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Mythic Circle #39

Gwenyth E. Hood

Marshall University

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ILLUSTRATIONS
Emily Metcalf: Cover illustration.
Bethany Abrahamson: p. 60 and back cover.
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THE WOOING OF THE DOORLEY
by
A.A. Azariah-Kribbs

In the days when cities were towns and towns were villages and villages were little farms, there was a farmer, Coinneach de Barra. His crops grew timely and rich, and his livestock were healthy and happy. For miles around and some, there was no farm like De Barra’s. Folk would travel from miles to his door to buy butter, which tasted like the best butter a cow could give and a wife could churn.

Few grudged Coinneach de Barra his luck. He was generous and kind. But it was common knowledge that his plot of land, which was rough for a farm and not promising to look at, was blessed. Coinneach and his wife Mary always gave a pat of their best butter and bread to the Doorley.

The Doorley lived in a little house in the lea of a tree. The house was built for him by Coinneach and Mary. The day after they had met the Doorley at the forest’s edge (and a black daunting forest it was, too), the farmer and his wife put their heads together and built him a little room. It was one room with a door.

“This is a home for me,” said the Doorley. Now the farmer made the fairy’s help no secret. He and his wife were proud of him and fond as if he were their son. He was only just small and slender and handsome as any young man, with only a little strangeness in his eyes. On his shoulders folded a pair of beautiful raven wings that the farmer’s wife brushed till the black feathers shone almost blue.

Talk of the Doorley spread. People began to want a Doorley for themselves. Many schemes were hatched to catch the Doorley. Folk promised him riches and some would have taken him by force. But the Doorley’s magic was quick. He laughed at the potions and charms meant to bind his magic, and cast an enchantment to make his home invisible. Because he was a little wicked, the Doorley liked to play mean but harmless tricks on neighbors and those who wandered too near him in the wood, confusing them with strange sights and sounds.

For all that, the Doorley’s mischief at others’ expense was not to last. For all that, she came.

She was a young woman in blue. Her name was Iona. She wore a belt around her waist with a leather pouch on it and carried a knobby, rude-looking stick over her shoulder. Her feet were bare and dusty. When she reached the Doorley’s tree she didn’t know it because of course, his house was invisible, but down she sat to rest in the soft green grass. The wind was cool and soothing and she fell asleep.

The Doorley saw her dirty feet and dress and for once, his mischievous heart was softened. When the birds sang he hushed them to let her sleep, and she woke to his hushing. When she saw him she gasped. He was startled himself, and vanished before her eyes.

Iona picked up her stick and went on. She couldn’t sleep after that. When she reached the farmer’s house she bowed in greeting and after an introduction, offered the farmer and his wife a fine gold bracelet.

“Ah,” said Mary, sadly, “you have come.

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to buy our Doorley.”

“Not at all,” said Iona. “I’ve come to buy your farm. Perhaps he will not mind new tenants.”

“Perhaps not,” said Coinneach. “But perhaps you do not understand him. Over the years he has been our friend and like our own child. What will you do if he should follow us and leave you in this hard place?”

The young woman hung her head. All she had ever owned was in her pouch, and the golden bracelet was all her fortune. She remembered the poor parents and siblings she had left with a promise of better fortune. The farmer and his wife kept her to dinner, but she could not bear to stay the night.

The moon was high in the sky when she saw the Doorley standing by the road.

“You have something dear,” he said. “Let me see it.”

She reached in her pouch and took out the bracelet.

“Not that,” he said. “Something else.”

She looked at him in surprise. She reached again in her pouch and, hesitating, gave him a wooden toy.

“My little sister gave it to me,” she said. “She made it.”

The Doorley stood with the toy in his hands. His strange eyes took it in.

“Yes,” he said. “For this I will give you gold.”

Iona was tempted. But she shook her head.

The fairy returned the toy.

“Aye,” he said. “This is far more than silver or gold. Go to your loved ones and never leave them.”

Iona remembered what the farmer had said about the fairy being a son to them. In an instant, she thought she understood.

She returned to her house but could not forget the Doorley. That brief moment of understanding left her more lost than ever before.

“I know how to win the Doorley,” she said to her parents at last. “I’m going back to try.”

This time Iona did not bring the bracelet or any gold. She brought her sister’s toy, her father’s fiddle, her mother’s Old Book of Poetry, and the family’s Alphabetical Guide to Wisdom.

The next day she stood in the place where she had slept in the woods. Iona still did not know that she was outside the Doorley’s house, but she remembered she had seen him there.

She sat down and read aloud from the Old Book of Poetry. It was not long after beginning that she realized she was not alone.

“What are you doing?” asked the Doorley.

“I’m reading,” she said. “Listen.”

And she read a tender poem written by one of the greatest poets who ever lived, about love.

The fairy laughed.

“Is that why you’re here?” he asked. “For love?”

His question made her turn a significant red. “Of course not,” she said. “I thought you might like it.”

“I don’t,” said the fairy. He looked past her to the dark green wood. It was early morning and the night crickets were still singing. “Listen,” he told her, “their music is more natural. It is their own. That is what I like.”

He turned to go.

Iona raised her father’s fiddle. The tune she struck was moving enough to make the fairy stop and listen. His strange eyes misted with dreaming and tenderness, and he sank on his knees in the grass, listening to her.

She stopped playing and he raised his head.

“Listen,” he said.

He snapped his thumb and finger, and there was a little harp. Bending to the instrument, he played. Iona forgot herself for the beauty of his song; by the finish she was crying like a baby.

“You see?” he said. “You and I are
appealing to the Spirit of Free Wind, and passion. It’s a magic beyond either of us.”

She leapt at his reply. “Do you want to know the wind?” she asked, opening *The Alphabetical Guide to Wisdom*. There were maps of water and wind currents, diagrams of the movement and names of the stars. Iona was so intent that she did not stop reading until the Doorley put his finger on her lips. To her surprise, he looked at her in pain.

“No more,” he said. “I’d rather not know.”

“Why not?”

“There is no wonder in it,” he said. “But there is.” She moved closer to show him. “Have you ever seen anything like it?”

He followed her hand. His face softened.

“No,” he said. “I haven’t.”

And before she could speak again, he was gone.

Iona was hurt. She did not know why he had left her. Now she felt foolish as well as sad, for thinking she had understood him when she hardly understood herself. She picked up her fiddle and books. She did not realize that the farmer, Coinneach, was watching.

“You came back,” said the farmer. His smile was kind. Iona hung her head in shame.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be sorry,” he replied. “I saw you both and you were wonderful.”

“But he doesn’t like me.”

“How is that important?”

She looked at him with wide eyes.

“When you came here last,” said the farmer, “you wanted the farm. Now it seems you will take our Doorley after all.”

She started to shake her head. “No, I don’t—”


Iona took out her sister’s toy. She told the farmer what the Doorley had said to her. “He loves you,” she said. “You are his as he is yours—you are family. And he made me prove to myself, that there are things worth much more than wealth. Fiddles, poetry—they are poor men’s bread, but my parents, my brothers and sisters, are rich as kings living and dreaming to them. Now he makes me think there are other things worth dreaming as well. Like—like crickets.”

The farmer listened. “Come in and eat with us,” he said. “I’d like to hear about the crickets.”

The next day Iona sat outside the Doorley’s house. She listened to the crickets. She watched the clouds showing white through the knobby green branches. She sang under her breath, an unrhymed song of ups and downs. And while she sang she realized she was not alone.

“Oh,” said the Doorley. “Now that is your own.”

She reached inside her pouch and held out her sister’s rough toy. “Here,” she said. “I want you to have it.”

He looked surprised. “It is your sister’s.”

“It’s mine,” Iona replied. “My sister gave it to me. Now I’m giving it to you.”

He took it, warm from her hands. “Why?” he asked. “Do you want gold?”

“Someone offered me gold for it,” she said. “I didn’t take it. Someone else told me that if I gave it up, I might get something better.”

“Who told you that?”

“A hope.”

The Doorley’s strange eyes flickered.

“What will you get for it?” he asked.

“I hope,” said Iona, “that I will get a friend.”

“You already have a friend,” said the Doorley.

She hesitated. She reached for him. In the instant of reaching, he was leaning to her, and they kissed.

Iona and the Doorley pledged themselves one to the other. They returned to the farm and confessed their love to the farmer and his
wife. But when he saw old Coinneach and Mary’s tears the Doorley could not bear to be parted from them. They and Iona could see his heart was breaking.

Mary threw up her hands.

“Who talks of parting?” she cried. “Are you mad? What would you do in the world, with wings? You’re our Doorley and that’s how you’ll stay. Girl,” she said to Iona, “send for your family. This house has been too quiet, and we could use hands and help. This is how it will be if it will be.”

And so it was. Iona’s mother, father, brothers and sisters, were taken in as family by that kind old couple. With willing help, the borders of the farm expanded and more space was made for pasture and living. They built new rooms to that one room in the wood, where the Doorleys lived in joy and gentle mischief, teaching music and the names of the stars to their own children, all the days of their lives.

About This Publication

The Mythic Circle is a small annual literary magazine published by The Mythopoeic Society, which celebrates the work of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and other writers in the mythic tradition. (For more information about the Mythopoeic Society, contact Alicia Fox-Lenz, Communications and Social Media Manager, E-mail: correspondence@mythsoc.org)

Copies of the next issue, Mythic Circle, #39, scheduled to appear in the summer of 2017, can be pre-ordered through the Mythopoeic Society’s website, <http://www.mythsoc.org/mythic-circle.htm>. Back issues are available at <http://www.mythsoc.org/mythic-circle/mythic-circle-history.htm>. Any trouble with the website may be reported to Gwenyth Hood at <mythiccircle@mythsoc.org>.

The Mythic Circle exists primarily for the benefit of writers trying to develop their craft in the Mythopoeic tradition and publishes short fiction, poetry, and artwork (mostly illustrations of stories and poems.) We have, as yet, no hard and fast length limits, but we as a small publication, we must think very well of a story more than 5000 words long to publish it. Shorter stories have a better chance. By editorial policy we favor our subscribers.

