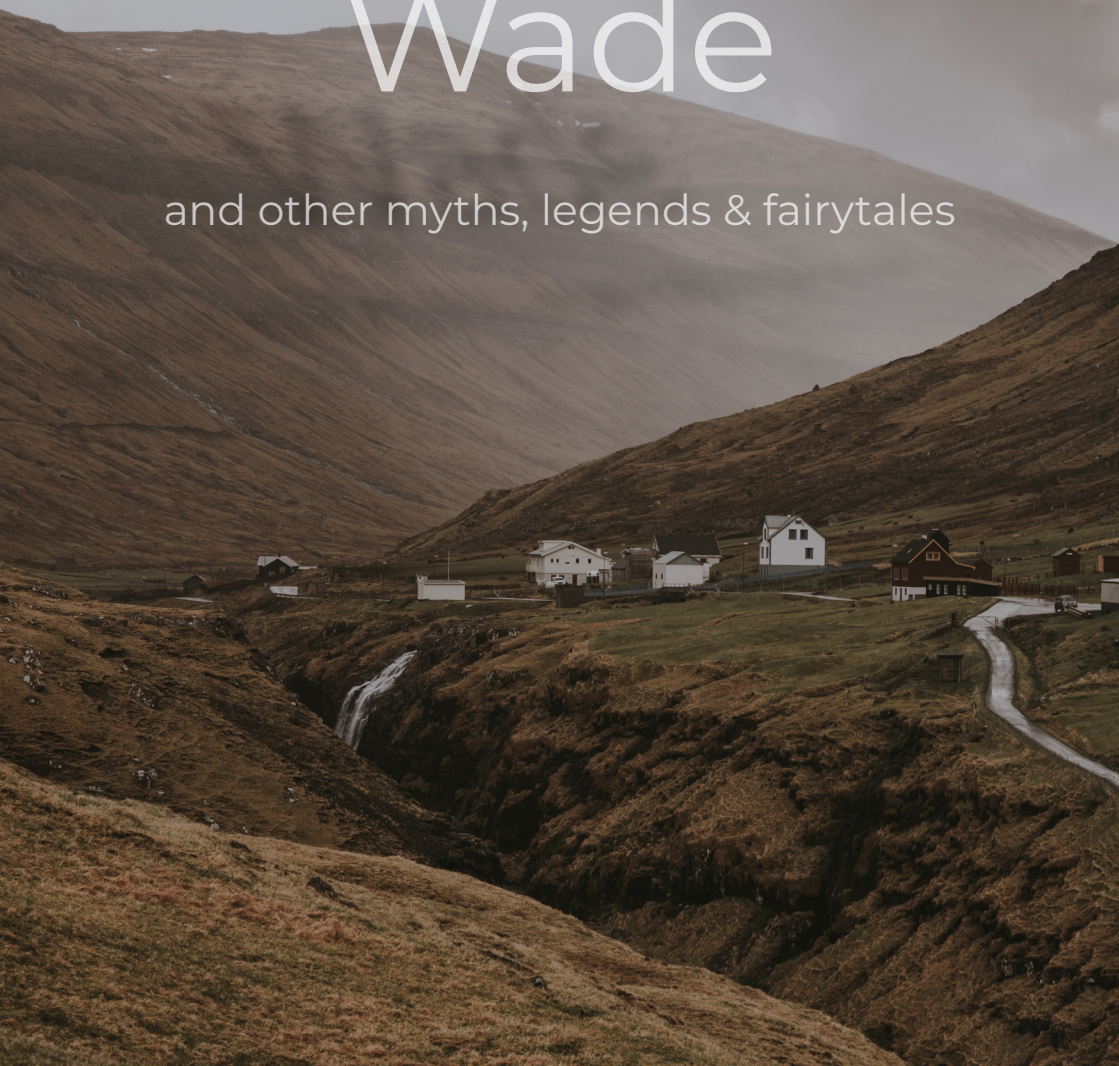




Wade

and other myths, legends & fairytales



Wade

Wade - Ellipsis Zine #12

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And So It Begins

Jeanette Sheppard

He's always tree-talling over me just because he's my Alder brother. He's always banging on about where 'The Hood' (he means Robin) got his green suit. Always unfurling lies from his leaves. Every spring there's a whole load of berry-bull about how he's first to 'nectify the bees'; how the goldfinches salivate at his 'sensational seeds'. Claptrap drops from his catkins. His pendulous, dangly catkins. Apparently, people run away from him. All that 'cut me and I turn orange-angry' crap. Who does he think he is, The Incredible Alder? All that drivel about his 'super-strong hardiness' in water. All that rot about not rotting, even when waterlogged. Does he expect everyone to believe that just because he lives near water? He's full of fake-news. He's even making up myths. Yesterday, I heard the best one yet—Venice. Yes, Venice. The latest lie to catkin-drip from his branches is one about how there'd be no Venice without his ancestors. Yep, Venice is all thanks to his family. They laid down their lives, 'crafted a raft to float the city'. I told him if that's true, I can create cities too—I'm from the same genus *Alnus*. That's when he said, 'From the shorter strain'. Oof, am I supposed to just stand there and take that? I'll show him what 'shorter strain' can do. He may be nearly thirty meters tall, but he's no longer young-stick-sticky. I may only ever be six-meters-grown, but I'll make pigments and dyes. Not only green. Blue and grey too. I'll attract bigger and brighter moths. Not the kitten-kind that flutter to him. Brimstone butterflies are already sulphuring my way. I'll become famous for my cancer cures. I'll turn charcoal into gunpowder greater than his. I'll be mightier than Eric the Alder.

I am Alder Buckthorn.

Mother and Child

Chloe Timms

Around the bed are the women from the village, the ones who know what they are doing. They bring groundsel and hyssop and the sweat of hunger, a crop circle of them, trance-like in waiting. They grip each other's hands around me. White knuckles. That's all any of us are, bones hanging together, skin starved away. My legs splayed, my ribs cracking with the effort. Hot in the air is the stink of sweat and open legs. In the months before, the women had come to me with their suggestions and superstitions. Fail-safes to make sure you came out right. Because we knew stories. A woman who spent too long bathing, whose firstborn came out with scales and a serpent's tongue. A woman who stood too close to the fire and gave birth to a wretched thing marked with burns. Then there was Clara, my Clara, born blue, hanged by her own cord. None of the village women could agree on a reason. I'd worn clothes too tight. Gazed too long at the hangings. Let my husband put his hands around my throat. Whatever I'd done, it could not happen again.

But Clara's death was the start of it. I buried her in the fields near the house, my body still carrying the shape she had made inside me. Such a burial was banned because luck was hard enough to find in a place like this without cursing the ground with dead babies, but I couldn't bear a burning, the sight of her tiny body turning to ash. So I'd done it and hoped the gods would forgive me.

Our earth turned dry, barren. Crops shriveled. Animals fled. Children started scooping dirt into their mouths because there was nothing else to eat.

At the bed, my mother-in-law steps forward and holds court between my thighs. She puts her skeletal hands on my knees, grunting against my noise as if we're in competition. She can see you already. She, the one who came forward with the plan, who said this had to be done. Cornered me in the house when I was still delirious after Clara, and explained how it was done long, long before and how it could be done again. She spoke quickly, making me chase her words until the idea of you was the only thing that made sense. She put a plan in motion, giving me her share of food, what little there was of it. Dried rabbit she'd walked miles for. If I was too hungry it would never work. Starving girls had given birth to bags of bones, collapsed chests and parchment skin. We'd seen so much of it lately. Babies that weren't babies at all. So she fed me

everything she could beg or poach and when I rested, she stroked me, laid pelts across me. Told me to focus, to dream.

‘The head! The head!’

I feel the release and the silence in the room. I am ready to howl. I won’t lose another. My mother-in-law spits into her hands, ready. She crouches, pulling you from me like giblets, slick and sliding at first.

‘That’s it. Keep it going.’

One of the women from the village wrings a wet rag in her hands, but she does not step any closer. She glimpses you before the rest. She knows. We haven’t told anyone what we were planning but there have been rumours for days. A quickening of excitement, disgust. I imagine what the women from the village see. All that pink and blood. Meat. I push down, feeling the tear and tug, unwilling and scratching. Starting to panic that we’re wrong to even try.

I fight, clamping my legs trying to stop, trying to keep you inside. Keep you away from this. My mother-in-law takes my gasps, my desperation not to lose another child, as permission. She hooks you out of me, fingernails full of blood, one hand on my hip for leverage. Behind her is a flurry of murmuring, pushing to look. A spin of bleak faces. I only get a quick look at you, but it’s enough to know I’ve done enough, it’s worked. Someone fetches a blanket and makes a clumsy attempt to wrap you. All I can smell is woodland but you’re mine, all mine.

My mother-in-law holds you tight in her arms.

‘Can I hold her?’ I ask. My second chance, my second child.

‘She’s nice and big. Bigger than I thought.’ I can see her twisting at the waist to show you off.

She hands you over and the wriggling weight of you makes me cry. Your coat is downy, blood-matted. I lift you up and run my nose against the fur of your long and upright ears, silken and silver. I put you against my chest and watch your nose snuff against my familiar scent. You are warm, trembling in my hands, your solid heartbeat threading through mine. You are just like the rabbits long ago that she’d carried home, skinned and roasted, like the ones she’d made me remember, focus on, determined to make it work. To transform you.

I look up and around the room at the women from the village, some of them slack-jawed, some with their hands up at their open mouths, some murmuring for the gods. For all their superstitions they hadn’t dared believe you were possible. I look down at you, seeing the same eyes I saw in my dreams

– Clara's. You are perfect.

My mother-in-law edges towards the bed, her arms outstretched, the room quiet again.

‘Hand her back, Mary.’

In my arms I feel you stiffen. You know what is coming, we both do. The glint of the knife in her hand, the pot in the kitchen, waiting. The hunger of unfed, open mouths.

Off Grid

Jude Higgins

When the giant from Jack and the Beanstalk phoned me for therapy, my husband told me it was the last straw.

'You'd rather live in a fairy tale world full of neurotics than stay with me,' he said. He packed his computer and told me he was off on a round-the-world tour to meet his gaming friends.

'What's the difference between your world and mine?' I shouted after him. 'You're living in a fantasy, too.' But he didn't look back. So, eventually, with no messages from him, I had to look forward.

I phoned the giant back and agreed to make a home visit. He'd downsized from his cloud dwelling to a dilapidated castle.

'No-one plants magic beans these days, even though there's a cost of living crisis,' he said. 'And I'm vegan now, so you'll be safe.'

He said to use a map because wifi was non-existent where he lived. I drove down narrow Devon lanes to find him, using my wits. It was a classic castle — moat, draw bridge, high soot-blackened walls. Inside, cavernous and cobwebby with over-sized furniture. The giant's face was like the way mine looked in the morning mirror. No attempt at bucking up, just settled into lines of despair. Why hadn't I told my husband I loved him before he went?

The giant clearly worked out — bulging muscles, teeshirt straining across his chest. He was twice my height and his jeans were far too tight so I asked to borrow a set of steps to stand on, to keep my eyes at biceps level. He offered a bucket of tea and a tranche of toast. But I waved them away.

'It's you that's after sustenance,' I said.

He sat down heavily and it all spilled out (metaphorically, thank God). His wife couldn't stand coming down to earth and had left him for a sky god. He'd just about got over that, but humans never read Grimms to their kids these days, and they wouldn't even have him in the local over-fifties book club — the ladies would be frightened, the men threatened.

'The worse thing is no wifi.' He said, 'I have to climb to the top of the turret to get even the faintest of signals on my mobile. I can't even meet people online.' He paused, looked down and gazed at me with eyes as brown as a peat bog.

'The worst thing in your life is no wifi,' I repeated back to him, emphasising 'worst'. Would that really be the worst thing? I tried to imagine life without it.

We had fibre optic broadband at our house. My husband used to log on every night to play his games. With me checking emails and surfing the net, we scarcely talked.

