed so early?” the boy grumbled.

“You don’t see the others return with fish like me,” said Grandfather.

This was true. “I can’t pull these oars much longer. It’s your turn soon. Time to leave childish ways behind.”

Hew’s face reddened, and he turned away. The fog cleared for a moment, and he saw they’d crossed the loch to a small island. Cold grey stone rose from the water like a giant’s fist. The old man clicked his tongue.

“Broken Wing,” he called, “show me your face.”

A dark shape emerged from a crevice in the stone. A sleek head at the end of a long neck turned this way and that. It belonged to a large black bird. Awkwardly, the bird hopped down the rocks, one wing outstretched. The other hung useless at its side.

“Broken Wing,” said Hew.

The bird peered at him, wary. Then it hopped onto the boat. The old man ran a rough-skinned hand along the bird’s neck before taking his oar. He shoved against the rocks, pushing the boat back out into the loch.



The bird faced ahead, eyes scanning the water.
“What can a crippled bird like that do?” asked Hew.

“More than you think,” said Grandfather.
“She may not fly or dive, but she can see.
And my eyes are weak, but I can still row
and cast a line. We have an agreement.
An oath.”

The idea amused the boy,
not that he dared show it. But the
old man was right about the bird.
Hew watched as she guided their boat
across the loch – through rolling fog –
her neck pointing one way, then another.
How did she know where to go? Hew peered
into the water, but it revealed nothing.
He sensed there was more to Broken Wing
than mere feather and bone.

Grandfather followed the bird over one
shoulder, steering with his oars. At last, she gave
a loud call and bobbed her head up and down.
The old man reached for his rod and quickly
hooked a worm. Watching the direction of the
bird’s beak, he cast off. The hook dropped into
the water and slipped from sight.

On the row back to shore, three glistening fish lay
in the hull. They were a good size, their skin pale
and spotted. Broken Wing searched for her island,
guiding Grandfather with her head. Hew couldn’t
take his eyes off the strange creature. He was
filled with unease. When the front of the boat
nudged the rocks, the bird turned to face them.



“Give her a fish, and we’ll be on our
way,” said Grandfather. He noted the
boy’s sour look. “I gave her my word.
And my word is your word now.”

Hew did as he was told, choosing the
smallest one. But still, he wasn’t pleased.
It was bad enough that Grandfather had
already returned one fish to the loch by
way of thanks. Hew pictured his brother
and sister at the table, picking over bones.
There was never enough to go round.
As Grandfather carefully steered them
away, Hew saw his chance. He reached
over and snatched back the small fish.
Then he hid it behind his back.

The old man hadn’t seen a thing –
but of course the bird knew. Hew didn’t
care for the way her dark gaze settled
on him. He felt a rush of blood and
reached down to fling a handful of water.
She turned away with an angry squawk
and disappeared into the mist.

Later that week, Grandfather took to his
bed. His rasping breath was feeble, and
the colour fell away from his skin. Hew’s
mother shook her head. The old man lay
beyond even her most potent remedy.

“Don’t fret, Hew,” she said, seeing her
son’s tears. “It is the way of things.”

“Time and tide waits for no man,”
Grandfather murmured in agreement.



Hew should have talked with Ma. Instead, he got up early the next morning. He dragged the boat down to the water before anyone knew and rowed out.

At the island, he called out as he'd seen his grandfather do. "Broken Wing, show me your face." And just like before, the bird emerged from the rock. She paused for a moment when she saw it was Hew but got on the boat just the same. Hew smiled. It seemed she'd forgotten. "Let's see if you're as good as Grandfather says."

He watched Broken Wing over his shoulder, steering the boat across the water's soft roll. She took him farther out than last time, but that was to be expected, thought Hew. Sometimes you had to move around to find the fish – even he knew that. In the thick fog, he felt like the only body in the world. He shivered and pulled his cloak close. Not for the first time, he wished it wasn't so worn and thin. Not to mind. Tonight he would put food on the table – and Grandfather would see that he was ready.

Broken Wing became still, her eyes on the water. Hew willed her to give the call. At last, the bird began to bob up and down.

"Here?" asked Hew, a little surprised. This part seemed gloomy and mysterious.

Broken Wing chirruped. "Yes, here," she was saying.

Hew cast the line, though not as smoothly as Grandfather. The hook hit the surface and dropped from sight. Broken Wing called to the loch, and as if by magic, there was a tug. A strong heave jerked the tip of the rod.

"Clever bird," gasped Hew.

Suddenly, the line jolted downwards with a power that frightened him. What manner of fish was this? It was a monster. But he kept his grip firm. He would not lose this beast or, worse, Grandfather's rod.

Hew clenched his jaw and pulled back with both arms, and all at once, he was in the water. Wrenched over the side and into the icy grey. He gulped for breath, stunned by the cold, and lost his grip on the rod. It was gone in seconds. What would Grandfather say now?

Hew tried to splash back to the boat – but as he kicked out, he felt a jerk. A hand wrapped itself around his ankle ... he was sure it was a hand. Cruel fingers pressed into his skin. Hew screamed, but the fog stole the sound. He strained against the unseen thing below with all his might, and still it pulled. In desperation, he lashed out once more. At last, the icy fingers loosened their grip.



The boy swam frantically and reached the boat, heart hammering. Scrabbling at the slippery side, he heaved himself over the gunwale and clattered to the bottom, gasping for breath. Fragments of glistening weeds hung from his leg. His cloak was sodden.

From the bow, Broken Wing peered at him with dark, dark eyes. In the bird's shadowy stare, Hew caught the shape of his grandfather. The old man lay on his bed, chest rising and falling. *Time to leave childish ways behind.*

My word is your word ...

"I promise," Hew managed at last.

illustrations by Rosie Colligan



Broken Wing

by Paul Mason

Text copyright © Crown 2019

Illustrations by Rosie Colligan copyright © Crown 2019

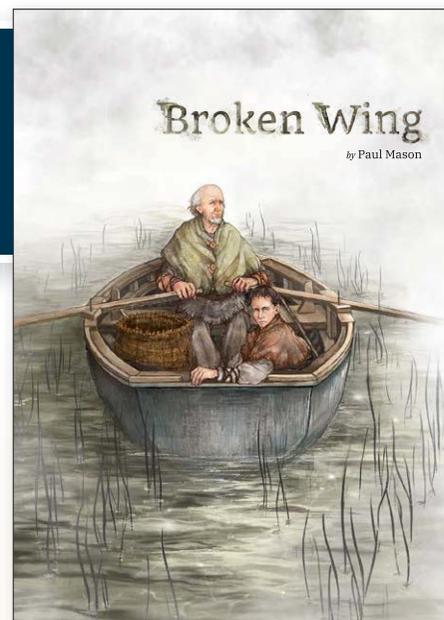
For copyright information about how you can use this material, go to:
<http://www.tki.org.nz/Copyright-in-Schools/Terms-of-use>

Published 2019 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

All rights reserved.
Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 589 8 (online)
ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 MAY 2019

Curriculum learning area	English
Reading year level	Year 6
Keywords	agreements, allegory, change, coming-of-age, fairy tales, family, fantasy, fishing, honesty, honour, keeping your word, mood, mystery, narrative, trust