Submissions and letters of comment should be sent to: Gwenyth Hood, English Department, Marshall University, Huntington WV 25701, or e-mailed to <mythiccircle@mythsoc.org>. Paper submissions should be double-spaced and should include a stamped, self-addressed envelope. E-mailed submissions are preferred. ---
A Monday Evening in Narnia
by
Shane Blackman

I walked into the vestibule, childlike.
The new world was unknown and familiar.
Young ones rollicked around the dark and the light,
Then hid, one-eyed, behind a wardrobe door.
The girl and lad sea-fared with me ten and
Ten thousand years, to a marked time in school,
To a place where there is no time at all.
I traveled with them to a Narnia,
Where Lew and Mary Ann Salter found faith,
Where Cheryl and the kids mended a heart
Broken by Aslan's will. There, on the mane,
I sought, as a pilgrim, to fathom it.
For Digory's promise, I kept my word.
The Christ gave surpassing-joy, here on earth.

Author’s note: “A Monday Evening in Narnia” is a sonnet, but not with traditional meter or scheme. Sonnets also may be called quatorzains. Lew and Mary Ann Salter, at Oxford University when some of the Inklings were at Oxford, were also beloved members of the community at Wabash College, my alma mater. According to Sheldon Vanauken's book A Severe Mercy, Lew and Mary Ann were in a prayer group that included C.S. Lewis. My sister Cheryl and her children, Rebecca, and Jason, are featured in the quatorzain and are constant sources of inspiration and blessing. The poem describes an evening when I visited my sister's family in their new home and is a series of memories and snapshots.
The tale is told that one night in deep winter a man came over the ice floes to the fortress of Skeergard. Inside the great hall fires were burning amidst the furious revelry of the Northmen. Haunches of meat filled the air with their savor. The drinking horns were passed while stories were told—of battles, of conquest, and of glory. They pounded on the tables as each shaggy warrior boasted of his deeds and shouted as they tested their strength against one another.

They had much to celebrate and the many long hours of winter night in which to do it. The summer's raiding had been good, and they had ended the season by sacking the hall of an ancient foe. There had been untold wealth, riches beyond count, things of gold and artistry such as their wild hearts loved.

The greatest of the treasures was a mighty cauldron covered with beaten gold that now stood at the head of one of the long wooden tables. The vessel was so huge that it took four men to lift it, and it was covered from rim to base in fabulous scroll work chased with silver. On it were depicted all of the nine worlds swirled about with the branches of the great ash tree. So marvelous was the workmanship the bard proclaimed that it must be the creation of the dark dwarfs of the underworld, that it was dangerously magical. Surely he knew that it possessed a magic more powerful than his own. The cauldron became the glowing center of that tumultuous scene, seeming itself to revel in the grim merriment of these warriors of the northern wastes, drawing in to itself their strength, their savage vitality. It was made to inhabit such a hall as this, where pillars fantastically carved with serpents and heroes grew upwards to a vaulted roof swirling with flame-tossed shadows, where warriors drank deep from the spring of life while hoping for a good death.

The cauldron was shrouded in fire-lit sorcery like the pulsing heat of a furnace-hammered blade. In that glow, the intricate engravings seemed to move and take on life. Around the leafy bowl the squirrel Ratatosk scurried among the branches, though etched in unmoving gold. The spring of Hvergelmir flowed at the base in misty Niflheim where the dragon turned from gnawing the corpses of the dead to wound the root of the tree. In broad Midgard, men took the mixture of good and bad allotted to them by the fates. They went their ways, drinking mead in their halls, sailing on the stretching seas, battling in the mountains and on the plains. Giants built fortresses tall and deep in Jotunheim, biding their time until the final battle. Around it all circled the mighty serpent Jormungand, Thor’s bane, whose eyes glittered in jeweled malice. The rainbow bridge stretched to divine Asgard around the brim where the gods feasted and schemed, themselves subject to the laws of fate. The silver-armored Valkyries cast their strange light as they carried the chosen slain to ghostly halls across the gilded sky, and in the broad bowl the echoes of Heimdall’s horn rang faintly.

Into the midst of the revelry came a man colored with the pallor of death. How he had passed the guards no one knew, nor could anyone say how long he had been among them when once they had marked him standing there before the doors of the long hall. Where there had been violent celebration and riotous song, there now descended the silence of the tomb, broken only when a serving maid in her terror let fall and clatter a vessel of mead. A thrill of supernatural dread clutched at the heart of the assembled warriors at the sudden appearance of this unearthly figure in their midst, and their eyes stole nervously to hilt of sword and haft of axe hanging on the shadow-haunted walls. The stranger walked forward, slow and stately, between their staring ranks to the head of the hall and the seat of their war chief.

Gorm the Ringwinner feared no man upon earth. He had faced the strongest of warriors and left them on blood-streaked snows with beards of red and gold tilted upwards as if in final supplication to the grim war gods of the North. His dragon prow was feared on many coasts as a portent of ruin and death; his war band waded from foam like the wrath of the wind-driven sea. But Gorm did fear the otherworldly.
omens that had plagued his mind were for a time relieved by his most recent victory, but they were now renewed by the apparition before his seat.

As the stranger walked toward him, Gorm’s eyes dimmed and reeled with visions of ghostly companies marching forth from their barrows to dance among the standing stones. Inwardly his spirit stumbled under the weight of dark awe. His mind traveled spectral landscapes of whispered stories. Yet he showed no outward signs of fear. His hands clutched at the arms of his chair; that was all. But it was some time before he spoke in a quiet voice: “What are you that comes thus unbidden to my hall? Be you mortal man or wandering spirit that haunts crypt and cairn?”

At the words the stranger started, as if he had been jolted from a walking sleep. He now looked about the hall as if seeing it for the first time. “I am no spirit,” he responded. “I have traveled far over the endless snows without food or rest. I have come to ask for these things.”

The strange terror that had held them in thrall snapped and was snatched away like a sail torn loose by the wind. They saw him now as but a man—cold, exhausted, and starving. His feet were wrapped in rags and his cloak was patched and threadbare.

Gorm let out his breath. Here was no threat, no messenger of gods or dark powers beneath the hollow hills. “Bring bread, broth, and mead!” he roared, his strength now restored. He glared about the hall as if daring anyone to suggest that he had felt fear. The serving maids hastened to obey him.

“May your death be worthy of song!” gasped the man in gratitude. The warriors, reassured by this noble sentiment, were content to turn back to their feasting. They laughed at each other and became even more boisterous, though they all turned wondering eyes on the stranger from time to time as he consumed his meal.

Next to Gorm’s high seat, the bard read his master’s countenance. He knew Gorm harbored anger in his heart that this pathetic figure had caused him to fear. Thus he formed the thought to make sport of the stranger to win his master’s favor. When the stranger had finished a lengthy repast, the bard called out to him: “Hail, noble guest! You must pay for your meal. Tells us how you come to this plight, your rags and your ax! Begging for food and fire. But perhaps you jest with us. You may be a god in disguise or a king from some distant land. Or maybe you reign over the snow and ice, and the winter winds are your retinue. Your rags must be a royal robe to shield you from the loyalty of your subjects. Hark! They call for you. I hear them whistling outside the hall and whining over the gables. You have abandoned them for warmth and a full belly.

‘Come back to us!’ they cry. ‘Forsake the fire and the fellowship of men. Come, feast on frost. Make your wine the glacier’s milk.’ Tell us stranger, don’t you wish to return to your kingdom?”

This prancing roused the stranger’s anger. “My kingdom is greater than any you have seen, and my subjects know not to mock a guest of their lord.”

“Do you jest?” asked the bard. “Surely someone in your condition should show more humility. A wanderer on the snows who begs gifts of others and has nothing to offer in return ought to remember his place.”

“My place! While it may not appear so to you, I do hold authority in my own place,” said the stranger. “I wander by choice. I will return home when I have recovered what has been taken from me.”

“And what has been taken from you?” asked the bard.

“The work of my hands,” said the stranger. “I am a smith. I have made weapons the gods themselves would not be ashamed to bear. In the working of silver and gold I have never been surpassed. Some things I make for the sheer joy of making. I shape the elements to echo the wonder and workings of the cosmos.” As he spoke, his eyes burned with love of wrought gold and his countenance was lit as with forge fire. All present had an image of the stranger, now altered, wreathed in the smoke and flame of subterranean grottos.

“It is one of these I have come to seek.”

At this the eyes of all touched on the cauldron.

“You seek this?” the bard asked, pointing at the cauldron.

“Yes. It was yet unfinished when it was stolen from me. You can see the bare gold beneath the rim. A piece of the universe is missing, and the work must be completed.”

Gorm’s eyes narrowed and he shifted in his seat. He was again unnerved by presentiments of the otherworldly, and wondered at the nature of his guest. But he was determined not to show the fear that would cast doubt on his leadership over his warriors.

“If you come to take treasure which is mine by right, then you should have come with an army at your back,” he growled.

“Yours by right? You mean by the strength of your arm and the edge of your axe.”

“What else would I mean?” asked Gorm.

“The cauldron is mine. It bears the marks of my labor.”

“Your labors will soon be at an end,” said Gorm, lifting his axe and rising to his feet. He moved forward slowly, his eyes rolling and teeth gnashing in a manner that had terrified so many before, causing

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Come, mighty Gorm,” said the bard, stepping between them, “the gods watch over the wayfarer. We have shared our hall with him. Father Odin’s one eye will gleam with wrath if the laws of hospitality are thus broken. Let you both enter into a contest or wager of your own free will. The winner will claim the cauldron.”

And why should I risk my greatest treasure?” asked Gorm.

“Because if I lose, I swear that I will remain here as your servant, shaping such treasures for you as will arouse the envy of the very gods,” replied the stranger. Gorm’s eyes shone with greed at the thought of such wealth and renown, but he was cautious for he had again begun to suspect that the stranger was more than he seemed. He hesitated, but he dared not do so for long for the eyes of every warrior were upon him now. To show fear was to endanger his reputation, his position of command, and his life. “Surely it cannot be a trial of strength,” he said at last, lifting the stranger’s arm. His warriors roared with laughter.

“Or a trial of wits,” said the bard, though it was not clear who he meant to insult.

Let it be a trial of fear,” said the stranger. “If Gorm the mighty keeps his hold upon his treasure no matter what he hears or sees until the sun rises, he shall keep it and I shall be his servant for a year and a day.