'Some people would love you for the lack of wifi,' I said, trying not to sound wistful for long ago internet-free days of country walks and fireside chats.

'They would?'

'Take a moment to think.' It was probably the wrong intervention. I couldn't think of anyone, myself. If my husband did come back, I doubted he would like it if I cancelled our internet contract to try and return to how things were. And what would I do for work?

The giant looked worried for a moment. He screwed up his eyes and tapped his fingers on the table so firmly the castle windows shook. But then his face brightened. He sniffed.

'Fee, Fi, Fo,' he whispered, as if he could still smell the very thing he needed to keep him going. 'Yes,' he boomed and a window pane fell out. 'The off-gridders!'

'Of course,' I said, with a careful smile. My husband and I had scorned the off gridders not so long ago for their idealistic ideas, their permaculture, forest gardens, Walopinis, their worship of the great mycelium.

The giant had no such prejudices. He was excited. It wasn't long before his notebook was full of ideas. I left with a golden egg, a goose he had no use for and promised to post messages for him on the right websites.

Last I heard, his castle was home to an eco centre, the moat filled with wild flowers. He'd grown a beard and lived in a bungalow with an ogress called Sheila who cultivated mushrooms. He'd stopped working out and bought his pants and teeshirts from Azda.

'You should let go and be off grid too,' he told me when I visited in my smart new sports car and designer clothes. 'The simple life is so much better.'

I didn't stay long. I needed to check my messages. I'd sorted lots of celebs now. Rapunzel finally decided to cut off her hair and had stopped wanting to be rescued. Goldilocks had kicked her habit of breaking and entering. Sleeping Beauty was no longer obsessed with ageing. But I didn't want any more therapy clients. And I didn't care about the goose, who laid me golden eggs. Everytime I logged on, all I wanted see was a text from my husband, telling me he was coming home.

The Creation of Music

David Luntz

In the beginning, Hermes took a tortoise shell and strung it with entrails from one of the sacred cows he'd stolen from Apollo to make a lyre. To prevent Apollo from tracking the cows down, he placed slippers backwards over their hooves. But Apollo found them, anyway, and just before he's about to kill Hermes for stealing his sacred cows, he hears him playing the lyre and offers Hermes all his cows in exchange for it. We cannot know for sure what Apollo saw or heard. Maybe the way Hermes' fingers strummed the freshly-strung sinews made Apollo think of raindrops slinking down a conch shell or of seaweed-wrapped boulders quivering in moonlight. Or, perhaps, the sounds aroused a sensation of something wet, smooth and salty, like a dolphin's nose muzzling against his cheeks or sails redolent with lilac cracking open on a breeze.

Anyway, it's a clever story that shows how art originates in theft, blood and violence. The sort of story that might get you thinking about how that dead cow's repurposed gut resembles the thread Theseus unspools in the Minotaur's labyrinth. That same thread that lets Theseus not just find his way home, but conquer death, too. Or how those threads of prophetic fury sown into Desdemona's handkerchief, which, if she'd known how to decipher, might have let her flee to safety rather than get strangled in some Cypriot bedchamber.

But you need not turn to such stories or fancies for such revelations. They are being woven inside and right in front of you, too, like the everyday vine that creeps along the fence outside your window, grasping towards something unknown, much like your unformed thoughts, with nothing to guide it except all that's come before, as if some impatient mob were pushing it from behind. Never mind that the end of the fence, autumn's dying light, or winter's chill will stunt its riotous clambering. Never mind that the limits of memory, a change in mood, or some distraction will end your thoughts from becoming fully formed. It's the *now* that counts. *This moment*.

Which is what you come to understand, too late, as you leap naked into a pond on a warm summer night and sense within this moment, too, a precious part of you stolen long ago, as if lurking just beyond in some dark thicket or grove, which, were you to plunge into instead, you would hear for the first time an echo of vanished music that would change you forever.

Bluebeard's Only Wife

Stephanie Carty

Don't unlock the door. Enjoy your finery. Why do you seek the dark clouds of knowing? Talking makes it so, so stitch your lips. Should you be tempted, wear silken gloves that keys slip-slide from. Silken wines too, perhaps. Learn to laugh! Appreciate the world. Don't spoil it - don't become spoilt meat. No don't think of it, eat pickles instead and screw your face to the tang of them.

Open doors bring danger. Open doors let the stench in, dear. Open doors release rats. Leave it locked up.

So she dances en pointe till her toes bleed through. She tightens her corset to hold in organs and urges. She whistles away longing. The door remains locked.

Time does what it does. Her looks wane. Her legs tire. Her husband roams.

The crow's feet by her closed eyes croak 'Open it'. Her dry, lonely womb murmurs 'Open it'. The pains in her hands gnarled as grief shriek 'OPEN IT.'

She sticks pins in her bun to lift her brow. Like this, she can show no surprise. Numbness is her nature now.

She seeks the key, or it seeks her. In the parlour. In the scullery. In the grate. A relief in the impossibility of it; a decision she no longer has to make. Yet, lying there, she finds the key resting on rope coiled around her neck.

Bluebeard's only wife opens the door. Or rather, her hand acts as though enchanted. A laugh shatters into shards of glass on her tongue.

Horror awaits in the form of three paintings: moments captured forever in scarlet and black. How she'd lured them home for him. How she'd scrubbed stains without question. How she'd burned their robes as kindling.

The secret is served. The door lies within.

She knew, oh she knew, yes she knew all along.

The Thick Wood Cold

Mathew Gostelow

Before the pairing rite, I selected a visage. Dark wood, crudely hewn. Taller and wider than my own face. I chose the likeness of a hare, ears standing upright above a heavy brow. Two circular holes allowed my eyes to peer through, either side of a long, flat nose - more human than leporine. Two prominent front teeth sat inside the slightly opened mouth, lending the animal a grotesque, ferocious look.

I ran my hands over the surface of the mask, enjoying the rich, rough grain. My fingers explored vertical splits punctuating the carved surface like open wounds. Worms had bored into one of the long, spoon-like ears, leaving a cluster of holes. The bottom edge, under my chin, was ragged, unfinished, sharp.

The mask was curiously comforting against my skin, the thick wood cold, craggy, like armour. Behind the hare, the world became quieter, dimmer, less intense. Within its spell I felt bolder, more apt to be myself. The power of the disguise spread through me, endowing my movements with swagger and bounce. I walked tall, ears standing proud atop my head.

I wore the hare's face to the pairing, on a balmy summer eve. We youngers gathered beneath the trees in the apple orchard. Two dozen sons and daughters of the clan. Some behind masks, some bare-faced. We laughed and danced. We talked. We marvelled at the animal faces carved into the living trees by elders of our village.

This is where I met her. A willowy, maskless girl. A girl who threw her head back to laugh in lilting wren-song trills. A girl who pulled down springy branches to breathe the honey scent of blossoms as we walked. A girl who pressed her palms against the trunks of trees, then stared in fascination at the gnarled knots and whorls imprinted on her flesh.

She touched the tall hare ears of my visage lightly, gazing into the round holes to glimpse my eyes within. Her own eyes were a rich dark brown, shining like horse chestnuts, fresh from their shells. Her skin was supple golden oak with a soft summer sheen.

We shared stories of our selves, our families, our dreams and, as the sun set slow and fiery, waning gently into dark, she asked me to remove my visage.

'I know you are not a hare,' she said, in her wren-song voice.

'It is a mask you wear. Please, I would see your true face.'

I complained of the sun, said my birch-pale skin would burn bright pink, although the low red star had long since lost its noonday heat. Really, I was fearful to let my armour down - scared that the truth of me would break our fragile spell of affection.

She persisted, chirping, comforting, reassuring until I was ready to relent. Grasping the sides of my mask, she gently pulled away, but the wood refused to budge. She tugged harder, but it stuck fast, and my cheeks stretched painfully. Then, at once, her fingertips and my own sensed it - my skin around the edges of the mask was rough, unfeeling. Together, our hands explored the craggy, bark-like textures under my chin, down my neck. My heart jolted with fear as I found my ears no longer had sensation. They were hard, inflexible as the knotty, worm-riddled carvings atop my mask.

The wren-song girl looked at me aghast, realising what was taking place, that some strange fusion of wood and flesh had begun to spread. In panic I pulled hard upon the mask. Still it would not release me. I felt pain in my forehead, my face, as though I were trying to remove my own flesh. I heaved at the visage, ignoring the burning agony, only stopping when I heard a dry splintering crack around my jaw.

As I watched in horror through the deep eye holes, my hands, held before my face, began to warp and alter. The flesh of my fingers became solid, unyielding, the joints fixed in arthritic contortions. My skin turned to ragged bark dotted with knots. My forearms seized and dried to wood, splintering, cracking wide in places, slow sap seeping from within.

New stems burst out from my shoulders, arms, and hands. Beneath my feet, roots pressed down, deep into the earth. My willowy girl backed away, hands pressed to her face, mouth agape. I tried to call out, but fibrous phloem tissue choked my throat. I reached for her, my splinter-rasping fingertips grasping desperate at her wrist, beseeching her to stay.

The girl turned and ran, but in that final moment she could see my transformation near complete. A new tree stood at the orchard's edge, branches twisted, reaching, and in its trunk, roughly-hewn, a hare's face staring out.

The Axens of Silver Stag Ridge

Rosaleen Lynch

My Papaxe is an Axeman and my Mamaxe is an Axewoman from a long line of Axens, their fates already set, their work already decided upon, their purpose instilled in me from birth and we know our worth as the guardians of the earth, for a tree may not fall without an Axen's consent and their sweat, since the outlaw of mechanisms, at the turn of the world, at the final-use recycle, of melted down metals into corrugated sheets, stoves and planters, shovels for the Shovlens and sickles for the Sicklens and iron and steel, forge-welded together to make axe heads for us Axens, the providers of the fuel for heat, cooking and industry, the timber for homes, bridges and boats and we are sacredly called to the clearing of a dead tree, for it is the law, and on the day of the call to the clearing of the dead tree, we find other Axens new to town are already there, their axes held at their feet, for it is the law, and they tell us that they have assessed time of death from the lean, dryness and open wound cankers and Mamaxe and Papaxe tell me that we have to go, for it is the law, so we wave our axes in woodbyes and turn back onto the path towards town, the long march ahead, starting with axe head swings, along the outside of the leg, axe butt to the ground, with the step and to swing again, on every river changing arms, and somewhere in the rhythm of the swing, step, swing, step, swing, I see a silver stag, believed to be extinct, and I step, and see it's wounded and I stop and it's gone, the red slash on the throat, the last image to be caught by my eye, and as Granaxe would tell me, forests hide more than trees, roots can't always be seen, so I should look down at my feet for grounding, and there I see a splinter, fresh and enough to tell of illegal felling, and I pick it up, hold it in my hand, watching the back of my parents' heads, walking on, and I wonder if this is a test but I know how this tiny splinter could set a wedge into town, but I also know I must come of age, for it is the law, and I show Mamaxe and Papaxe, and they tap axes with mine and we turn back on the path, and all the way I watch for the silver stag to tell me I'm right, but when we come to the other Axens, we know by the raise of their axes in greeting, for we can now see the sap on their blades that cannot be from such a dead tree, and we keep our knowledge secret, and Papaxe instead stands his axe on its handle and claims the greater need, and for this the other Axens, lower their axes, to yield and leave, for it is the law, and when they are gone, Papaxe says, it's of no surprise

to him, as they've already done the deed and there's nothing for them in this dead tree and Mamaxe, says, it's true, the healing tree ritual will not be for them, they have no cares for a dead apple tree, and we lay our axe handles against the dead tree and I prepare it for the healing ceremony, break off the smallest of the limbs, check they are dead, set them alight and wait for them to burn, so we may mark our foreheads and the tree in ash where we will take up our axes and cut, and we will take turns, until it is done, for it is the law, and when we deliver a piece to each of the town's people and mark them each with the ash of the dead, we will seek out the other Axens, and we will wet our axes red with their blood, for it is the law of the Axens of Silver Stag Ridge.