“And if he loses?” pressed the bard.

“If Gorm releases the cauldron, he will surrender it to me—and anything else I need to complete the work.”

“Agreed,” said Gorm after a time.

“Swear it, for you and your warriors” insisted the stranger.

“By my axe, I swear it.”

“It is good,” said the stranger. “Your axe cuts both ways.”

With all eyes fixed upon them, they stepped over to the cauldron and each took of one of the great handles in his hand. They stood thus facing each other in the now complete silence of the hall. The warriors stood with their backs against the walls, many of them gripping weapons in dread of what was to come.

Gorm stood with his feet braced wide and his jaw clenched. When nothing happened, he laughed nervously and drank off a horn of mead. “Well, little man, what do you have to show me? Do you carry terror in your pockets? Or perhaps you think that your grim visage will be enough to frighten Gorm the Ringwinner. Do wish to tell me a story, such as are told to scare children on dark nights?”

The stranger stood with closed eyes as if meditating and then spoke quietly: “I summon all those whose spirits were sent shrieking down to dark Niflheim by the axe of this man, all who dwell in Hel’s kingdom.”

As the warriors watched in terror, a thick mist began to seep from the walls and floor like a foul miasma of the grave. The chill vapor curled like sinewy wraiths about their limbs and robbed them of breath until, as if driven by an unfelt wind, it settled into a swirling pool in the center of the hall. Out of it arose human figures. Gaping and gasping, their hollow eyes staring, they shambled forward with arms outstretched toward Gorm. The lord of the hall had stood unmoving, his face pale but set and grim. The shapes of the dead now clawed at him with insubstantial fingers as if to drag him down to the underworld.

Gorm scoffed as he swung a massive fist through the vapor. “You summon shadows, shades of the forgotten dead! They could not harm me in life. Why should I tremble at them now?”

“Death comes to us all,” said the stranger. “It will come for you too.”

“Hah! I shall not be as these. I am a warrior! The Valkyries will carry me to Odin’s hall and, at the end of days, I will fight alongside the gods themselves!”

As he said this, the shapes of the dead receded into the mist which, lit with a cold light, now formed a column which towered over Gorm. It took on the shape of Nidhogg, the great dragon of the netherworld. It lunged for Gorm with slavering jaws. He threw up his arm in protection, but did not let go of the cauldron. The stranger spoke a word, and the dragon dissolved into falling mist.

Gorm said nothing. Despite his boasting, his struggle with terror was written on his features.

“Do you care for the gods?” the stranger asked after a time.

“Care for the gods?” Gorm asked with genuine puzzlement. “The gods do not command us to care for them—only that we be strong. They despise the weak. Besides, whatever you are, you do not have the power to summon the gods.”

“You are right about the gods,” replied the stranger. They do not command your devotion, nor even desire it. They will look after themselves until doom falls upon all. But as for what I am and the power I wield, I shall show you!” he thundered.

Sheets of flame leapt from the floor to enshroud him. Gorm raised his free hand against them, though he felt no heat. Even so, the blaze melted the stranger’s humanity from him. His form shortened and

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broadened. A wild mane and beard of jet black hair floated upon the air. His eyes flickered like dark fire from out a visage that was never born of woman. Finally, at a motion of his hand, the flames died. His rags were transformed into rich garments that shone like obsidian scales, and his shadow engulfed the hall.

The warriors gasped in fear, and Gorm himself trembled, but he did not loosen his grip on the cauldron.

“I am Andvari, King of the Dwarfs of the Underworld. You hold what is mine. I will have it back. Release it or I shall summon an army of my kin to take it.”

At this, Gorm raised himself to his full height and bellowed a great roar of mirthless laughter, his fear forgotten. Here was a threat he could understand. He welcomed the prospect of a flesh and blood battle to clear his head of supernatural terror. “Let them come! I would see the color of their blood.” Bending forward, he added “Even if I have to fight on my knees.”

Andvari smiled at that. “But,” Gorm added after a moment, “you will not call them, will you? You would not have entered our bargain if you could do this.”

“You are right, mighty Gorm. I will not call them. I am bound by my word—and I have no need to resort to such methods. I have magic, Gorm, and I have made a thing of magic. Even now I call it forth. You will release the cauldron. If you do not, it will consume your life.”

Gorm stood with clouded brow but said nothing. “You will not die. You will wither. You will have no glorious death in battle. No one will sing your deeds. The Valkyries will not choose you for Valhalla. You will shuffle uselessly until your own sons, overcome by the shame of it, send you down to the nameless dead.”

“Shadows and imaginings,” said Gorm, “that is all you have shown me. As if I were some lisping babe to be frightened by the prattle of old women. I do not believe you have this power.”

“Look at your hand that grips the cauldron,” said Andvari.

Gorm gasped to see his hand shrivel. Like the working of poison, grey tendrils spread up his arm, wasting his flesh. As he watched in horror, his heavily muscled arm became emaciated and weak.”

“There is still time, Gorm. Release my treasure.”

Gorm replied only with an inarticulate howl of fear and rage. As his gaze passed over the cauldron, he caught a dim reflection of his face in its golden surface. The shock was too much for him. With a great cry he brought both of his hands to cover his eyes and stumbled backward.

“Rise Gorm,” said Andvari. “You are unharmed.”

Gorm examined his hands and arms and touched his face. Slowly he rose to his feet with as much dignity as he could muster. He cast his gaze over the warriors who were pressed against the walls of the hall. “You have won our bargain,” he said finally. “I have been defeated by your tricks. Take the cauldron and go.”

“Ah, but our bargain was that you would also supply what I need to finish the work,” said Andvari.

“You have already taken my greatest treasure. Will you strip me of my gold and silver as well?”

“On the contrary,” said Andvari, “I will give you a great gift. You will complete the cauldron. All that is missing is a depiction of the soul of the Northman—your soul. You are terrible in battle, thirsty for fame, and the only thing you really fear is an inglorious death.”

“You wish to carve my likeness into the cauldron?” asked Gorm skeptically.

“Not exactly, but I will give you and your men immortality.” As he said this, he raised his hands and spoke in an arcane tongue. There was a great rumbling in the earth, a rushing wind, and a rolling clap of thunder. When all was over, Andvari stood alone next to the cauldron. There was only an empty plain where the fortress had stood. He ran his hands lovingly over the gold, smiling to see Gorm reigning forever there over his hall. The dwarf hoisted the cauldron easily upon his shoulder and quickly disappeared into the falling snow.

The Mythic Circle #39, pg. 10
Sentiments

by

R. L. Boyer

1.

Don't let my sentiments fool you. I have the heart of a poet, but also the sharp tongue,

and the poet's sharp eye, too. The tongue follows the eye and tells what it sees, sharply.

2.

Don't let my sentiments fool you. I am a realist with the problem of a madman: I see reality too clearly. I yearn for comfortable illusions to live by, but see more than

I want to and tell more than I should.

3.

Don't let my sentiments fool you. I have the cool, hard eye of a poet, and sometimes the savage tongue that chooses words as a warrior chooses weapons, and tells what it sees. And the unseen? I try to tell that, too, inventing strange, new tongues for singing.
Haunting Christmas

By

Marina Favila

At first they were only irritated, the ghosts of Manorville Manor, seven souls haunting the house they died in, or wandered by, in the process of dying, some restless, some pining, as ghosts are wont to be, but mostly content to call the manor home. And that makes sense. For who knows what awaits us after death, the where or why or how of it? But here, in this beautiful old barn of a house, with its old-fashioned gabled roof and tall cathedral ceilings, its imposing stone fireplace and hanging chandelier, with the tiny frosted bulbs the shape of tiny frosted flames, and one large window, set at the top of a spiral staircase, where the ghosts could float up and turn round and look out at the town they were born in, twinkling black and gold at night or washed pale grey at dawn—life could be worse, they all knew.

Then she moved in.

Up until now they’d had a fine time, or a good enough time, for they were dead, after all, but before her, why, before her there’d been plenty to do, and they’d done it all and they’d done it well. The house was a veritable gold mine for ghosts. The attic wailed liked a banshee, drafty and cold, and easy to manipulate. A quick turnabout by one or two ghosts could create a mini-cyclone within seconds, rattling the attic windows and shoving around old trunks of clothes and hatboxes and hat racks and stacks of National Geographics, left long ago by previous frightened owners. And the stairs in the front and the stairs in the back squeaked horribly; and the spirits, especially the young ones, could play those stairs like a violin. Ghostie-music, little Devin called it, when he first squeaked out “The Water is Wide” in mid-July, when the boards were dry and weak. He’d learned the old song right before catching a cold and dying of influenza in 1899; and his parents, two earnest do-gooders, who ran the Down on Your Luck Soup Kitchen for the town’s down on their luck, were so devastated by the loss of their fat-cheeked Devvy, they packed up and moved away within weeks of the little boy’s death, leaving him inconsolable. Those wheezing, whining, wood-turned tunes, drawn out from the manor’s creaking stairs, did much to distract the young spirit.

So you see, up until then, the manor boasted a sterling reputation, for the living and the dead. There’d even been talk of a listing in the Northeast Haunted House Registry. Especially after Prof. Hautboy, the eldest spirit in human years, had organized the ghosts into performance sections: bumps in the night, staircase interludes, whirlwinds and cold spots, and flashing lights—a specialty of the house on Halloween night, when Manorville Manor lit up like a Star Wars laser show, shooting red and blue across the sky. And those spritely inhabitants might have gone on forever, flashing their lights and moving their trunks and moaning in the dark, had the girl moved into another old house and not their lovely manor.

But that girl, that girl, that slip of a girl,
with her college sweatshirt and skinny blue jeans. She’d arrived last spring on a warm afternoon, unloading a trunk full of antique mirrors and faux fur rugs. She’d not even bothered to check out the attic before signing the lease. Even the realtor seemed shocked that the girl knew nothing of the house’s legendary past. Or perhaps she didn’t care. Her smile was as wide as the Mississippi, and her pearl-pink cheeks flushed English rose at the thought she could be so lucky to live here, in this castle-like home, with its bad heat and faulty wires and creaky floor and leaky roof and that terribly romantic staircase, with its wrought iron railing twirling round and round and up and out, to the large picture window set so high you could see the whole town and the river beyond, its dark waters lit by sun and by star, or just slow-moving under slate-grey clouds. She knew life could be worse. So she signed on the dotted line. Alone, she signed, no mother or father beside her, not even a great aunt Lil or Uncle Joe. And the realtor placed the key in her hand, and rushed out the door, leaving the ghosts amazed at her presumption.

Not much past twenty, maybe not that—tall and thin, with the gangly stance of a newborn foal, all knees and elbows in constant motion. Hanging her curtains, stocking her fridge, pirouetting in the hall in front of the mirror, her honey-blonde hair gave a melodic bounce around her heart-shaped face. Something there, too, in her eyes, an open edge, a rawness that perplexed the ghosts. For every so often she’d abruptly stop whatever she was doing, cooking or singing or banister-hopping, and stare into space for minutes on end.

But still, to think the house would welcome her and her knick-knacks and her multiple cans of turquoise paint—preposterous! And for someone so alert to every detail of the house, how could she be so oblivious to their presence? That’s what rattled the ghosts. For no matter how hard they rapped or knocked or thumped or flickered the lights, she never gave them the time of day, not a backward glance or a second look or a shiver or shock or a nervous tick—nothing.

“Youse think we didn’t exist!” Mrs. Spartini exclaimed, after the first few days. She was particularly perturbed, for the house was originally hers, built by a doting banker for his Ten Cents a Dance bride. He’d stolen Mabeleen from “The Orange Peel” speakeasy, just before midnight on New Year’s Eve, and the former dancehall hostess took pride in reminding the ghosts that she was the original mistress of the manor, and still ordered them about to knock on the door with a menacing rap or streak the old walls with their skeletal hands. “I’se been doin’ this for over a century,” she huffed, “and I don’t take kindly to being ignored in me own home!”

“There, there,” Prof. Hautboy soothed her. He was by far the most educated of the ghosts, with a PhD in musicology. “She’s young. I saw it in many of my students,” and they all nodded, if ghosts can nod, that is. Even the Farmer Boy twins shimmered in agreement, two oafish white shadows, blustery and pale, with a touch of aquamarine swirling around. They’d never said a word, nor left each other’s side, these past forty years.

“Yes, yes,” the professor continued, “she’s inattentive, with her iPod and smartphone glued to her ear. But she’ll come around.”

And they promised each other to give her a month, and took bets that such youthful self-centeredness would wear thin after two or three weeks. Give her time to lug in her Goodwill sofa and flea market lamps, and that god-awful basket of marbleized eggs to clutter the fireplace.
mantel. They’d even endured her initial cleaning. The fumes alone should have driven them out, but they knew, they just knew, once she settled down, they would have her attention, then send her packing to some sterile apartment in the suburbs!

But that was nearly nine months ago. She’d arrived in April, a gorgeous yellowy month, which turned bright green in early May and emerald-green the next. But those glorious colors faded fast to sage and gold by summer’s end, then golded themselves to a ruby fall and fell to the ground with a silent crunch, quilting the earth in cranberry, copper, marigold, mustard, and rust. Three weeks later, all was ice, the air wet-weighted with the promise of snow. But by Christmas Eve the ghosts were no closer to making their presence known. Huddled together for warmth in the attic, they took stock of their situation.

Professor Hautboy called the meeting to order. “Quiet down, quiet down,” he started, as he always did, with the only joke he knew: “We don’t want to wake the dead!” And he laughed to himself, as he always did, alone.

“But it’s ridiculous,” rushed in Ravensby, a tattooed punk, triple-pierced and pacing, who’d been hit by a speeding car outside the house two years passing. Still relatively new to the manor, he was young and feisty, though death had admittedly slowed him down. “We’ve tried it all. Just last week I knocked down every single one of her piles of clean laundry—towels, wash cloths, two sets of sheets, eight pairs of athletic socks, all piled high on her four-poster bed and not a second glance at the mess I’d made!”

“Me, too,” piped Petunia Sweeney, who turned ninety-nine this month, if you counted the years from her birth not her death. She was the last one to die in the house, surrounded by her children and children’s children, who held her hand and patted her cheek, though they’d already sold everything in the house, save the bed where she lay dying.

“I hid her keys in the refrigerator—my refrigerator, under the moldy lettuce in the vegetable bin.” Petunia fingered remembered pearls, with the air of a duchess who’d suddenly found the maid in her brocade gown. “She looked for them alright, but when she found them in the fridge she merely laughed—laughed! As if I’d done it wrong!”

“She’s a mess,” Prof. Hautboy sighed. “A terrible housekeeper and unobservant to the max. How can we compete with that? Even the old chairs-on-the-table trick, just administered last month, which took quite a bit of energy (‘and coordination,’ Ravensby added)—a fiasco!” For when the girl came home that night (“too late for a young lady,” Petunia sneered) she slammed the door in a fury, blasted her stereo, and jumped round the room till the chairs came crashing down. Then she wove her way to the bedroom, without a backward glance at the dining room wreckage.

“She just can’t hear us,” Devvy said quietly, “but I might could like her if she could.” Ravensby rustled himself closer to the forlorn little spirit, by far his favorite in the house.

“A terrible problem,” Hautboy concluded. And he slid the finger that didn’t exist up the nose that didn’t exist to push up the memory of thick glasses falling down his long face. “We must find a way to communicate with our, ahem, guest.”

II

From the balustrade Devin watched the young girl decorate for Christmas. He had been sent by the other ghosts to guard the new mistress of the house, as if the spirit
could effect much of anything at his young age—a ghostly glimmer, perhaps, aided by moonlight, or a lukewarm coolness, for cold was not in his nature. But he liked her, and they knew it, and thought it best for him not to be in their war room as they set their plans in motion.

Devvy was just as glad. The girl was particularly happy tonight, and he liked to watch her then, for her eyes glistened when she was joyful, and she hummed under her breath and sometimes burst into song at the top of her lungs. Tonight was something special to see. She was decorating the house for the holidays, in multi-colored garlands and shimmering icicles. A fire burned in the fireplace, and the mantelpiece was dressed with a delicate crèche: jewel-type stones set in the camel’s saddle, and the three kings’ crowns were painted in gold. Cutout stars wrapped in shiny foil dangled from a coat rack, and a huge fir wreath hung on the dining room wall with a large red satiny bow. The table was decorated with clips of holly and giant pinecones dusted with glitter. And everywhere—candles! Fifty, more, in wine bottles, jelly jars, tiny votive cups, and one large brass candelabrum, just tarnished enough to look expensive.

But Devvy’s favorite was the Christmas tree, a tall blue spruce set up by the window and dressed up fine with red glass balls and candy canes, and a treasure trove of miniature antique toys: rocking horses, pogo sticks, dollies with golden hair and tiny blinkable eyes. Strands and strands of warm yellow lights seemingly floated on prickly branches. There must be hundreds, he thought, blinking on and off to the music box tunes of “Greensleeves” and “O Christmas Tree.”

Devvy was entranced as he watched the girl climb a rickety ladder to place a five-point star at the top of the tree. When a knock on the door startled them both, the ladder swayed as the girl jumped in surprise. Without thinking, the little ghost rushed to steady the ladder. Pushing himself hard into the wood, till the white oak pinched his very essence, Devvy steadied the ladder, while the girl traipsed down the steps with a lilting laugh at her luck and agility. Thank goodness the other ghosts were still in the attic, else there’d be hell to pay.

The open door let in gusts of wet darkness, but it was swallowed up by the warmth of the candlelit house and the greater warmth of its beaming mistress. The girl’s voice hit a high-pitched squeal. There before her, a dowdy woman in a dark blue coat, a peek of nurse’s scrubs beneath, and at her side, a small thing, with a heart-shaped face and honey-brown hair, cramped in a tiny wheelchair. When the girl stepped back, Devvy gasped, for he thought he saw himself, such a wasted creature there, mostly skin and bones, and hollowed out eyes, darkly and deeply creased. The boy looked nine, maybe ten, and... ghost-like, Devvy thought, for his skin was near translucent, and his eyes glazed over like he wasn’t there. The spirit shivered in response, until he saw the boy look up from his chair. Seeing the girl towering above him, he smiled the same wide-as-a-river smile as her own.

With a deep bow, which made the boy giggle, the girl ushered in her visitors, closing the door with a definitive push, as if shutting out all that is bad or indecent in the world. She took over the woman’s duties, wheeling her charge to a sofa covered with pillows and a large knitted quilt, kelly green, white, and tangerine, a zigzag pattern with scraggly tassels and many a snag in the yarn. When the girl and the woman pushed the couch closer to the fireplace, the light and the heat brought a healthy flush to the young boy’s face.

Then all was a flurry in the house. And
the flurry was the girl. Like a humming bird, here, there at once, she leapt and twirled around the room: stoking the fire; plumping the pillows; wheeling in an old-time tray, with mix-matched teacups of cocoa and cream; passing around a platter of cookies, shortbread Santas and chocolate reindeers, one with a raspberry nose. *How wonderful to be here.* Devvy thought to himself, for he felt he too was part of the eating and sipping and singing and pillow-plumping and belly-laughing, for everything seemed funny, now, to the three living inhabitants of Manorville Manor. Even the woman had begun to unwind, as she dipped a second Santa into her cocoa. Devin hoped the ghosts in the attic would take a long time with their evening preparations.

### III

“Settled!” Hautboy concluded. “We’ll wait until the clock strikes twelve, or rather, till I make that clock chime twelve booming clangs, and that in itself should get her attention, for the grandfather clock is a hundred years old and hasn’t chimed for fifty.

“Then I’ll sweep in,” said Ravensby, slicking back the air where his hair used to be, “and do my cyclone thing, picking up anything I can in my wake: cups, saucers, tinkling spoons, knick-knacks—books! She’s always leaving them scattered about. The fluttering pages in my little whirlwind will make a fine rat-a-tat-tat, adding to the confusion. If I move fast enough, perhaps I can even raise a chair!”

“Now, now,” Prof. Hautboy advised, “we don’t want to kill her.” And he tried to look stern, though his transparent expression conveyed very little. Still, he wanted his tone forbidding, for he worried about the Farmer twins, hearts of gold, those boys, and silent as the grave, but easily stirred to their old roughhouse ways.