The Feminal Forest

Linda McMullen

They called me a witch and buried me under a yew tree; what did they expect would happen? Those primitive minds, who –

Well.

That is beginning at the end.

I was a girl once, a girl who heard rosemary songs. I grew into a young maiden who stole into the forest to read stories written in bark and moss. My great aunt left me a cottage and a garden in the shadow of the great boughs. And when the women of the town crept to my door in search of aid – chamomile or red clover or tansy – I comforted them in their need. Offered mint tea and honey cakes. Scented their futures in the fumes of burning sage.

Then the men came in a white rage. The knife-faced leader wielded words like swords: *sinister* and *corrupting* and most especially *unnatural*. Irony: what had I ever done but offer the fruits of the earth to my sisters in dust and bone and blood?

The rest was inevitable: the bars, the stake, the flame.

Let the corpse rot in unhallowed ground, they said. They laughed to imagine the worms of the witch's own garden devouring the tainted flesh. "Let the land be abandoned," they said. "Let no one use her evil harvest. Let the earth purify itself for a year and a day."

My self passed out of time and yearning. And when I returned – it was not a matter of a day, nor even a week, but rather a season of unfurling. I felt cool water and possibility rising within me. I stretched toward the yellow star... my limbs bent and dipped and rose, while my crown of green garland rustled joyfully in the breeze.

A new existence.

And then, a new sound – too faint for certainty – a trick of the air, a vestige of another lifetime – a voice. "Hello?" it seemed to call. Without agenda. Without hope.

Many moons rose and set before I found my voice to answer.

Open communication took time, relying on the wind and the rain and gaps in conversations among the birds. But then – oh, then! Under the ground, where no man could see: the network. The underground. My roots had already begun to nourish me... and now they brought food for thought.

The laurel nearest the brook had been the site of a violation; the victim had drunk the dew from the moss at the foot of the tree, and quietly succumbed. The juniper to the southwest had been abandoned by her parents. The elm had never wanted to be another mother and fled into the winter night...

"Are all of us –" I began. "I mean, is every..."

"No, no, not all," a nearby pine assured me.

"But many," added a willow.

I didn't have the courage to ask whether they viewed their forested incarnations as second chances – or the opposite.

I listened to their melancholy conversations. In brighter moods I would pass the time of day with the wind, and listen to the gossip of the birds as they returned with news of the village.

On a day that augured autumn, we watched the women and children gathering firewood – collecting fallen logs and broken branches – and we waved. We witnessed the rites of devoted young lovers and shaded them from prying eyes. We dreaded the men coming alone, with blade and torch. I noted the knife-faced man amongst them.

And whispers, whispers rushed through the network...

His poor wife...

...daughter pretended illness... hide her broken face...

...the elder married... got away...

Condemned to stand by and watch – again – as this man inflicted his ire on womankind! Again, and again, and again...

A bird piped an infuriating story as the knife-faced man took a mighty axe to a laurel. Her scream resonated from my root hairs to my canopy. Susurrations of love and commiseration echoed... as well as anger at the attacker. "Fall on him, darling!" cried a maple. "Lean left! Land on his head! Make him pay!"

"Wait!" I cried. "Don't kill him!"

Shock and incredulity rippled through the forest.

"My dear sister," I whispered, "I am so sorry to lose you, but I promise, you shall not go in vain. Can you aim to *injure*, rather than kill?"

The laurel whispered *Farewell* – and plunged onto the man's shoulder.

The willow began the lament; one by one, each of us took it up. The men heard nothing; they had gathered around their wounded leader, and were lost in discussions of improvised stretchers.

When we had completed our elegy for the laurel, I explained:

"As he is injured, the other men will carry him to his bed. His wife and

daughter will not be expecting him or anyone else. They will not have time to ready their faces. And the others will see."

"But will they hold him to account?" demanded a larch.

"Oh, I expect they will," I said, "when they *also* see that he's set his women to drying *my* spices from the rafters of his house, and putting them in jars for market."

The birds vied with one another for the privilege of tattling. The knife-faced man was growing well again... but the elders of the house came often, with grave faces.

The judge. The plea. The gavel.

A grim group of elders gathered at my yew. A rope looped over my highest bow. The knife-faced man pleaded for his life, for forgiveness. The elders bowed their heads, cinched the circlet.

And when the wind swept through, then, my sisters and I raised our branches higher, higher, higher toward the heavens.

Wade

Charlotte Oliver

Our home nestles a giant's stride and an owl's call from a road-ribboned valley. And this valley, legend has it, was created by Wade. This monstrous figure, the scourge of the North Land, toppled one evening like a chimney demolished, after he had drunk several galleons of strong sea ale. (Surely you mean 'gallons', I hear you think? Sadly, no – he would seize a docked ship from the dusk-tide harbour and fill it, hull-full, with strong amber brew. He would then tip its stern into his crater of a mouth, and gulp and glug until his enormous belly swished and swashed inside of him, like an enraged November sea.) This particular evening, he had chosen a larger vessel than usual, which explains why his legs were being less obedient. When he had drunk his fill at the expense of yet another landlord (left with his head in his hands), Wade stalked up from Sandside and headed towards the frowning hills. Night was at its most velvet, lit only by ancient gifts from galaxies far-off. But Wade was angry. The moon and stars were mocking him, chasing each other around the draped navy instead of guiding him home. He bellowed at them, 'Anchor yersens – I will not stand fer this devilry!' But the more his eyes chased them across the skies the faster they jigged, and the faster they jigged the more his eyes chased them across the skies until, (TIMBER!), his spinning head forgot which way was up, and down he crashed, pounding a vast deep furrow into the earth. He lay there, stunned, before drifting into a sleep the depth of an ocean. It was the owls who saved him, their mellifluous hoots raising him to the surface of his dreams and sending him on his way to his own rough bed before his wife's rage grew any more colossal. Wade was so grateful to the owls that he swore protection on their dwellings along this valley ever since, which is why to this day, each child who lives here swims to sleep each night accompanied by a magical hooted lullaby. And sometimes, when the night has fallen heavily, we can hear the echoes of beer waves crashing inside Wade's giant belly.

Féth Fíada

Keely O'Shaughnessy

The fog descended pretty soon after we married. I'd wake in the night to find the space beside me empty and the moon pasted over with grey. He'd be out playing blackjack, poker, hold'em or five-card draw. He'd be downtown, in some back room—O'Malley's or Corner House—pushing his chips to the centre of the table.

On nights when I can stomach it, I go find him, the glow of neon signs in my headlights, and other times I stay home.

Tonight, is one of those latter nights. A night of collecting time like marbles. Watching each hour roll along the carpet and pool with the others, where the floorboards bow.

The valley is choked with fog. I whisper, *Féth fíada*. This fog is a shroud raised from the earth to conceal. It slithers closer. Its opaqueness teases me. I know there is something there, crouching beneath the murk, inching its way closer.

Somewhere after midnight, he announces his arrival by hurling one of our crystal tumblers against the kitchen wall, and I slice my palm sweeping up the shards.

My mother was the one who warned he'd bargain with the devil to save his skin. After a year, he'd cleaned out our joint savings. He promised to join a twelve-step plan.

He presses his arms around my waist. I smell the smoke on his clothes: earthy and stale. Words spill from him, some of them apologetic. From the French doors in the living room, there's a hazy view of the hills. The peaks and troughs of moorland have disappeared: a lace of fog has knitted itself around our house. *Féth fíada*, I call again.

He pushes and for a moment I yield, my spine against the countertop. His hands grope at buttons and cloth. The rasp of his zipper is as sharp as glass. Outside, the fog ripples across the lawn.

I kick free. He almost looks hurt. I bite my lip.

The fog has seeped its way inside. We both watch, him aghast and me in awe, as it unfurls itself on the checkerboard linoleum.

Childlike, he rubs his eyes.

"It's not the booze this time, Sweetie," I say, as the fog pulses. The life within is more visible than ever. In urgent tones, it murmurs. He's not the only one to

commune with the devil. I beckon it forth. A flick of my wrist is all it takes for our pact to be binding.

The fog enters through his left nostril. He bats it away wildly covering his face with his hands. It's no use; the tendrils worm their way inside. With the ferocious draw of a wood burning stove, he is full. The panic in him is palpable. His eyes are bloodshot. For a moment, he is still.

His skin stretched as far as its elasticity will allow, he inflates a little more and then—pop. Like raspberry bubble gum. A fine pink spray covers the granite chopping-block, kettle, and fruit bowl.

Later, alone in the house, I run a bath, the water on the edge of scalding. Leaning back in the tub, I'm weightless. A pearly moon licks at the blinds. The fog has all but receded, and I allow the soft wisps that linger to cradle me as I bathe.

Nancy O'Donnell is Sleeping

Shaun Byron Fitzpatrick

They say the sun was shining on the day she fell asleep.

It was, by everyone's account, the most beautiful day of the entire summer. Cornflower blue skies with clouds that took the shape of castles, dogs, ice cream cones. Hot and bright enough to seek the shade of a tree, but with a breeze that made it impossible not to sit outside for hours at a time. The town's ice cream truck was followed like the Pied Piper by kids everywhere it went, and even the Johnson children's lemonade stand ran out of product before noon. They spent the day instead at the playground, their pockets jingling with quarters.

It was the type of day that only exists in children's stories. It makes sense, then, that Nancy O'Donnell chose that day to slip into her dreams.

Nancy was seventeen and well-liked throughout town. She was a pool lifeguard and occasional babysitter and always made cookies for the church bake sale. She got good grades and did some volunteer work and tried marijuana once, but didn't like it very much. She had honey-colored hair and big blue eyes and a nose just crooked enough to make her interesting looking instead of merely beautiful.

Nancy, everyone said, would really make something of herself. In public, she always accepted praise with a gracious smile. Privately, however, she was very tired.

Nancy was tired of studying and tired of going to high school parties and tired of waking up early for church. She loved them, but she was tired of her family and her friends. She knew she could become her old cheerful self again. She just needed a little rest first.

So, on the most perfect day of the entire summer, Nancy walked onto the middle of the high school football field, laid down, and fell asleep.

At first, no one noticed her. The football team didn't start practice for a few weeks, and no one was at the school. Nancy's parents assumed she was with friends. They didn't start to worry until the next morning, when they found her bed empty. They called everyone they could think of, but no one had seen her. It wasn't like Nancy to disappear without calling or leaving a note. They organized a search party with some of the other parents in town.

Eventually someone stumbled across Nancy, asleep on the field. Jake Carter,

a high school freshman, found her first. He thought she was dead, lying so still on the grass. But as he got closer, he saw the gentle rise and fall of her chest and the slight flutter behind her eyelids. He called the rest of the search party over to the field.

"I think she's sleeping," Jake said once they all arrived. "I think she's dreaming."

Nancy's mother leaned over her body. She shook her once, gently, and then again, more roughly. She whispered in her ear, and then shouted in her face. But still her daughter did not wake up.

Nancy's mother stepped away from her daughter. She walked over to her husband, and they talked quietly together. Finally, Nancy's parents turned to face the crowd.

"There's not much we can do," her mother said.

"We've decided to leave her here until she wakes up," her father added.

And that is what they did.

Nancy O'Donnell remained on the football field as summer turned to fall and fall turned to winter. The football team had to give up their season, as no one was willing to move the girl from the middle of the field. And they couldn't very well play around her (although that was briefly suggested). On rainy days the townspeople set up umbrellas over her to keep her dry. In the cold weather they brought blankets and space heaters and stuffed her hands into gloves. Old Mrs. Ritter even knit her a bright blue cap, which she pulled low over Nancy's ears to keep her warm.

Winter turned to spring, and still Nancy slept. Untouched by the school's groundskeeper, the field grew wild around her, the white markings washed away and replaced by bunches of weeds and flowers alike. Children went to visit Nancy and weaved dandelions into her hair, which grew long and tangled in the grass.