“We’ll take care of the window,” Mrs. Spartini interjected, for she wanted to make sure that everyone knew she was really in charge. “A frosty peel! Inside, of course, for the window’s been rusty-eyed shut for years. But if we steam the inside, we can write some dastardly message for hers to read. Petunia, dear, what might be fearful for you?

“Anything!” Even at ninety-nine, the ghost’s voice went up in a girlish lilt, at the sheer pleasure of being asked. “Something about the night, I suppose, for I was always afraid of the dark. I . . .”

“And the twins?” Ravensby rushed in, worried they’d never escape Petunia’s lengthy riff on the dark.

“Lights!” Hautboy responded. “Multi-colored!” The whitish shadows glowed in response, for they loved shooting red and blue across the room, whether they had an audience or not.

“And if that doesn’t work?” Petunia whined.

Even in death, Prof. Hautboy was a teacher and a good one, and he responded with authority: “It *will* work. Never fear, Petunia! And if it doesn’t—we’ll wrap that horrid afghan so tight about her tiny frame that when we finally let her go, she’ll run from the house and never return to Manorville Manor!” And the ghosts all shimmered in approval.

But as they floated out to take their places, at the hearth, by the tree, hovering near the window, they paused, for the girl was reading now, to a young boy on the couch, while the older woman faded in and out of sleep in an overstuffed chair. And the girl was reading with enthusiasm and dramatic gestures, about some ghost of Christmas past and a singing child on crutches. Hautboy signaled the spirits to wait. They wouldn’t have started even if he hadn’t, for they knew, as he knew, what was
At first Devvy kept his distance, hidden in the branches of the spruced-up spruce. But it had been so many years since someone had read to him, and before long he was pressed up next to the fireplace, then folded around the ottoman, close to the sofa with the ugly quilt, not so close to touch the humans, though he could feel their warmth. And with the cookie crumbs lavishly dotting the floor, and the teacups emptied of cocoa and cream, he saw the girl reach beneath an embroidered cushion to retrieve an old blue book.

It was dusty, cracked, bound in leather, with pages edged in gold. She presented it to the boy like some precious treasure befitting the Magi, and pointed at the illustrations and the lavish scrolled print. Then she jumped from the couch and began to read. Both boy and ghost were transported as she skipped around the room and motioned with her hands and acted all the parts. With the lighted tree sparkling behind her like the backdrop of some Christmas play, the girl became Scrooge, counting his money, and timid Bob Cratchet, cowering before him, and Tiny Tim, leaning on crutches, but singing in a high sweet voice. Even the joyful nephew with his blasted “Merry Christmas” brought a tear to the woman’s eye, before she fell back to sleep. And Devin was a ghost himself, he trembled when Marley arrived, with a raspy voice like a rusty nail, floating in air on the living room stairs and clanging his voluminous chains.

But then the boy began to cough, then cough in earnest, great sobbing, hacking coughs, and the girl swept down from her staircase perch and cuddled him up on the sofa. She pulled the raggedy afghan round them, tucked it in tight, on the left and the right, so snug they might have been bound together. And she plodded on, reading aloud, but Devin could tell, as anyone could, that all her attention was on the boy. For even when she raised her voice or pointed to the air when a new ghost appeared, her other hand felt for the young boy’s neck and brushed back the hair from his hot flushed face.

And she read for an hour, maybe two, of Ebenezer’s life and his love and his money, and though each new ghost prompted Devin to shiver, the boy lay still, so still, in fact, he seemed asleep. And it was then Devin noticed they were not alone, but joined by the ghosts, around the room, still and staring at the boy in the girl’s arms. For the ghosts could see, though she could not, the outlines of the boy beginning to blur, like the edges of a photo no longer in focus or the fresh white smear of a dab of paint, titanium white on a dark oil canvas.

And the girl read faster, flipping through pages with furious intent, playing each part with commitment and verve, but the boy was no longer listening. He’s . . . rising, trying to shake his body loose. Impatient, his movement, like a pupa shedding its skin, he pushes himself away from himself and from his sister too, oblivious to who she is, even to her loving attention as she turns each page and adjusts the blanket that holds them together. He is no longer who he was, nor does he care for her. He thinks only of ridding himself of this great weight. And though the ghosts have taken this journey themselves, they are transfixed by his ascent, for he does not see them. He does not acknowledge they even exist. He simply rises, past the lighted tree and the fireplace and the spiral staircase, learning how to swim in that great sea of air.

And a light seems to grow inside him, and now he is all titanium white, brilliant
and bright-edged. And the ghosts can see right through him; and the lights from the candles and the lights from the tree flicker behind him, and it looks for a moment as if the Milky Way has descended into the room and revolves around them. And the boy’s form is some low constellation or gossamer angel descended to earth—but an angel that feels nothing human, and so he is both like the ghosts and nothing like the ghosts, for they have always felt human, and they have always felt tied to this world.

A huge gust of wind opens the window that hasn’t been open for years and years, and the boy, looking now like a shiny piece of foil, acts like a magnet to the other ghosts, who also feel the need to rise. And they rise: Petunia and Ravensby, into the air, like helium balloons let loose in the wind. And Mrs. Spartini, waving to the house, like some grand dame in a local parade. And the Farmer Boy twins, still hand in hand, like a pale green fog, frosting the window inside out. Even Prof. Hautboy joins in, waving an imaginary conductor’s baton, as if he is leading an orchestra again, pointing to each ghost to play their part. “Two notes up. Now jump the octave! Jump!” He laughs to himself, alone.

But Devvy sees none of this, for all his attention is on the girl. And she is crying, cradling the boy in her arms, while the older woman talks on the phone. From high above Devin can hear Ravensby calling, calling him now, and Prof. Hautboy taps the air and motions for him to follow. When Devvy looks up, he sees Mrs. Spartini floating out the window, in a great twisty movement reminiscent of her Orange Peel days; and Petunia joins her, no longer afraid of the dark, but sparkling like a slow-shooting star in the heavens, or a snowflake welcomed by a sky full of glitter. And that sky full of glitter is suddenly covered by a gauzy white cloud with aqua-green swirls, following the boy out the window as well.

Red and blue lights sweep through the house. Not as bright as the dazzle the Farmer Boys planned, but a whirling pattern around the room. A high-pitched wail shaking the walls deafens the calls for Devin to follow. And all is a flurry: rushing and moaning, doors that are opening, closing, and slamming, a table with wheels wheeling round the room, and strangers in uniform shaking their heads. Coats and boots grabbed, gloves by the door, in minutes it’s dark, and the whole house is empty of all of the living and all of the dying. Crowding the window, three shadows remain.

V

When the girl returns, it is late, and she enters the house alone. She walks like she’s been sleeping. Her face holds no expression. She shrugs off her coat in the middle of the room, letting it drop to the floor. Then she climbs the spiral staircase in a slow, measured gait. And she pays no mind to the snow on the steps, blown in from the open window. Nor does she notice the ice on the railing; her hands are just as cold.

She reaches the top of the stairs without stopping. She leans out the window and waits. The clock strikes one and the clock strikes two, and the air grows cold and colder. And every minute of every hour she’s searching the town below, from house to house, and street to street, all lit by the muted glow of streetlamps covered deep in snow. Then she raises her face to the sky. She searches its depth with a long, long look, as if she might seriously count the stars or the snowflakes falling around her. And she seems to be listening to something or nothing. Even the wind is silent.

Then she leans out further and extends her hands, into the night and into the snow, her palms face up, her forehead wrinkled, as she squints into the darkness.

And now she’s on tiptoe, leaning
forward, her bare arms raised to a cloud-laced sky. And she waits and she waits, as the clock strikes three, and she listens. She’s listening.

*She’ll fall if she’s not careful*. Devin thinks from far below. “She’ll fall if she’s not careful,” he repeats into the air.

“We must grab her attention!” Hautboy commands. Ravensby, Devin, begin!

The chandelier creaks as it slowly turns, and the frosted bulbs charge a ruby red, and the lights on the tree blink faster now, its music box tempo increasing as well. And far in the corner, the grandfather clock begins to chime with a booming clang, as a whirlwind rises in the middle of the room, filled with objects of the evening’s bliss: teacups, saucers, silver spoons, a platter dotted with cookie crumbs; cut-out stars covered in foil, each one boasting a flickering train of multi-colored candle flames; marbleized eggs and clips of holly and pine cones dusted with silver glitter; and books, books, a vortex of books, flying like starlings around the room, their pages a clattering, thunderous flutter. Even the ottoman knocks on the floor, as if trying to jump to the whirlwind above.

And the girl whips around, amazed at the sight. The house is alive and dances before her. She gasps as a tea cup twirls within reach, then a trio of spoons tap together like bells; and with so many candles and jelly jar lights, it looks like the Milky Way now has returned, made up of objects from daily life. And the girl starts to laugh. She laughs in surprise. Doubles over and laughs. She laughs so hard that tears overflow her pearl-pink cheeks and heart-shaped face. Laughing so hard she loses control; and shaking with laughter, she feels herself slip on the snow-laden stairs. Slipping and falling, backwards she’s reeling, with only the night and the wide-open window to catch her as she falls.

And then such a rush rushing inside her, a hard-air push. It’s almost warm. Wedged in tight it holds her steady, just for a moment, on the edge of the sill, where she sees—she swears, still swears to this day—that she sees the old quilt with its zigzag design and gnarly strings, rising in earnest and billowing out like a tall ship’s sail that sails on high, through the air and into her arms.

It wraps her up twice and pulls her in fast, and she slides down the railing, around and around, down to the floor where she’s dropped on the sofa in one magnificent plop. And be it fatigue or the ice-edged cold or the wet night air or the warmth of the quilt, or the whirling images of a house come alive that she can’t take in and she can’t deny, the girl falls asleep as soon as her head hits the plumped up pillow of her Goodwill couch, wrapped up tight in a ragtag throw, with a ghost pressed up to her heart.