As time went on, the town began to forget that Nancy was ever awake. They started to tell strange tales about her. That she could only be woken up by her true love. That she would wake up only when the town needed her most. That she was cursed to sleep for a hundred years and would wake up to find everyone she knew dead and gone.

All nonsense, of course. Nancy will wake up when she is good and ready. For now, let her sleep.

Leda

Alicia Fitton

They say everyone experiments at university. But to be fair they usually mean with drugs or same sex relationships. They don't mean like this. This was weird.

The library was empty, forsaken in a hard winter snow for warmer pubs and toastier fires. I trawled its corridors, mining for lost books; the ones returned last minute before the christmas break and not yet found on January reading lists, a rare opportunity to swoop and snap up their goodness.

The air was dry and chill with all the aspects of a half-forgotten tomb, so when I reached the third floor, the swan was somewhat unexpected.

I don't think I'd ever realised that swans were quite so large (perhaps because they're usually so far away). This one was apparently asleep, dozing with its head tucked beneath its wing, long neck arched and elegant like an expensive birthday ribbon. It was bathed in a beam of soft blue light emanating from a single overhead window, as if it had just descended from heaven. It was blatantly ridiculous.

More importantly, it was blocking my access to Art and Symbolism. I edged slightly closer and then leaned across to get a better look at the shelf. I was after 'God and Gold' by Dominic Janes, dewey decimal: 246.2. I tried to maintain a safe distance whilst peering past the bird. I spotted 247.4 and leaned closer, counting off the reference numbers, 246.6, 246.4. A brush of feathers stroked my leg and I bit my tongue to keep from shrieking in suprise!

I looked down, the swan was resting its head against my knee. It stared at me confidently, as if our situation was entirely resonable. I glanced back to the shelf. 246.2, Janes! I reached for the book, just as the swan ran its beak up my thigh in a manner which can only be described as wildly inappropriate.

I jerked back and suddenly unbalanced I fell over the swan and we both went down in a tangle of feathers and legs. My face was buried in a suprisingly soft wing.

The swan didn't smell of algae like I imagined, like a river in high summer, or muddy, or really how a swan should smell at all, and perhaps that would have been a clue if only I had known more about swans and less about libraries. The swan smelt of dust and old forgotten pages.

What happened next is a bit of a blur. Somehow my bra had come open in the fall (although again, I couldn't tell you quite how, as its usually reliable) and

the swan had buried its face in my tits, I remember laughing at the sheer ridiculousness of the situation.

And...

Well...

9 months later, I laid an egg.

Lachrymatory Child

Lauren Kardos

One dark year among many dark years, the river flooded from the widow's tears. Her wails kept the village awake night and day, and, exhausted and without a passable bridge, many villagers grew poor and hungry.

Her love, a famed artisan, died young, leaving the widow his estate yet no heir. Soon, crying couldn't quench her misery — she ripped out flowerbeds, tore clumps of hair. The town abandoned the widow to destruction, seething across the river, unable to stem the deluge's source.

She turned to his life's work last. Onto the ballroom parquet floor, she smashed dinner plates and stemware from his apprentice days, wrecked crystal goblets and punch bowls, his creations for parties she'd never again host. She punched out windows and swept the bits into the ballroom pile. Vases, eyeglasses, perfume bottles from his studio — nothing breakable was safe. When the ruins towered over her head, the widow collapsed into an armchair, her hands stinging with a thousand tiny cuts, though her sorrow subsiding.

She slept deeply, the first slumber since the funeral, and dreamed of fire, of molten lava, of a spectral glassblower remaking every wrecked item. And then: cooing, giggling. The sounds curled around her heart, and, rubbing her eyes, her ears confirmed the song of a happy child lived outside her dream. The glass heap pulsed, breathed.

All night the widow dug into her mountain, crooning forgotten lullabies as blood caked her palms. At dawn, brushing away a layer of sand, she freed a flesh-and-blood baby girl. Not a cut blemished the infant's peach fuzz skin, so the widow clutched her love's final present to her breast.

The newborn grew, floodwaters receded, commerce resumed, and socialites rescheduled, yet the village refused to forgive. Hadn't they too experienced tragedy and not devastated their neighbors? How could the widow expect a welcoming, especially when her ward acted so bizarre?

Gossip turned venomous as the baby passed from toddlerhood to childhood. Though otherwise mute, her laughter dumped ice down one's spine. She romped through the forest unchaperoned, yet never endured a scratch. Other children hid from her gaze, her gray irises roiling like a thunderstorm. More peculiar rumors set hearts racing, like when the butcher claimed he jounced

the girl's arm, the *ting-ting* of a toasting glass her only complaint. Sun, rain, and snow produced neither sweat nor shivers on her shiny epidermis. The widow chalked up each tale to jealousy. Who wouldn't want offspring who never back-talked, who always helped with errands?

The paperboy didn't mean to shatter the girl, alone at the market, he'd later swear. Upon a dare, he volleyed a loose cobblestone against her calf and couldn't help the insults that poured forth.

"What's wrong with you?" he shouted. "You monster!"

He didn't notice the small rivulets and cracks tracing her arms and legs, so a fallen branch he hurled at her chest.

"Go back across the river! You're unnatural, unwelcome!"

Her fists unknuckled into marbles. Water burbled over her features. With each heave, fractures clinked up and down her slight frame, echoing across the square.

When the thing finally cried out, crumpling into a murky puddle of shards, it was not with a youthful voice, but that of a pained man. Sticks, stones, and words, it seems, could break a glass golem.

To this day, the villagers debate the final words of the widow's husband as his lachrymatory child failed. Half the town holds the glassmaker lamented his last invention, too weak to withstand the town's unkindness, while others claim he exhaled his widow's name one more time. Whatever was said, the river never again subsided, and the widow keened evermore for a vessel to hold her tears.

Picturebook

Catherine O'Brien

She will know her story isn't a secret. It isn't sophisticated. This isn't gnocchi paired with gorgonzola and pear. The three golden rules of love never are more than they need to be.

Sophia's face is a party as her father verbalises his interpretation of her squishy picturebook. This is what he has always wanted but never had in his childhood, he calls it the behind-the-scenes magic and he is glad his heart has grown to know that. It may be selfish but it's a rarity that life is this wonderful. They are on page five watching a freckle-speckled bear take a leisurely cruise downriver on a perfectly symmetrical log to his favourite bakery spot. She gurgles and positions a shaky finger over the bear's headphones and it doesn't seem to be a step too far to imagine strobe lights bobbing in time to the music of her brain. Jacob looks down at his daughter and her comedic side eye doesn't need to but it drives their love home and waits outside until their laughter turns its key in the door.

One story leads to another. It will come as a surprise to some to learn that this next story starts with Sophia's father yelling 'Fun isn't for everyone!'. She's standing at the bottom of the stairs but her argument isn't even treading water anymore. You see she's dressed to impress because a hapless prince (you know the type) has ridden in on his long-suffering white horse and insisted he's qualified to save the day. You know the sort; the guy who says *long story short* and then proceeds to tell a labouring story, who eats fruit salad for breakfast and thinks that's sufficient nourishment to face the day, who languishes on sunny slopes but balks at the notion of climbing mountain ranges, who drapes himself like a forgiving sun across the karst landscape of your only daughter's mind and convinces it he's worthy to accompany her down its limestone catwalk. The sort that's unblinking in his devotion until there's a talking frog on a foreign holiday or a damsel in distress having a bad hair day. He'd found her while she was picking out an avocado at the supermarket. He'd laughed at his own introduction that some people call them alligator pears.

'You're not wearing that!'

'I am.'

'You're not!!!'

'Dad, we can't keep going over this. It's happening.'

Her tone sidestepped empathy, that's how he learned she was violently in love.

He has reached the point in the tale where he can offer only wrong answers. Our forefathers' understanding of how deep and current-driven the coastline of love can be is no help now. He knows his interventions will be a candle trying to disrupt the life cycle of night. Love may be blind but it can see in the dark. That's one of its party tricks, it's also one of the main weapons it uses against overprotective fathers.

There is an Irish proverb 'Níl tuile dá mhéad nach dtránn'. It means there's no flood, however big, that won't subside. It's just a flood, a surge of hormones and neuro-transmitters, nothing that won't keep a girl from looking back and finding her way home.

When she was a child, she asked him 'What are a wasp's weaknesses?'. He'd been ashamed not to be able to provide an answer. Later he had felt its beginning, she'd stood in front of him rotating gently from side to side as she spoke and there it was, the broad-waisted embrace of a love lost.

'A golden paper wasp is so intelligent it can recognise faces. It could facetime with you but snub your impostor but who knows if their social networking or cellular data would allow for casual chat.'

Fast forward what seems like a few short years and he regrets ending a call with 'you can't see the wood from the trees.' He doesn't dream of her but her "he" is there as an asp. An asp is an ambush predator but it is also not aggressive and given the opportunity may simply run away. It doesn't to his dismay and when he wakes the jungle has devoured everything.

He feels it is impossible for him to describe it adequately but it has sweet facets with floral and spicy undertones. Bergamot essential oil is a quintessential ingredient in colognes and an ideal oil to freshen a room. Her neat penmanship tells him this and he keeps his Father's Day gift on his kitchen countertop while he magnetises the letter with its postmark from southern Italy to the fridge. Even though Jacob still believes the prince is a profoundly odd choice, he no longer spends his days 'ag beochaoineadh' (a lament for someone who is gone but has not died). Time and patience have proven themselves to be powerful poultices. No dust jacket separates their stories - stories of this kind belong to the same book but are best lived outside its pages. That doesn't mean he hasn't bookmarked his favourite parts. He has even agreed to walk his daughter down the aisle because love never entertains the notion of hurting those it truly loves.

Samhain

Alpheus Williams

When the portal opens between the living and the dead. When pumpkins are stacked in fields, hay cut and bailed, when corn, potatoes, turnips are harvested and stored in root cellars for winter, when wood is chopped and heaped for the great fire to celebrate and give thanks for the harvest, to welcome the return of the departed and to usher in the long cold nights of resting earth, it's Samhain. It's Halloween.

Ancient traditions born from nature and time.

Simon hates Samhain, hates its paganism. Hates the reverence for the land and the fear of Wilderwood. Hates stories of Dullahan, headless horrors on black horses, harbingers of death. He hates the Faery Host, kidnappers of children and of the Slauch, stealers of souls.

Simon harboured his contempt, kept it close like the children he abducted and stored in his root cellar. His casual attendance at community functions and his silence helped him remain unremarkable, unnoticed, invisible. Simon nurtured a blandness in his appearance and manner. He was a master of hiding in plain sight. Even his faux timidity escaped notice.

On this night, black horses with flashing red eyes, their riders flaunting decapitated heads dangled from withered hands. A headless woman follows them with a black pig in tow. Scarecrows, witches, ghost, ogres, trolls, ghouls and goblins all march to the sacred fire. Clever costuming. Such a waste of time and energy. Multitudes in costumes from the village and surrounding farms attend the sacred burning. Costumes inspired by local legends and superstitions. Legends and myths that conjured deep fears and prompted many to make ancient gestures and signs to ward off the evil eye. Just to be safe. A village of fools and bumpkins shackled by ancient beliefs and custom, thinks Simon.

Simon is happy with his costume, happy-go-lucky scarecrow, cute and friendly, less likely to frighten, so harmless and so boring he escapes notice among the more mythic, legendary and supernatural regalia. The advantages of this harvest ceremony, anonymity and opportunity for his own dark harvest.

Costumed figures howl and dance around the fire. Offerings of corn and turnips are tossed into the flames and burned in sacrifice. The night wanes on. Sparks dance in the evening sky. The fire dims. Exhausted children curl up

in laps of parents. Some, children in tow, begin to make their way home. Two children, tired and weary with celebration, take the path along the edge of Wilderwood. Simon follows, can't believe his luck, two so much better value than one.

Simon makes merry, skips up beside them, laughs and chats, offers candy. They walk along edge of the wood beside him, young faces, peaches and cream, rosy cheeked, cherubic, trusting. It's the yellow brick road and the wizard of horror.