**VI**

On Christmas Day, the gabled roof of Manorville Manor is sagging, from the snow and the cold and the wind and the rain and the decades it’s been standing. But a girl can be seen at the window there, on the second floor, or so it seems, enveloped in an afghan quilt of green and white and tangerine, with a delicate teacup in her hand, from which she slowly sips. And the sun through the window must feel warm, for a lovely glow surrounds her there, the softest cloud of peach and gold, almost a mist that clings and swirls as she stands by the window, one hand up, as if to touch the sun. Some trick, too, of the afternoon light casts three shadows against the wall, making her look both small and bright and strangely not alone. She looks out the window at the town she was born in, washed pearl-white by the glittering snow. And she stares at the river as it circles her home, slow-moving and slate-gray.

The Mythic Circle #39, pg. 19
The Lands of Talking Animals

by

Ryder W. Miller

It had been a long wait and the dog was old now and almost ready to go. Esmeralda had waited years now and Spot was ready to fulfill his promise. Other members of the family did not know that Spot talked. He did not talk much. Unlike a lot of dogs he was not terribly friendly. He would bark at others and smell other dogs, but he did not spend a lot of time with them. He did sometimes talk to Esmeralda alone.

She was surprised at first.

“I will help you if you keep this secret,” Spot said in a British accent. Spot was a Basset Hound with a white circle over one of his eyes. The rest of him was a mixture of brown, black and off white. He had very long droopy ears.

Esmeralda could not believe her ears. Spot said so again, but she had to double check with her mother about this.

When she mentioned this to her mother, she smiled a big smile. Her father would laugh kindly. Esmeralda decided not to tell too many others. They did not believe her, but they weren’t too mean about it. She would let Spot decide when they should talk. He was hard to understand because he usually spoke English. She was learning English in school, but it was taking a while for it all to sink in. Her parents spoke both English and Spanish, but it was hard for this dog to learn some new tricks. Spot understood some Spanish also, but he liked English better. Esmeralda thought it sounded better to him.

Spot, though, was kind of an imaginary friend. He had promised to take her one day to the land where animals talked. She had not been old enough to go when they first got him. He also swore her to secrecy. Esmeralda decided not to mention it to her parents again. Someday she wanted to be able to meet all these animals. Spot did let her know that they would not all be friendly. Esmeralda wondered what they would sound like. She wondered if they would all sound like they were from New York. Spot had developed some of the accent and sounded like he moved to the city a long time ago.

When the wait was no longer so long Spot let her know in the Spring. She was almost 12 now and would be able to converse with the animals in both English and Spanish. He could take her there when she took him out on a walk.

“We need to wait for the fire flies,” Spot explained when they were alone. “They know the secret way. They can take you to the Land of the Talking Animals.”

Esmeralda was almost ready to be able to take the dog out on a walk by herself. The park could be magical. She would have Spot as a companion for protection. They had had a private friendship that Esmeralda would not even tell her parents about anymore. She did have a friend who did not believe her at first. Joy was in the same grade as she was and also laughed at first when Esmeralda told her that Spot could talk.

“Prove it,” she demanded.

Spot at first did not want to talk with her. It took a couple of visits for them to find some time alone with the dog. Spot would usually bark. It was not a terribly loud bark, but then again Spot was not trying to scare people off. He was a good protector and
could have a frightening growl.

He had grown older now and it was time for him to take Esmeralda to the magical land one could find through the park. She, however, did not yet know how to go to the park alone with Spot. She would have to figure a way to do it. She might offer to take the dog alone by herself. They might not allow her to. She was more likely to be able to get away from her parents if Joy was there. Maybe they both could take Spot out for a walk?

Spot had told her that if one knew how to speak with the Fire Flies that they could take you to that special land. Esmeralda had to figure out how to make it into the park at night with Spot. The twilight would be okay, but her parents might not let her go on a walk by herself. That is where Joy might help, but maybe not. It would be hard to coordinate.

There were also the big concerts they had in the park during the summers. Maybe on one of these they could break away for a few minutes. They called each other girlfriends and the three of them should be safe on their own for a few minutes. Spot said that would be enough time. In that other land time did not pass in the same way. They could go into this land and return only a few minutes later. Joy said it sounded like Narnia.

Spot would be the one who could take them to this land. He would know how to speak with the Fire Flies. They sure did seem magical. They did not light the night up, but they did dance wonderfully. Magic they were, thought Esmeralda. Joy liked watching them also. Spot said they could take them on a visit or maybe an adventure if necessary.

The problem was how to break away from the parents for ten minutes. Mom and Dad were protective, but they also liked some time alone. As she grew older they would let her venture out more on her own, for short trips to the corner of the street.

Esmeralda was afraid Spot would not be with them much longer. His words had got slurred recently. Sometimes Spot would just give Esmeralda a knowing look when he wanted something. It was sort of a nonverbal code to let her know that they could not talk until later. Sometimes Esmeralda could hear things in his barking, but now he got tired faster.

During the summer concerts in the park she might be able to go with him. It was already a long wait, but it might be mostly over. Joy would be a partner in this. They would have to break away for a few minutes during twilight. She could probably get away with this because her parents did not mind when she was the one cleaning up after the dog. They would be able to dance alone for a few minutes while the music played.

She did not want to run away from her parents. Her parents were kind and funny. They took the time to explain things when it was necessary.

This fantasy world sounded intriguing though. She wanted to see what the animals sounded like when they talked. She wondered if they had accents like Spot?

Spot explained why they were in the park. The park could be a wonderful meeting place for all sorts of people. Sometimes the animals would sneak into Esmeralda’s world and observe the people. If the entrance ways were far out in the country they would not be able to meet many people. The park attracted all sorts of people. Some were there for sports and exercise. Others to commune with the outdoors. Some went to events. There could be some great music in the park. There would be dancing, lights and fireflies.

Spot knew how to indicate that he had to take a “dump.” Joy, though, would not clean up after him.

“It is your dog,” Joy would say.
Cleaning up after him was like a chore she did for the family. Spot gave her a sad look one day and just whispered, “Sorry. I can’t do it myself.”

Esmeralda loved Spot and gave him a hug. She had learned things from him during her life. “Study for school,” he would tell her. “Get good grades,” “Don’t be friends with everyone,” “Eat your vegetables.” Spot would not eat her food, insisting she needed it: “For you.”

Spot, as far as she knew, did not bark up the wrong tree. He also protected her and the family. He had a loud bark even though he was not as big as some other dogs. Esmeralda, when she was older and had read a romance or two, was sad for him that he was a lonely bachelor. They did not want to let him go and they could not find a mate for him.

One night when the poster and fliers for the concerts in the park had arrived, Esmeralda listened carefully while her parents discussed which concerts they were going to go to this season. She would be able to look at the flier to find the dates. For now she would just listen to see which shows they were planning to go and make plans with Spot.

Dad didn’t like to dance, but he would dance to Mambo and Latin Jazz. Mom tried to pull him to the dance floor for more and usually succeeded, but he volunteered for this type of music. They did not know the names of a lot of the bands, but that did not matter. They were excited to be out there in crowd with the music blasting.

Esmeralda set her mind on a concert in early June. She did not want to wait the whole summer for this to occur. She would make plans for Joy to join them. While their parents danced they would take Spot into the woods for a few minutes, or so it would seem to their parents.

She would take that walk while a band named Hidalgo played in the night. They should provide the necessary distraction. Spot explained how he knew how to talk with the Fire Flies. They were regular residents in The Land of the Talking Animals. They were Gatekeepers who normally would not let people into their world. Spot said that he was missed.

“Don’t you love us?” Esmeralda asked, saddened by the fact that Spot might be happier elsewhere.

“I have been happy among you, but I have not been able to speak much. I miss my own kind,” he responded.

“I look forward to meeting your friends,” she responded.

“Yes that would be fun. Keep this between us.”

Esmeralda thought about telling her parents that Spot would talk to her, but they would think that she was “Mucho Loca.” The old dog had gotten reticent in recent years also.

The family sat together in the park that night while Hidalgo warmed up. It was dark already. Joy had joined them. She had heard Spot speak a few times, but she also decided to keep this between the three. She and Esmeralda had grown beyond the age where she could pretend that she had secret friends or that animals could talk to her.

“Narnia is just fiction,” Joy’s mother explained to her. “Animals can talk among themselves, but sadly we cannot talk to them.”

“What about in Narnia?”

“Narnia, though wonderful, doesn’t really exist. The movies are also a fantasy.”

Joy was saddened by this. She was amazed by Spot, who explained that if people knew about him he would be put into a circus somewhere. He explained that he was too old for that. He really did not have a lot of advice for mankind. There was so
much variety and dissension. There were plenty of good people trying to solve problems. They might think that they had been invaded by talking animals.

They actually had been. Not for conquest, but rather to find out information about this world. Animals were dependent upon people in this dangerous world. Certain kinds of animals were there to be bred and harvested. As a dog he would not suffer that fate with most. Spot was not sure what to think about people, but he liked Esmeralda and her family. He liked Joy, who spoke his language better.

Now they walked through the night while the band played. Esmeralda let her parents know that she was taking Spot for a walk and would return in a few minutes. The parents decided to dance where they were rather than join the crowd. Cleaning up after a dog might change their mood. They were happy to not have this chore on this festive night.

“Be back in five or so minutes,” said the mother.

Esmeralda nodded. Spot winked at her to let her know that that would be enough time. Joy giggled as they walked into the woods in the night.

When they had made a little bit of distance, after they could not see the parents through the trees, Spot let out a welcoming growl.

A few Fire Flies gathered around them.

Esmeralda noticed that Spot seemed to have a smile on his face. Joy was giggling.

“This is going to work,” said Spot as a lit doorway formed before them. It seemed as if nobody else saw the gate. They would be walking into sunlight. There was a green field and path before them.

“This is only going to take a few minutes?” asked Esmeralda again.

“No, not even here in the park. Let us move fast while we have time,” said Spot.

Joy was ecstatic. She had read about such things before.

“We are the only ones who will see the door. Hurry,” said Spot.

They saw Fire Flies blinking in and out along the entrance way.

Esmeralda took the leash off of Spot and put it over her shoulder as they walked into the green field. The sun was shining brightly between the large clouds.

They were now in The Land of the Talking Animals.

“Fantastica,” thought Esmeralda.

Joy was more used to such things and was less surprised. She had read more of these types of stories and was now in one. She seemed to recognize where they were, but she knew there would be surprises.