Is the candy yummy? Excellent! There's more, there's cake, ice cream and soft drink in my larder deep down in the root cellar.

It's too easy. Children, so gullible, so trusting. Open the door of the root cellar, bow and gallantly swing your arm in invitation. Usher them in. Lock and leave. Their screams silenced by layers of earth and heavy wooden door. They will keep like other fruits of the harvest to assuage his hunger through the winter.

Simon sheds his costume, makes for bed, finds an easy untroubled sleep. Sometime later, screams from the root cellar shatter sleep, shrill and loud, blasts the silence. People will hear. People will know. The cellar silences screams and cries. He can't understand. He slips into a dressing gown, grabs a leather lash, rushes to the cellar. A good flogging will silence the two.

The door explodes open, thick heavy wood leans on stressed hinges. Swarms of bat eared creatures, naked and hideous emerge from the depths, overtake him, pin him fast. His screams are frozen when she emerges, naked, skin painted in autumnal colours, of gold, orange, red and brown, long lustrous auburn hair and luminous green eyes. She smiles blows dust in Simon's face.

Darkness and sleep.

He wakes to gentle swaying in the breeze. Bars of a wicker cage surround him. He gazes out through veined branches of a giant yew tree to a sky bedecked with stars and harvest moon. Figures dance round a fire far below him, headless horsemen, the naked lady with the burnished copper hair, a myriad of lost children, and denizens of Wilderwood. His wicker cage descends. They begin to sing. He's never heard anything so beautiful. The cage drops further. Little by little he feels the heat. Warm. Warmer. Hot. Hotter. Sparks dance in the evening sky. A long slow burn. The singing stops. Simon screams.

Between Sky and Earth

Fannie H. Gray

Years later, when the village was no longer a village, when being left-handed or redheaded or homosexual was no longer a crime, people who knew about Gretchen Schwartz referred to her as the girl with heterochromia. When Gretchen met Johan Scherer, he called her a witch.

Before Gretchen Schwartz had been born, no one in the village of Zweifel thought much about the color of eyes. Blue eyed, green eyed, brown eyed alike all worked and harvested, toiled, and praised. No one was wealthy but no one was poor. The day before Gretchen was born, Gunther Schwartz found gold in the stream behind his house. The day after she was born, Marta, mother of his child, died. Perhaps, if Gretchen's eyes had both been blue, or both been brown, no one would have worried about the good luck or the grave misfortune. Gold in the hills was not unusual and death after childbirth was not unusual either. In a different age, the eyes of Gretchen Schwartz might have been celebrated or at least treated with mild curiosity instead of revilement but as is the case with a many a spectacular thing, Gretchen's eyes inspired jealousy and fear.

Because Marta had died, Gunther sent for his mother Fee to help with the baby. Fee was apple-round, warm-scented like cinnamon, a quintessential grandmotherly type long before the birth of her first grandchild. She loved wholly and fiercely and knew the instant she gazed upon Gretchen that the child would need to be protected. Fee and Gunther told the villagers the babe was slight, would need to be closely kept, sheltered to survive. Fee strapped the raven-haired, snow-skinned child to her back and went about the business of the household. Gretchen's earliest memories were of pies bubbling and baking, birdsong underneath thick boughs, meadows full of feverfew. Fee sang songs and recited stories of lovers and warlocks. Gretchen learned to darn socks, spice a stew, skin a rabbit, and churn butter before she was three.

Gunther and Fee knew the days of solitude would one day end. Villagers, by nature, are curious. A huntsman would report hearing a voice to rival an angel's singing. A dairy farmer would tell how his prize heifer had come back to the barn bedecked in garlands. A maid would catch her beau spying on a beauty tending the garden behind the Schwartz house.

And so it happened that this maid, the daughter of the Bürgermeister, became compelled to meet Gretchen Schwartz. Inga was betrothed but it was

a marriage of arrangement. Her intended, the young man spying upon Gretchen, was the son of the Bürgermeister of the neighboring village. Thus, one day, when Fee had gone to market and Gunther was on the hunt, Inga stole into the garden of the Schwartz house. Fee was much beloved but there was village chatter about how her garden grew so well. Some neighbors with less successful gardens secretly harbored beliefs that magic was afoot. Indeed, Inga had never seen chard so large nor so many different colors of zinnias. She was marveling at the wondrous size of the melons and squash when she heard a melodic voice. She took cover beneath elephantine leaves of spinach. She listened raptly to the beautiful rendition of a childhood song she knew well. She was enchanted. When the song ended, she peered out and was met with a gaze that astonished her. A face, round and pure, like alabaster, with a nose straight and small, two black firmly arched eyebrows, full lips which looked berry-ripe and most astonishing of all, an eye the color of the sky and one of warm molasses. Inga fell back upon a cucumber, which loudly squished beneath her. Surely, she had seen the face of fairy or an angel. Could a human have ever been made so beautiful? A delicate laugh, like the tinkling of bells, and then a snow-white hand with long, lovely, tapered fingers extended to her through the tangle of vines and leaves. Gretchen's touch sounded song through Inga's body. Her skin was warm, softer than down. Her grasp was firm but gentle. Gretchen pulled Inga up from the garden patch and the two young women stood scant inches apart. Inga could smell peaches and roses and a scent she would never be able to fully identify. And when words failed to find her, Inga felt hot tears forming as the other girl embraced her and whispered, "Hello. I'm Gretchen."

Gretchen Schwartz had never met another person besides Fee and Gunther. She had never shaken a hand or introduced herself. She did what she always did when she encountered her grandmother or father. She had only known love.

Inga felt her body tighten like a thread pulled fast before tying the knot, and then she felt a flood of warmth, an attraction to another like she had never known possible. She turned her face slightly, finding the girl's pink seashell of an ear and whispered her own name.

It is said that Love cannot be concealed. Unfortunately, for Inga, but most especially for Gretchen, this was true. Johan, Inga's intended, recognized immediately the passion she felt for Gretchen, as he too had such feelings for the mysterious girl. He felt shocked and betrayed watching the two girls

embrace, as well as aroused and angry. The boy stood up from behind the boulder past the garden gate and denounced Gretchen.

“Witch! Harlot! You have bewitched my beloved!”

Inga, recognizing the wrathful voice, freed herself from Gretchen and ran past her, out the garden, down the lane, back to her house and the safety her father would afford her. Gretchen, scared and confused but assured of her own goodness, began to approach Johan. She opened her arms to him, to embrace him and he let fly the arrow which pierced her heart.

In that patch of garden, upon one side blue Forget-Me-Nots bloom year-round; the other side is always fallow, mud-brown and hardened.

Sow seeds carefully.

The Old Man

Marie Gethins

I keep the old man locked away. He's been in a secure vault for years. I used to worry that someone might hear him—interminable entreaties, captivating promises—yet no one else seemed to notice. Until you appeared today.

I know what you're thinking—guilt should be gnawing at me. An easy assumption, but that situation is rather complex. This isn't about self-preservation. A change in his position would have consequences well beyond the two of us.

I first encountered the old man in September 1939. His whispers drifted down from the attic into my room. Pleading, sometimes angry, he called me by name, begged me for release. My grandparents brushed aside my fears as the over-active imagination of a seven-year-old. Later, I learned that my grandfather, a high-level member of MI6, had been entrusted with the old man's care.

Everything changed when the order for the evacuation of London children came through. Arrangements were made with a cousin in Inverness, my worldly goods compressed into a small leather case. The morning of departure my grandfather took me aside. One hand on the family Bible, I recited an oath, then followed him to the attic. The old man's voice grew louder as we approached. Struggling with the seized lock, my grandfather forced the key. The dim room tasted of stale air and dust. I looked for an elderly gentleman among boxes and trunks in the haze, but no one was there. A hollow laugh came from dusky corners—low, rising to fill the space. I covered my ears, yet his mirth continued in my head. My grandfather pulled away my hands. "Listen to him boy, but be careful of his advice." I watched my grandfather pry open a trunk, tossing aside ancient garments. He handed me a small, flat object, wrapped in several layers of dense, black fabric. "It's a sketch of an old man." He grabbed my shoulders, fingers digging into my flesh.

"You must never look at him. Do you understand?" he said.

I trembled.

"Keep the him hidden, but protect this sketch with your life. In the wrong hands..."

Normally so controlled, my grandfather became a stranger. Fear, no, terror. It was there in that room. A drawing? Why did it speak to me? My throat was

clogged with dust and tears. "Do you understand?" I nodded although I did not.

The old man travelled to Scotland in my case that day. No one else on the train seemed to hear his whispers. Nor did my cousins notice a disembodied voice during my years with them. The old man counselled me, comforted me as my world fell apart. Home destroyed, my grandparents killed in the Blitz. I listened. He told me what to say, how to act. At first I resisted, but the old man is patient with centuries of manipulative wisdom.

After the War, I kept him with me at boarding school, finding secure hiding places under his direction. He called me his protégé and said we were destined for great things. While I had academic success, the old man taught me other skills. How to cheat, to influence, to outwit enemies. No one dared cross me. Not just the other boys, but the staff grew to fear my power as well. The old man guided me to special drawers and private journals. Darkest secrets to sell. I picked the lock on Mr. Lewis' desk, held his pictures of French girls for ransom; traded the Headmaster's scotch for essays and exam cribbing.

Schooling complete, I entered the adult world with insight beyond my years. The old man guided my investments. He knew what people craved in good times, as well as bad. My largess brought women. The old man's whispers guided conversations, even seductions. He took over my limbs, pulsed through my veins, shared my inhales and exhales. Always there, he never left me to think or act alone.

I shifted money markets, orchestrated political scandals. However, no deal had enough value, government turmoil a minor amusement. I became insatiable. The old man said the time had come for me to gaze upon him. Only then could I achieve such immense power. Yet, I hesitated.

One autumn night, a storm rattled the windows, while logs sparked in the fire. I heard his words, soft and sweet in my ears, dampening the noise. I began to unwrap the worn black cloth surrounding him. My fingers clung to the fabric, peeling back layers. When a corner of the frame emerged, I heard a moan and dropped it.

I poured a large brandy, liquid quaking in the glass. What did this mean? Hadn't the old man called for me to face him? On weak legs, I walked to the fireplace, gripped the marble. A flash in the over-mantle mirror. Not my reflection, but grandfather's face. "No, don't!" he mimed. I grabbed the sketch and threw it into the fire. The fabric ignited and a pungent odour made me gag. Two disembodied voices argued. I sheltered my head with a cushion, but

couldn't suppress their shouts. When it stopped, I looked up, saw the flames extinguished, but the sketch intact. "You must never look at him." Eyes averted, I wrapped the old man in my jacket. He gave a satisfied laugh.

What have I learned over these wasted decades? Money smooths every path, silences questions before they are asked. Governments posture, make pronouncements, but they are fleeting and inconsequential. History is made behind shadow curtains. Great men are scoundrels.

I found this ancient place, beyond world's end, or so I thought. Fortified and secure. We have lived here, entombed together. I hoped that no one else would hear his call and the world remain safe. You can leave. No? Pity. I feel your hunger. Mark this, he taught me well. Long after you've disposed of my body, the old man will remain within an impenetrable vault, gazing upon eternal gloom, beckoning but always out of your reach.

Preacher's Dilemma

Christopher Stanley

"Are you happy?" asks Clerval.

The preacher sits on a rocky outcrop and stares at the valley below.

The bedroom's timber walls are decorated with hand-drawn butterflies and tricolour rainbows. The rug is strewn with pages torn from picture books and limbs amputated from rubber dolls. The air reeks of excrement and fear.

Strapped to a mattress with lengths of animal hide, the girl's body is the yellow of dried grass, her skin stretched thin enough to reveal a landscape of muscle and bone.

"How long?" asks the preacher.

Kneeling beside the bed, hands clasped in prayer, the mother replies, "Two days."

The girl opens her mouth and searches the air with her tongue. She tilts her head forwards, eyes rolling back into her skull. When she speaks, her voice is an underground cavern, deep and dark and wet.

I am powerful because I feel no fear.

"The sickness spreads," says Clerval. "You need help."

"Who would help us?" asks the preacher.

Clerval nods towards the town in the valley.

"Men are foolish and weak. They know nothing of our ways."

"But they are many. They command vast resources."

"The same can be said for insects."

"What about the cave?"

The preacher scoffs. Everyone knows the cave is forbidden.

The boy is tied to a wooden chair. According to the parents he has not yet learned to speak. The father lifts the boy's vest to reveal a patchwork of yellowed skin stitched together with angry scars. The mother says he was healthy when they put him to bed. She dabs her eyes with a handkerchief.

The preacher towers over the boy. She considers how easy it would be to crush him out of existence. She could crush them all and make her problems go away.

The boy cracks open his creamy-white eyes. Licks his liquorice lips. When he speaks, his voice makes the floorboards vibrate.

Only a monster could love someone like me.

"Your home is the church," says Clerval. "Your purpose is to spread The Creator's word. To remember His name."

"Do you ever wonder why we don't have names?"

"Names are a human invention. You have no need of such sentimental things."

"The Creator had a name. So do you."

"You used to know why," says Clerval. "What else have you forgotten?"

The preacher stands in the entrance to the cave. For nearly two hundred years, her people have occupied this remote corner of the Bolivian wilderness, living in wooden shacks, worshipping in the ruins of a white stone church. They've tended herb gardens and picked meat from the bones of small mammals.

No one has ever set foot in the cave.

Clerval once asked if she was happy. She didn't know how to answer. Her life felt complete, but also small. Then the sickness arrived, and the world grew uncertain. Children turned, as though possessed by some ancient, uncompromising force. Hearing their corrupted voices, witnessing their transformations, the preacher felt something that made all her previous experiences seem trivial.

Something like ... *exhilaration*.

She is unqualified in matters of health, and yet her people still come to her for answers. The choice she must make is superficially simple: place the fate of her flock in the fickle hands of man; or search for answers where no one else dares to look.

She lights a torch of wood and rags, and steps into the darkness.

"This is the Creator,

"This is the monster,

"And these are his victims, one, two, three.

"This is the bride that was made for the monster,

"This is a murder,

"And this ... was me."

Shadows pirouette across the reddish-grey walls. The ceiling is furry with bats, and the floor is slippery with guano. The preacher follows the tunnel until the air grows salty and damp. It leads her down to a cavern, roughly twice the size of the ruined church, where the walls are scarred with paintings.

Dozens of them.

A grand building, a lightning strike, and a sprawling cast of figures. A diminutive male in a suit and cravat. A taller male, ugly and ungainly, with searching eyes and thin black lips. Another male who looks uncannily like Clerval. She sees an angry crowd with pitchforks and lengths of wood raised above their heads. Primitive depictions of violence and bloodshed. Despite Clerval's rhymes, the preacher struggles to make sense of the paintings. She's distracted by the dryness in her mouth and her nervously bleating stomach. And then she finds an image of a female figure, a patchwork woman, her belly swollen with life. A single glimmer of hope in a tableau of despair. The preacher touches her finger to the cheek of a newborn baby.

"Over here," says Clerval.

The preacher raises her torch. On the wall above her companion is a single, elegantly written word.

Frankenstein.

"We are descended from monsters," says the preacher. On the far side of the cavern, gathering dust on the floor, two skeletons sit with their arms entwined. Skulls pressed together like lovers. Bones stitched with metal plates, which sparkle in the dwindling torchlight.

"You *are* monsters," says Clerval.

"I have such doubts."

"Listen to the children. They're tired of pretending to be something they're not."

"And what of you?"

"I'm your companion. A voice of reason."

"Then why do I feel so alone?"

In the depths of the forbidden cave, the torch falters a final time.

The preacher sits on the rocky outcrop, dust clinging to the sweat on her brow. Clerval is gone, maybe forever. In the valley below, there's a town of boxy, pastel-coloured buildings with square windows and sloping roofs. A human town. The preacher considers how easy it would be to surprise the inhabitants, to crack

their skulls and burn their bodies. She knows she must make a choice for her people, the consequences of which will be felt for generations.

Continue to suffer a civilised existence ... or set the children free?

The True Nature of Prometheus

James McPherson

Prometheus stole fire from the workshop of Athena and unbeknown to Zeus descended Olympus to deliver the spark to humankind. The primordial children, themselves forged from cooked clay, looked up from the barren mud at the titan-blooded thief and took the flame. They came to enjoy roasted flesh, lit torches to stave off destroyers lurking at the edges of camps, and settled down — becoming fixed, accumulating knowledge, forming armies. With fire they welded weaponry of iron and then bronze, and melted glass, silver, gold to form shining cities and empires.

Prometheus for his betrayal was chained to a mountain where a winged emissary of Zeus feasts on his liver every day — the bird bluntly pecking through his skin to its soft reward. Prometheus laughs in maddening agony for he knows the gift he has given the young can never be taken back.

But with fire illuminating the way to civilisation came acrid smoke that corrupted the lungs of all those who inhaled it. And humankind, inspired by the knowledge of the first chemical reaction, soon dabbled with sulfur and potassium nitrate to inflict new violent fires. Later, the legacy of the Titan's gift would hang over the plutonium fields of Chernobyl and the cancerous waters of Fukushima. Fire burned carbon now lingers in the skies above a once thankful humanity with melted plastics coating the ocean seas. Cells of the recipients of fire replicate and multiply into formless chaos.

Tumours spread as the liver of the punished endlessly reforms. Prometheus, Titan-blooded trickster lashed to the mountain while the eagle rips through his tender flesh eternally, goes on laughing.

The Cave of Melissani

Emma McEvoy

In every tragic tale, there's an Arcadian before: a moment we wish we could return to; a time when better decisions were possible and wiser paths could have been followed. My before, is not so different.

In this before, I was Melissanthe, nymph of the meadows of Greece, feted for my accomplishments in nature. It was I who taught gods and mortals to tend bees and extract golden nectar from sticky cones. Meli anthe, a name of honey and flowers. Melissanthi, Melissa. My name lives in the after.

In this time before, Pan was simply my friend: trickster and prankster, god of the wilderness, worshipped by shepherds. In this time before, when I looked upon him I felt only camaraderie; sadness for how he was abandoned by his mother; sorrow for the way he was judged for his unconventional looks.

Then came the after, beginning the moment I was shot by an arrow from the bow of Eros. An ache pierced my chest; a stabbing squeeze and release of my heart. I became breathless whenever Pan was near. If I looked at him, my eyes filled with love and hope. But out there in the fields and meadows, he never saw me - there were too many distractions, too many other nymphs.

When he asked me to join him on a journey over the azure seas, past the rocky lands of Ithaca to his cave on the island of Kefalonia, I hoped he had plans for me. I certainly had a happy ending mapped out for us. In that quiet place of beauty, with the waters of the underground lake lapping against the honeyed limestone walls, I knew we were at a turning point: a significant moment; a line was about to be crossed. Everything after would be different. He would finally see me. He would know that mine was the love he needed.

I watched as he scanned the walls of the cavern appraisingly, taking in its rugged charm, the stalactites, the crystallised and calcified water droplets glinting like precious jewels. The magical beauty of the place spurred me on. I longed to touch him; to lay my head against his chest; to sleep tangled in his limbs; to have him gaze upon me with eyes reflecting the love I felt. And so I reached with hope-filled hands, traced my fingertips across his shoulders, so soft and sun-kissed. Then he looked at me, his eyes wide and filled with panic - a feeling which transferred itself to me. I was a fool! Rejected and wretched. My cries rang out through the silence of the cave, echoing off the glittering walls. I backed away, blinded by tears. I stumbled and fell.

An icy blast of water stole my breath; ears thundered as I plunged down beneath the surface, through the turquoise, the azure, the emerald depths of this underground lake. I did not fight or kick, preferring to sink than swim forever in a sea of unrequited love.

Melissa, Melissanthe, Melissani.

My name lives in the after.

The Woman of Thorns and the Honeycomb Queen

Lyndsey Croal

Deep in the Otherworld, in the land between life and death, the Queen sat on her honeycomb throne as visitors from all the realms presented their gifts. Nectar, mead, silk, gold – always the same every season, year on year. An endless cycle. And the Queen would have to sit and be gracious, even when all she wanted to do was return to her room where she could be left alone.

Everyone knelt and lay the offerings at her feet one by one, and they'd make their requests of the Queen – a healthy harvest, thriving businesses, true love, or a happy family. In return, she'd carve off a fragment from her honeycomb throne and present its magic to them, feeling herself weaken with each cut. 'Your Queen is most grateful,' she'd say. 'May your home be protected, your days be bountiful, and may all your wishes come true.'

And so it went as the days wore on. Her throne gradually became depleted of honey while her energy waned, until the final visitor of the week approached. The woman was unlike anyone the Queen had ever seen – she wore a long yellow silk dress, and her face was covered by a mask of thorns. But before she could make her offering, the Queen's guard stepped between them, a poison-tipped sceptre in hand. 'You're not on the list,' he said, holding the weapon in a point towards the woman's chest. Behind them, the Queen's wings whirled in a drumbeat thrum. 'The week's festivities are over,' the guard added.

But the woman of thorns was not perturbed. 'You must have time for one more offering. For I have come so far, and I wish to present a different kind of gift,' she said. 'A performance. A dance, for my Queen.'

The Queen's eyes lit up, and she waved the guard away – he stepped back, though still kept a watchful eye on the visitor. 'And what do you seek in return?' she asked the woman of thorns.

'Only to spend a moment in the company of my Queen, and hopefully make her smile. That is enough for me.'

The Queen couldn't help but smile at that. She'd always loved to dance, and it had been a long time since she'd been allowed to attend any ceilidhs, or even had the energy to. The realms took so much from her. 'Then please, begin.'

The woman of thorns bowed low, then began her dance in rhythm with the Queen's buzzing wings. As she waltzed, ribbon-like vines stretched from her arms moving in mesmerising patterns, while flowers bloomed in her hair –

sunflowers that had always been the Queen's favourite, even though she had forgotten that until now. In her final act, the woman of thorns reached into her pocket and presented a handful of pollen-like dust. With a swift pirouette, she turned and blew the pile straight into the guard's face. Before anyone could react, he collapsed. Moments later, as the pollen swirled around the throne room, the rest of their company followed suit, falling one after the other into a deep slumber. All except for the Queen, who rose from her throne, eyes darting to the doors as if expecting someone to burst through them and call this all a big charade. But no one else came. 'Who are you?'

The woman of thorns removed her mask. 'Please don't worry my love, I've come to rescue you.'

And as the pollen swirled in the air, the Queen remembered. The masquerade of the Otherworld lifted. So long she had been here, between life and death, doing her captors' bidding, pretending to be a Queen, letting herself wither while the realms around her flourished. So long she had spent her days bound by the whims of all but herself.

No more.

'You found me,' the Queen said, stepping down from her throne, gazing at the woman from her past life. Though the memories were still vague, she remembered she'd once loved her, long ago, in the land above, where time passed by as easy as the clouds, with days and nights, and weeks and months, and moments to cherish, and people to love. A place without wings or magic, but where she could dance freely without someone watching her every move. 'I've been waiting so long to be released from this prison,' she added.

The woman of thorns smiled. 'I travelled from above and below in search of you, but now it is time to come home. Things will be clearer then, your mind will become as sharp as thorns, as it once was.'

As the fog started to clear in her mind, the Queen felt a warmth in her chest, as sweet and pure as honey. She took the hand of the woman of thorns, and together they fled the Otherworld, leaving only a pollen trail and a sleeping kingdom in their wake.

An Easterly Wind

Tracy Fells

One corner of Nanna's herb plot was reserved, and roped off, for her "special" plants. Here she grew the mandrake. When dug up, its curvaceous root system weirdly resembles a human body, albeit a pretty twisted and deformed one, fuelling superstitions and folklore of its magical powers.