Esmeralda was surprised that the grass, trees, sky, and clouds all looked the same.

Spot was beaming. Esmeralda noticed that he did not look sad and tired like he usually did.

“Where to now, Spot?” Esmeralda asked.

“We don’t need to rush. Let’s look for the town by the river,” he said.

Joy was smiling. It was like a fantasy story coming true.

“This isn’t Narnia?” she asked Spot.

“No. No wars and coronations on this trip, I think,” said Spot. “Onward across the fields we go. Where it will take us I don’t really know. I have not been here in a long time.”

“Why did you connect us to your world?” asked Esmeralda.

“Wasn’t my choice. I think we found you interesting. I think the top folks thought we could learn from you. Your world was easy to infiltrate. You also had animals,” Spot responded.

Slowly they made their way across the fields. The grass was not cut and uneven, but
it was mostly flat as it ran down towards the stream.

Esmeralda wondered if the water would be the same color as it was on her world. There was a lot of variation, she reminded herself.

As they walked she began to hear the river. Spot, though, was humming a tune they had never heard before. Esmeralda knew it was not Latin Jazz. It sounded more popular and theatrical, but she could not identify it.

As they got closer to the water they noticed there was a path they could follow along its length. The water was mostly clear. They could see the rocks underneath the surface of the water. There was algae on a lot of the rocks. They occasionally saw fish swim by. Esmeralda thought they looked normal enough. The sound of the moving water was soothing. They rested for a time there by the stream listening to the sound of the leaves through the tree. There were more plants by the water. The trail led them through woods on the banks of the stream.

Esmeralda wondered if the birds would talk with them. Joy expected them to. Spot would lead the way.

“When was the last time you were here?” asked Joy.

“You might not have been born yet,” said Spot.

They knew he could bark if there was trouble. Esmeralda knew he had a mighty bark, and quite a bite to back it up. There though there were probably more dangerous things here.

“Are you leading us to a town or the king?” asked Esmeralda.

“This trail led to a town. We will have to wait and see if it is still there,” said Spot.

Joy and Esmeralda did not find themselves tired, but they slowed down to follow Spot like usual. Esmeralda wondered what language these animals would speak.

When she looked at her watch she noticed that it was not working. It was still the evening time when they left the concert. Joy was not being introspective. She had a rambunctious gait as they walked down the path. They had not been walking for long when they heard a voice from the tree tops.

“Who goes there?” said something.

They all looked up and saw an Owl. It was young and gray. Its eyes and expression changed as she contemplated these visitors. They could tell it was a female from the sound of the voice.

“Who goes there, I say,” repeated the Owl.

“Why, it is I, Spot, and some visitors. You might remember me by the name Ruffous?”

“I have never heard of you,” said the Owl.

“I am here on my way to Dog Town. Is it still here? Some should remember Ruffous there.”

“Yes it is. It has always been there as far as I am concerned. It was there before me.”

“Any news afoot?” asked Spot.

“Why I hear there is supposed to be an election. There will be a new Mayor for Dog Town. It might have happened already.”

“That doesn’t concern us,” said Esmeralda.

“We are not going to be here for a long time,” said Joy.

Spot barked and then said sadly, “There might be a necessary change of plans.”

Esmeralda grew worried, but Joy smiled.

“This might be an adventure,” Joy said.

“What if they bark at us or bite us?” said Esmeralda.

“I think we more have to worry about living with the stink. They all might not be able to clean up after themselves.”

Esmeralda smiled and was happy that they brought Joy along. She seemed the most at home here of the three so far.

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“Onward we go,” Spot said to the Owl. It was late in the day now and they decided to rest under a big tree a little bit away from the stream. They found fruit trees to eat, and had apples and oranges for dinner. Spot was content with an apple. He left them for a few minutes to relieve himself.

They went to sleep while the moon rose. They heard murmurings in the woods, but Spot had told them not to worry.

“Who are those two?” said a passing Fox.

“Are they really going to Dog Town?” said a Mockingbird.

“I wonder if those two also know how to talk?” said one Squirrel to another.

Esmeralda was not worried. Spot was a light sleeper and his bark would scare things away. Joy had said earlier that she was looking forward to her dreams in this land. They would wake up with the sun. They might be a bit chilled and moistened by the chilly night, but so far they were comfortable sleeping.

Esmeralda was the first to wake. She was surprised that the snoring woke her. Spot was sleeping on his belly and Joy had nestled her head into the roots of a tree.

There was dew on the ground that morning and a light mist being cleared away by the sun.

Joy woke up with a big smile. Her eyes were wide open and she was ready for the day’s tidings. Esmeralda was not as comfortable as Joy and Spot. She figured Joy had read more things related to this adventure than she had.

Spot opened his eyes and yawned deeply.

“Nobody bothered us last night,” he said. “It will not be a long walk to Dog Town. We might be able to get there by lunch.”

“Is it a complete city of dogs?” Joy asked.

“I have not been there in a long time. I think so,” said Spot. “The Cats set up their own town also.”

“Who is the king of The Land of Talking Animals?” asked Joy.

“There wasn’t one when I was here a long time ago,” said Spot.

They shook out their stiff legs and walked along the path again. Esmeralda wondered what time it was but her watch was still stopped.

Later in the morning, further along the trail, they began to encounter other dogs. They were approaching Dog Town. There were all kinds of dogs on the trail now. There were big ones and small ones. Some would bark at them. Others would just say hello.

Spot seemed to be smiling more. He was more upbeat. When he barked at the other dogs they also seemed to understand him. None of the dogs recognized him yet.

“Many moons,” Spot had said to describe how long he had been gone.

There was a smell that was developing.

“I am used to this,” said Esmeralda.

“There are so many different breeds here though,” said Joy with a smile.

By noon there were a bunch of hills and then a valley with a city. They now looked out over Dog Town which had rivers that ran through it. There were not a lot of structures in the town. There were no bricks or bridges. Some dogs had made shelters for themselves.

“What about when it gets cold?” Joy asked Spot.

“We don’t have winters here,” said Spot. “There is something I need to tell you.”

Spot had been conversing with the dogs as they were on their way. There had been some dialogue back and forth. Spot seemed now more apprised of what was happening down in the valley.

“I must leave you. I am also needed here,” Spot said.

“What is going on?” asked Esmeralda. Joy was now paying close attention.
“The dogs I met along the trail were very surprised to find someone who had been to your world. It had been a long time for them. We were happy to have a passage to your world because we could hide and explore there. We could have adventures among your kind. We could learn from you. It is tough not being able to build a house for example,” said Spot.

“Do you mean there is nothing here that can build a house?” said Joy.

“We thought about inviting people here, but it was not clear that we could defend ourselves. We sent forth ambassadors to your world because we needed help, but we became afraid to reveal ourselves.”

“How did you link with our world?”

“We also had magicians. Not everything here is a canine. Most of us, though, are limited by not being able have two usable hands to build with. Some of us don’t have useful thumbs even.”

“Why must you stay?” asked Esmeralda beginning to cry.

“It is necessary now for me to tell the others of your world. Most of the animals we have encountered have never seen humans before. If you stay there might be a big scandal or something. I need to stay and maybe it is best for you to go. We need to close some of the entryways. It has been an experiment that has not really worked out,” said Spot.

“What about the election?” asked Joy.

“That is not important right now, but it is why I must stay. I will need to tell them of your world. I am afraid they might not be friendly. There are so many of them.”

Esmeralda now thought of all the different kinds of dogs they had seen on the trail. They were all shapes and sizes. They had used their own language with Spot. A tear was now in her eye. It appears that they had decided to be exclusionists.

“I belong among them. You are not in immediate danger, but they have heard some stories about people hurting other animals. They might not all listen to me. I will take you to the gate tonight when the Fire Flies are out.”

“That’s the best thing to do,” said a Cardinal that had been listening while she sat on a nearby bush.

“Sorry that you have to go,” said Spot.

“I would have liked to see The City of Cats,” said Joy.

“They don’t like us Dogs very much,” said Spot.

“Are there other cities?” asked Joy.

“Most animals have decided to live among their own kind, but we talk and visit each other. There are a few towns that the animals share, but it is not clear if things have worked out in those situations. There is peace despite the Anarchy. Your kind might be able to learn something from us and this account.”

They spent the night on the hill above Dog Town. Some animals came to look at them. Some even chatted a little. These were all things that Esmeralda and Joy recognized. The sunset that night was otherworldly. The sky was partly cloudy and many of the clouds were painted pink and purple in the sky.

There were Fire Flies in this land also. When they came out Spot led them to the gate.

“What should I tell mom and dad about you?” asked Esmeralda.

“Tell them that I got lost in the park?” said Spot.

“What if they go looking for you?”

“I might return, but I don’t know now. This might be a goodbye. I am pretty old, Esmeralda. They may need me here,” said Spot.

Esmeralda eyes grew misty.

“You will find other friends,” said Spot.

“Thank you Spot,” said Esmeralda.
“Thank you also. This was a dream come true,” said Joy who now turned sad.

The Fire Flies had gathered in the twilight and they could now hear music beyond the gate that was not visible on the other side.

“So long,” said Spot a little impatiently and sad.

Esmeralda and Joy waved and then walked into the gate and the music. The time had only changed a few minutes. There would be other animals that they could be friends with. They would have to look for them.

Editorial: This Issue

In this issue, we welcome some new writers with a variety of tastes and techniques. Several authors are publishing with us for the first time. Justin Lyons presents a new version of Norse Myth with an implied commentary on the relationship between art and life. A. A. Azariah -Kribbs offers a fairy-tale with romance (in the best sense). Marina Favila has composed the tale of a beautifully ghostly holiday. Bethany Abrahamson reconsiders fairy-bridegroom, reversing genders involving a familiar motif. Shane Blackman gives us a sonnet expressing appreciation for Narnia and it impact on life as he knows it. B. L. Blackwood’s two poems show technologically advanced civilizations in outer space, still clothed with mythology. In J. R. Alfieri’s tale, a mysterious door and a hidden river offer tests and perhaps benefits to the protagonist. Simon Perchik’s poem, “This Rock,” shows us many directions in which half understood works can lead us.