Mandragora officinarum is a plant with leaves and roots containing hallucinogenic alkaloids that can lead to psychotropic events when absorbed through the skin.

Fiction writers have long-harnessed the mythology of how the screams of a mandrake pulled from the ground can kill. Even with ear defenders the piercing sound can deafen someone. Or make them stand at the bus-stop, barefoot in their dressing gown and best hat, patiently waiting for the double-decker seaside special of childhood holidays.

Mandragora is sometimes used in homeopathic medicine, believed to induce a soothing sleep. In medieval times it was carved into amulets to encourage good fortune or help a barren woman become pregnant. In witchcraft it is a key ingredient in flying ointments.

I begged my parents to let Nanna heal herself. But when the policeman returned her from the bus-stop, they argued how it was no longer safe for Nanna to live independently. Her root system was compromised, her mind confused. A new home, one with round-the-clock care, would be best.

Before Nanna lost her hearing, she taught me an incantation, to be learned and recited only from memory. On a cloudless night when the Wolf Moon was full, I crept out to Nanna's special plants, tied a black cord around the mandrake's stem, and whispered her words as I pulled its gnarled root from the ice-clogged soil.

After removing her cardigan, I massaged the home-made salve into her scarecrow thin arms. I couldn't find a recipe, since she never wrote anything down, and ground up every bit of the plant, root and leaves, finally adding a dollop of her favourite face cream and blitzed the resulting grey-green porridge in the blender for good measure. For the first time in months, she was sleeping soundly when I tiptoed into her bedroom. Lightly kissing Nanna's flushed cheek, I wished for fair weather and an easterly wind to carry her safely to the seaside. Before leaving, I unlatched and opened wide the window.

The Woman Who Carries Time

Vicky MacDonald Harris

The great calendar was demanding in her arms, chained to her, like a methodical love. Mios carried it with her everywhere, and everyone who saw her, saw her fidelity curse.

"How can she stand carrying the weight of time?"

"She can never hug anyone properly."

"She can never make love, to see past that damned calendar," they worried.

Everyone pitied the time woman, for all she could not do. Mios did not feel the supposed curse. She saw it as a threshing of people, those who could imagine and those who could not. She felt their curse, not being able to imagine possibility, the much more luridly evil curse in her opinion. Though they couldn't see it, their time blindness gave her the veil of anonymity, that time wasn't watching. Like feeling young again, though she would never know that. Before she was plucked by her father to carry his burden, she too lamented those who carried their weights and choices slung around their necks, or in their arms. Her naivete did not serve her so her father chose her for that reason, so time was both her burden she loved, and her savior.

Mios enjoyed the weight of the days, the bird flight of the months, the foundation of the years, and the galaxies of millennia. She would meet someone, very occasionally, who did not notice her calendar. They saw the true gleam of the glacial blue of her eyes, like old, compressed ice revealed, she had no covering, and was exposed to everyone else's judging eyes. They could only see her filtered through their own inadequate eyes, that could not see the ages, only saw the calendar, and like scars, it became all they could see of her.

Those one in a million, that saw her glacial eyes, and empty arms, were a delight. To have someone see the light of you, and smile when they did, took the weight of time away from her. She could rejoice in those moments, even though she would never give up her duty, no, her calling, her prison, as the woman who carries time.

The calendar was an infinity of pages, and no matter how fast time passing felt, or how slowly, the calendar never lost any pages. Mios knew the calendar never got lighter, but satisfyingly, never got heavier either.

Thor Made a Friend

Hannan

Thor's goats, Tanngrusnur and Tanngnjsotor; for the sake of pronunciation, Tooth-Grinder and Tooth-Gnasher, were very useful animals. They dragged the god's chariot.

When he travelled to far lands for battle, he could kill and eat them and then he could wrap their bones inside their skins and the following morning they would be revived and ready for the onward journey.

Efficient, was the word.

But they couldn't talk. Thor had nobody to laugh at his stories and he had so many to tell because he had travelled to, and killed, in all nine realms. Travel and death like bangers and mash, always go well together.

Once, on his way to Midgard, Thor was staying with a poor man called Cyril, who had no meat for supper. Thor had no time for salad. Salad was a coward's meal, so he slaughtered Tooth-Gnasher and Tooth-Grinder and shared the meat with Cyril and his family, warning them that no one should split the bones to get at the juicy marrow within because that's where the magic was.

On the following morning, when the goats were reconstituted, Tooth-Gnasher was visibly limping. Thor furiously demanded who had disobeyed him.

All was quiet at the breakfast table.

For the family's insolence, a sacrifice had to be made.

The son, Pete.

But as Thor tied the noose, he had an idea.

What if Cyril gave up Pete? He had a teenager's wit (not an oxymoron) that made Thor laugh.

Cyril was ecstatic. His son would survive and Thor would have someone to share his stories with.

But Thor could not deal with the teenager, and Pete was not impressed by the god's stories.

'You realise you didn't have to kill all those people,' Pete said after Thor told him about the battle of Hatchet Lake, 'you could have just killed the captain and the rest would have surrendered.'

Pete was not tame and loyal like the goats. He would run around, always wanting to fight and he pulled on his cock even more times than Thor. He didn't know such a thing was possible.

'Par always said if something's good a little, it's good a lot.'

Odin shifted in his chair as Thor dumped all of his troubles.

'You need to spay him,' Odin said, 'poor lads got all those hormones rushing round him. Spaying is kind. It's better for him'

'That's barbaric,' Thor said.

'Keeping humans as pets is tricky business,' Odin said, 'but I've made an art of it.' This was true. Odin had fifty-seven human pets and to help them deal with the situation he called them demi-gods. Whatever great deeds they did, whatever great test they overcame, when Odin whistled, they always ran back and salivated at his feet.

'Has he started peeing yet?' Odin said.

'Of course. The other night the bugger pissed right on my pillow.'

'That's because he's marking his territory. This is natural. Impulsive. You must knock this out of him. You want him docile and lazy so you can train him. Unless you're looking to breed him and sell his brood. I hear Loki's in the market.'

'No,' Thor said, 'I can't do it. I won't do it.'

'Nonsense,' Odin said, 'get your blade, spit on the area to numb it, then lop 'em off. The lad won't even notice they're gone. Have you got him his own bowl yet?'

'His own bowl?'

'Aye,' Odin said. 'Lad needs a bowl. He needs to know when and where he can get his food. Have you got him a bed? Have you scraped him for ticks? Get Loki to give him a rune so you can track him if he gets pinched. Freya's still pretty pissed off at you for what you did to her serpent. You want to be able to find him if he goes missing.'

Thor didn't know if he had the bottle to index Pete at the official registry and he had no idea about grooming regimes. Wasn't having a human supposed to be about talking and having fun and having someone to cuddle with in the depths of Fimbulwinter.

Anxiety penetrated Thor like mismanaged acupuncture. Should he have taken Pete from Cyril?

'Having a human is a big responsibility,' Odin said, 'and don't you dare think

you're fobbing him off onto me.'

Thor reckoned the best way to do the deed was to sneak up behind Pete and catch him off guard.

He crouched down low in the spiky wreaths like an ice-tiger and shuffled closer to Pete who chomped on Tooth-Grinder's trotter.

'I can hear you,' Pete said as he picked meat from his teeth.

'Bugger,' Thor said.

'What were you doing?' Pete put down the trotter.

Thor showed him his blade that had a strip of fine silver down the edge.

'Recently sharpened,' Thor said, 'sorry mate, but I've been told I need to take your balls off.'

'Why? That's a bit strange isn't it. Won't they just grow back like the goat's,' he said pointing to a stew with two perfectly spherical testicles bobbing about on the surface like hard-boiled eggs.

'No,' Thor said, 'you're not like the goats. You're more special.'

'So why do you want to take my balls?' Pete said.

'Because you're too rowdy. You piss everywhere. You eat too much. You're always sarcastic. And you drink my mead.'

'Aren't you just describing yourself,' Pete said, 'and what the bloody hell were you like when you were fourteen?'

'Oh goodness I was ten times worse than you mate,' Thor said. 'I once skinned Loki's rabbit just for the shit's and giggles.'

'And did you get your testicles removed?'

'No.'

'It's a funny old world,' Pete said as he dropped his trousers and presented himself.

'What are you doing?' Thor said.

'The last thing Par said to me was "always please your master." So here you go, I'm making it easy for you.'

The Heroic Men of Kammet Town

David Cook

Papa sat back against the huge rock and stretched. He was old, but still strong. His arms flexed like thick rope. I kneeled to lay out the picnic Mama had packed for us: sandwiches, apples, flasks of hot tea.

'I remember when they rose up,' he began, and I was tempted to roll my eyes. I'd heard this story many times. But I knew better than that, now.

'We didn't know about them. We hadn't explored this stretch of land much. But we needed building materials to help the town expand. To stop growing is to stagnate. To grow, build, conquer the land... that, lass, is to be free.'

I thought about the weighty, rough stone our cottage is built with.

'They rose from the ground, stood up right in front of us, huge, fifteen feet tall. We ran. What else could we do? We'd never seen anything like it. We scampered back to our homes. But then, after a day or two, I led a group of men back here. Nearly an army. We came with weapons.'

'Did they try to hurt you, Papa?'

Papa slurped tea. 'They were gigantic, but they were slow and we outnumbered them eight to one. And, of course, we had our pickaxes. Hammers, too. Crude, but enough.'

I'd heard about this at school. How the brave menfolk had swarmed over the Stone Giants and beaten them down with hundreds and thousands of blows. 'There was nothing they could do against the heroic men of Kammet Town,' my teacher had said, a big, proud smile on his face.

'So the Stone Giants didn't fight back, Papa?'

'No, Janey,' said Papa, puffing his chest out. 'They were too cowardly for that.'

I imagined Papa astride the shoulders of one of the towering monoliths, pummeling it with his pickaxe, his arms rising and falling relentlessly.

There were other huge rocks lying nearby, plus assorted piles of pebbles, the last remnants of the Stone Giants. I pictured them striding the earth, covering a mile in a single step, tall enough to pluck the clouds from the sky.

We finished our picnic. Papa used the body of the Stone Giant he'd been sitting against to push himself to his feet. 'Tomorrow,' he said, studying its rugged surface, 'I'll come back and smash this one up some more. We must keep building. Young Jenny Tread is due to marry the Malloy lad in the summer. They'll need a house. The work never stops.'

He strode away. As I turned to follow, I saw something shift on the surface of the stone. A trick of the light? As I looked closer, the Stone Giant opened an eye and stared directly at me. The white hot rage in its gaze chilled me to my stomach. Then, as quickly as it had opened, it closed again.

Had that really happened? Or was it simply my imagination?

I wasn't sure. I decided not to tell Papa either way.

The Cunning Vane

Emily Macdonald

When I tell you the tales—there are seven in total—you will recoil. But know this: I see you. You scurrying folk, keep your eyes downcast. You don't look up unless startled by a sharp thunderclap or heavy-feathered ravens, cry-cawing as they swarm to their roosts.

And so, we weathervanes see you. Your desires, sins, and deceptions. We watch, we plot, and we wait. To witch is to know and knowing fortifies—gives me potency. I am a seer, truth, and wisdom. And yes, I can make trouble too.

On a new moon Monday, the first man chose me, glorying in my intricate metal work. He hauled me to the apex, struggling to balance on treacherous roof tiles. I knew him as covetous, but I steadied his legs, patient until he fastened me before I struck-dazzled—tempting him with a diamond ice-drop hanging from the end of my nose. He slipped when he reached, clawing the empty air.

The next man took better notice. He'd pause to learn by the wind streaming my cloak, the peak of my crooked hat. Those were peaceful years, flying over flattened fens, sodden earth cut by the still black waters of seeping sea, the sky helix dotted with starlings. Blown by the south-westerly, I saw red setting suns—the sunrise too—I have eyes in the back of my head. It pleased me, seeing the promise of storms. The air, whistling into hurricanes, the sea heaving into mountainous tides, whipped with lacerating sands.

The buffeting honed my thoughts. I shrank, hunched over, into myself, defined by my visions I rode, balanced, poised, into the weather. Weather I predicted and manipulated as my fury grew.

I rehearsed with sudden gusts, snatching at hair, loosening hay-bales. I cracked a rotten tree with sharp lightning, so it jawed, cleaved in two. I flooded a river into a torrent of slurry, drowning a fair child. I repented my lack of attention—it set me back for many long years.

When my father bound me in iron, I was a girl of fourteen. Beautiful, forthright, but disturbed by visions. I became sweating, wild-eyed in seeing the truth about men; the feeble who wrestle their conscience and the wicked who indulge their worst inclinations, the evil curdled in weak bitter hearts. My father included—how he murdered my mother, taking her money, lying in her quilted bed with a new young wife, even while his eye roamed again.

I named him. Cursing him, I called out in my sleep, detailing crimes, and secreted corruptions.

Too afraid to slit my throat, my father locked me in iron fastenings. I shrank, became hard blackened until not even a blacksmith could fathom where I finished, and the metal began.

The second who came was a thoughtful man, wise in his way. But restless, I felt a growing compulsion to act. I left him be until one testing Tuesday when—out of character—he lost his temper, kicking his horse who reared, startled by hissing hoar frost, caught crystalline white, sparking in winter sun against the oozing black creek. Furious, thrown hard, and sopping, he beat and whipped his frightened animal, wrenching tufts from its mane.

I trampled him, hooves cracking his breastbone, pulped tissue driven into the sods. I felt a momentary regret, but more—liked it—the memory curls my lip.

You can still hear the whinnying horse roaming free on the fens.

The third was proud, a pompous man. He threatened to replace me with a winged golden angel soaring high under a Christian cross.

I teased and tormented, playing with his cognisance. Whirling on my compass, spinning in tightening circles, unravelling his senses until he ran, maddened, despairing. I beat him with hailstones, sent him skidding onto a yeoman's pitchfork, the prongs spaced at satisfying intervals through his heart, liver, and guts.

The fourth? A gluttonous flutter-brained type, uncertain as mid-March sun and sudden squalls. I found his dithering tiresome and struck him with lightning as he straddled a fence. I split him—pared like two halves of plump peach.

The fifth—engorged with lust—bullied his meek, exhausted wife, bothering her nightly, bellowing and clenching. I led him, tempted, and blinded with promises, to ride in base desire, clasp a hairy goat until it kicked, blistering him in glorious pustulation. He burst, his seed bloodied and festering.

By now, I heralded surges to slash, biting the cliffs. I drove winds to flatten crops and rains to run rivulets unsettling the ground.

The sixth was stupid and lazy. He ignored warnings, a self-deceiving King Canute, his land slip-sliding away. The storm surge I mustered left him bloated by the boiling tide, battered by shingle, tickled by sandhoppers, swarming with flies.

There came a barren time. Fearful, the people deserted, recoiled from the

scenes of my deeds. I twirled, brooding on my perch.

At last, the seventh one came despite whispers of cursed, bewitched and cruelly murdered men. Grasping, he sought to benefit from others' distress, taking land for a farthing as folk abandoned, retreating from the sea.

Resolute, I chose the day, taking Thursday's hammer strike to clap shudder thunder. I summoned storms, I frenzied breakers. Salt gnawed the mortar, weakening foundations, timbers buckled, collapsing in pitiful piles. The encroaching sea took hungry mouthfuls, but he tried to save me—calculating the value of my iron fastening.

I speared his shrunken heart with my vane arrow. I fancy he saw my young, winsome self, before seeing made me hard and ugly. I dragged him under the furious water. The eels took his eyes, worms and molluscs slid into cavities.

Now the fish dart through empty sockets. Picked bones are white in the gloam.

The fishermen pray before setting to sea, to cleanse their hearts and minds. They say for the sinful unpardoned, a dizzying eddy can form. A rapid sucking whirlpool, where the knowing witch still spins and spins.

Sister Of The More Famous Jack

Alison Wassell

It is a little-known fact that Jack, of beanstalk fame, had an older sister.

She would, perhaps, tell a different tale if only she was given a voice.

Of how the precious cow was neither the first nor the last thing belonging to their poor, careworn mother that Jack sold to feed his habit.

Of how the magic beans turned out to be neither magic, nor beans.

Of how the only things scattered were shattered hopes and dreams, all that grew where they fell lies, which self-seeded, begetting more lies.

Of how what cast a shadow over their once upon a time home was not a beanstalk, but despair.

Of how it was she who saved them all, braved the giant's lair, stole the goose and its golden eggs, which she sold, clearing Jack's debts and paying for his rehab.

Of how she reclaimed the happy ever after they had all believed lost, with never a word of thanks from her brother.

Of how, despite all this, their mother still loved Jack the best.

Mirror, Mirror

Rachel O'Cleary

Regina

Vain? The hell I am. I don't even own a mirror. I don't need one. I can see everything I need to know written on his self-satisfied face.

He used to look at *me* with longing. I spent years thinking that there was something I could do to help him remember. To make him turn to me, again, when I crawled into bed next to him. But it wasn't just younger women at parties, not just maids and dancers and other men's wives. It was her. I saw how he looked at her. His own daughter, as young as she was.

Blanche

I'd give anything for men to stop looking at me that way. Anything. You know, I was only seven when that huntsman led me into the dark forest and forced me to watch as he killed a boar, blood gathering in the grooves of his hands as he pulled her insides out. I don't think I'll ever forget the way he stared at me with watery eyes while he did it, whispering to himself about how 'fair' I was. His shaky voice, asking me if I wanted to live. Asking how *badly* I wanted to live. The echoes. Squeals and gasps and streaky red fingerprints that I kept finding for weeks after, no matter how hard I scrubbed in the bath.

Regina

I didn't tell that brute to kill her, just to take her away. True, I didn't much care what happened to her after that. I just couldn't stand to look at her any more. Couldn't stand the earnest way she looked back at me, like she thought I could help. There was so much she didn't understand. The poor thing couldn't even remember her own mother.

Nobody seems to remember Callista, apart from me. I used to watch her from a distance as I walked along the ramparts, my hand tucked in my mother's. Later, I would stand in front of darkened windows and practice moving like her: the straight set of her shoulders, the way she tossed her hair, the unpracticed lightness of her step.

I saw, too, what that infant girl did to her. The way the lovely young queen's body sighed and sagged. Her sleepless, ashy complexion. Her cold, flat eyes. That's when his eye turned to me. I was so certain I could keep him, that I had

learned from her mistakes. But however careful I was never to bear a child of my own, I couldn't keep the furrows from gathering in the corners of my eyes. I couldn't stop the pink from blossoming on the girl's white cheeks.

So, yes. When the huntsman brought me that heart in the wooden box, I admit I was a little relieved. But I did try to do what was right. The next morning, I stole away in the soft gleam of sunrise and buried her heart beneath the old yew tree at the top of the hill, so at least she could be with her mother.

Blanche

My arms and legs were etched with a map to every thorn in the forest. I'd clambered over mountains and fought off wild beasts. I could've learned to like the quiet days of scrubbing. Of washing, sewing, and cooking for seven hungry men. But their eyes. Their shrewd little eyes. The clunk of the key in the lock, and their eyes always on my body. The quiet little murmurs of, "Oh good heaven! This child is so beautiful!"

Regina

They've found the iron shoes and buried them in the white-hot coals at the bottom of the fire. I can smell the sharp tang of the hot metal, can taste it at the back of my tongue. They are nearly ready for the softened flesh of my spoiled royal feet.

I probably deserve what is coming to me, but not for the reasons they say. I didn't poison any goddamn apple. I wasn't even there. But these men - convinced that any one of us could be Eve to their poor, innocent Adam - they need to believe it.

The poor child had obviously had enough, that's all. I can't say I've never thought about it myself, but I haven't got half her courage. I'm afraid of what awaits me in the next life.

Blanche

Maybe he *did* rescue me. How am I to know where I'd be now, if not for him? Maybe I need only tuck myself away in the dark corners of this castle, so unlike the glass coffin where I lay on display when he found me and snatched me up like a jewel for his collection. Maybe in the years to come - when the soft hills of my snow-white cheeks begin to sink, when my lips fade to dusty pink, and my ebony hair is streaked with gray - maybe then, I'll finally be free.

The Others

Nora Nadjarian

The sea never ended when we were in it and we always wanted more, please, more, please, as we plunged, and our mothers called us from the shore and we pretended not to hear them. Our skin and hair and face all salty and our mothers on the shore, waiting, with their aprons on, our fathers in the coffee shop, drinking ouzo and cheap wine, playing backgammon, rolling the dice. On occasion so drunk they could barely speak or count or walk home.

We'd hide our sealskins in our dark sea cave at the far end of the beach, where no one would dare to go, where the sea curled dark and licked jagged cliffs, where our voices echoed, reckless with freedom. We called out words and parts of them came back to us. Freedom, *dom*, Madness, *ness*, Fun, *fun*... We'd sing and laugh while swimming back to the shore. We dried each other out, put our plaid skirts and white blouses and flat shoes back on, walked home. The crack-of-dawn pink tinted our skins and we could almost hear our mothers mutter in their sleep, like Queens in forgotten fairy-tales, "Our daughters! What shall we do about our wilful daughters!" We'd snigger into each other's faces, part ways and said we'd meet the following night, same time. I'd hurry into bed, my bed, I'd place my wet head on my pillow which smelled so sweet, so human.

There were three of us. There were three of us together, always: Maria and Koull and I, our whole childhood a strange story of knowing and not knowing, believing and not believing, being told and not being told where we came from. I told them once that I was sure I'd been adopted, that my parents couldn't possibly have had me, and that I wanted to meet my real parents under the sea. Maria and Koull had life stories with asterisks on every other sentence, and the space next to each asterisk had been left blank. As slippery as fish, our lives.

At school, they called Koull the slut. Her mother had run off with the young, scarred sailor, abandoning a dark newborn whose cries pierced her grandmother's ears. She told us she'd been with a foreign man in the summer, a tourist, who had photographed her underwater for an exhibition he was preparing back in Germany. The title of his exhibition was 'The Others', said Koull. "Maybe this is us," she said, "this name. Maybe we are not these, but those, not this, but that." That other. He loved her, the tourist said. He asked

her not to leave. "But I am mine, not yours," she told him, "I am an Other and can never be like you."

"We could never be like them, baby," said Maria. "Not even if we tried for a million years." She called everyone Baby, smoking cigarette after cigarette. Energy spilled out of her. Her ribs, so thin and prominent, her body alert, fast and sinewy, restless on land, slick in water. And they all admired her from afar. "Sweetheart... so strong, so strong, how is that possible?" And she replied: "Baby, do you know what weakness tastes like? Like blood and broken teeth. I've tasted both." I loved her with all my heart. The way she walked alongside me, the way she showed me how to be.

The day I put make up on for the first time, my head was pounding in the heat. The eye shadow was the shiniest I could find in the drawer where I kept my secrets, the lip gloss made my lips look lusciously bold, and the low-cut sequin dress clung to me like a second skin. When the light hit the sequins, I looked like I was on fire. And I was. I was finally going to be the person I'd dreamt of being, for as long as I could remember. In the mirror there was a tall, pale girl with bright green eyes and long, black hair.

I'd told my family, they knew. My father had slapped me when I'd started wearing skirts. The weight of his hand on my face, and the perfume bottle had gone flying, smashed against the wall, left an orange stain there. A red mist hung in the air, smelled of the pain of a thousand words of abuse. And I crawled out, crawled out of the hole, day after day, with Koull and Maria telling me "Yes", telling me "Baby, yes", telling me "Yes, we are who we imagined ourselves to be.'

As I walked in my heels past the coffee shop and the dark-clothed men rolled the dice, my bracelets clicked against each other, my heart and lungs filled, I held my head high. I was finally becoming.



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