We also welcome back some previous authors. Trent Walters, a long time contributor, and sometime acting-editor of Mythic Circle, presents five “Moonstory Poems” loosely based on Inuit tales, full of vivid imagery, action and puns. Ryder Miller, in his “The Land of Talking Animals,” depicts a passage between two worlds, both undergoing political upheaval. Lee Clark Zumpe explores the consequences of yet one more attempt to rid the world of evil in “Rime of the Last Wurm.” Ron Boyer gives us three poems reflecting a bard’s link with nature.

For the front cover, Emily Metcalf contributes a cover inspired by “The Wooing of Doorley.” For additional illustrations, Bethany Abrahamson gives a dragon picture for “Rime of the Last Wurm” and her own image of an imaginary animal, the Owlbear, for the back cover.
Heir To Prophecy

by

R. L. Boyer

1.
O exalted one!

From the lonely mountain peak, your wide-open eyes, far-seeing, turn the world to glass. Your anguished, shrieking voice—a harbinger of fate. Your eagle's wings—a firebird’s swift flight over sun-glistening waters towards unknown horizons.

2.
O trumpeter of doom!

Wrapped in the cloak of your solitude, in you trembles our terrible future. In your heart resides the darkness of our time. Your heart forms a deep, primordial circle—a mirror-world. Your lonely voice the heir to prophecy: the wolf howls before the quake, premonition of a world in ruins.

3.
O lonesome sentinel!

You stand alone in the very mouth of terror, St. George before the dragon, Chaos—strong fortress against the abyss. You stand alone, Awake, a Great Seer—nearest the Infinite, where the hidden world becomes visible: at the center of the Self, where the numinous godhead speaks.
4.

*O sacred oracle! O beacon of the age!*

To you the Mystery is unveiled in the secret womb of the Mothers. In your innermost depths—at the threshold of transfiguration—a strange, new world labors to be born.

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**Moonstory Poems**

by

Trent Walters

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**The Moon Wages War against War**

As ad infinitum, two human old women, sick of the all’s-fair-in cosmic rows in heaven, root up enough carrot and turnip roots to burrow out of the martial din of winged shields, pitchforks, long knives, and tin-pot helmets; to burrow from their home’s den out a hole in the holy clouds and climb through on knotted bedsheets with their child, the Moon—born of star-faring seamen, launching falling stars at one another across the heavens. The child, bundled in bedsheets, sleeps safe in motherly arms, cradled.
as though she were a candle wan.
They erect teepees and warm milk.
The seamen sent salmon
to steal the Moon when her blind
grandmothers weren’t looking. She grew
among cattails and catfish, accounting for
certain tastes, and as she aged,
the celestial salmon enticed her, promised
the finest glittering jewels in the heavens,
so she followed those bad
salmon. When one let slip
that they intended steal her, she drove
the fish to market and traded them in
for love food, and money. She wandered
the world & found her dear, Deer
whom she immediately loved,
but he always wanted war, sharpened bones
into spears. So she transformed
Deer into a buck, & his spear-bones into antlers & hooves.
His warrior chums she bewitched
into Stone, Duck, & Clam. She swam home
but paused near a calm
pool. A herd of elephants out-crowded, stomped on
the hares. She said, “Leave
the hares to tipple, or go throw
your weight around elsewhere.” The elephants
filled their trunks with water and fired
it at her. Being less serious and grave,
the Moon’s water falls more slowly,
and she sidestepped easily. Knowing
greatness,
the elephants bowed & left. The hare
mouthed, “Elephant juice,” and leaped
on her face where it laughs to this day
when she waxes full.

The Moon Accepts Gifts from a Twin-Faced Lover

She waxes so full figured, the Sun numbers
her lovelinesses, & she eyes his. He is
Seventh Heaven itself. Desire
flamed their prayers up for a union. Heaven
replies, “Raise your arms,” and the Sun spreads
irrepressible orgasmic lightbeams into her
palms, and she burns, too, but too
late realizes the mistake. Her skin is singed
and bruised. “Stop!” she states. “I can’t live
with you.” But the Sun has eclipsed
in two: one rises on a halo,
the darker one glows with a murky light,
staggers after her, blindly walking on shafts
of beams. Heavenly one yells
to the Moon, “Accept this comb
& whetstone to protect you from
the Brujaja he’s become.” He lays her
back on Earth & the Brujaja half gives chase,
pursues to the earth’s end. She drops
the whetstone, which throws

a mountain between them, but the Brujaja gnaws,
sharpening his hungry teeth on jagged cliffs
where we will only see
glinting in the sun. She drops the comb,
each other on the longest
which throws up prickly
day.” She jumps to where
conifers between them, but the Brujaja
she is celestially secure
sets them ablaze. “Go
but cold & comfortless, where
to the other end of heaven,” shouts
she pines.
Heaven, “where you’ll be safe,

The Moon Accepts Gifts from a Familiar Stranger

She floats to a sandy shore & spies
a handsome man, with bright
eyes that pierce hers. As she gapes,
he asks with teeth glittering white, “Try

on these golden knee-highs.” Shiny,
they are dated & right away, she suspects he is
the Sun, disguised as a shoe salesman. He slips
them on for her & clasps

her buckles tight. The boots burn
her feet; she screams & fumbles
with the buckles: “Take
them! Take them off!” But he

will not. She fades
into wisps of fog,
escapes, and swims
to rest upon a rocky shore.
The Moon Finds True Love at Last

Upon a pebbled beach stands a strange hut. The Moon drags her bedraggled body inside. She tidies up & at the crunch of footsteps, changes into a spindle. Beat from warring with the Sun, the Northern Lights hangs his dappled hat—shifting green to blue—upon the bear-skin door and sniffs the air. He sniffs again, letting the smell guide him toward his new spindle. He says, “Lady, if you’re old, be my mom; my age, sister; younger, wife.” “Wife,” she lies and loves. But mornings when he flies at the Sun, her loneliness lengthens into shadows. She sews white stars on seal-black skins & flings it over the windows. Her husband stumbles home, collapses on his mat, sleeps, and bleary-eyed, gazes out the window to see the dark, he falls asleep believing until she throws the bear-skin door up, triumphant: “It is noon, and you’ve waged no battle!” The Sun takes a ray and lances the Northern Lights where he lies. She covers her face. Regolith leaks between her fingers. She hovers over her lover, says, “If you must kill, kill me!” In rage, the Sun hurls both into the sky but not together. She pines.
The Moon Finds That Persistent Love, If Less Than True, Lasts

She pines, she pines, she pines
for love, grows fat
for love, & drags the lakes
for love. Her rotund

belly opens valleys in her
search through Earth. A herdsman in disguise
rides reindeer over tundra. Wooly Mammoth, kin to Elephants who never, uh,

remembers to, uh, forget to re-
member, warns him of the Moon’s approach,
transforms the man to snow.
The Moon arrives, shoves aside

wooden reindeer, seeks under branches,
shoots, & leaves, but cannot find him.
She rages, snorts, contorts,
to no avail. "You nut!" she seems

to cry. She drives her sled
back up the curtain-black of night. He steers
his herd home to the tent
& curls into a womb of

warm blankets. Woolly Mammoth
awakes him, saying, "Moon returns! Allow me
to turn you into tent poles." "That's too obvious."
"A mole?" "Too dubious." "A foal?"

"Too ostentatious." "A rocky knoll?" He ruminates
before shaking his head: "Too smart
for us." "A shoal?" "Lugubrious." (He weeps
at deaths of salmon he has known & loved,
“Then what?” the Mammoth asks, exasperated. “A lamp!” he decides just as the Moon flings up the tent flap. “Where’s he at?” she asks. The mammoth gives a sheepish shrug. She rummages the premises & overturns big bones, stuffed ducks, & clams big bones, racked antlers, ancient spears, but he remains unfound. She leaves. He pops his head out tent flaps: “Hey, Lady, here I am!” She runs inside & overturns old stones, racked ducks, ancient clams, old bones, stuffed antlers, & spears, but he remains unfound. She leaves. He pops his head out tent flaps: “Hey, Lady, here I am!” She runs inside & overturns a couple other things, but she is weakened, thinned from pursuit fatigue. He overpowers her and trusses her, demands his space. She lifts her face and acquiesces, “Oh, whatever.” “Promise never to chase me.” “Never.” He imagines that he understands, unravels her ties, and she is now unleashed to prowl the heavens.
Peril

by

J. R. Alfieri

Every year in the tiny village of Wetfoot, there opened a door. The door itself, quite magically, had been built into the base of a magnificent willow tree, which rose in the heart of Wetfoot, surrounded by cobblestone walkways and rackety forges—a forgotten isle of green amidst a sea of stone. The townsfolk, or the Wetfeet as they’re called, rarely spared the willow any appreciation. What the Wetfeet seemed to treasure more were the metal offspring born from their forges and the golden draughts born from their alehouses. But what they didn’t treasure at all, what they in fact detested with all of their hearts, was the door and the day on which the door opened.

September 22nd, the Fall Equinox, or as they so keenly referred to it, the Day of Peril. They called it as such namely on account of the door, and more specifically on account of what the door opened up on. Or perhaps it should be said, on account of where the door opened up on.

You see, the willow’s magnificence owed itself not to its exterior—which, like all willows, looked as if it were languidly melting—but to its interior. For inside the tree you would not find bark or termites or rings on a stump, you would find a wide expanse where hills rolled and trees marched, where stars shone and rafts of the whitest clouds you ever saw sailed. And if the Wetfeet could be believed, there in that world inside the willow, you would also find your peril.

Once, long, long ago, the Wetfeet knew it as the Perilous Realm, but somewhere along the way, likely in the fires of the forges and the bubbles of the ale, that name had been lost. Now the Wetfeet know it only as the Land of Peril, which could be accessed once a year when all the sundials and pocket watches declared it the Day of Peril, by entering a door built into the wooden face of what surprisingly wasn’t called the Tree of Peril.

As it were, our story begins on the eve of September 22nd, inside a cottage on the outskirts of Wetfoot, under a thatched roof, around a trestle table, at a standstill moment between father, Brutus, and son, Faerwald (Faer for short).

Brutus had just tucked his pocket watch back into his waistcoat when he said, “Couple more ticks and that dratted ole tree’ll crack open its door. What needs to crack instead ‘er its root, and I say we oughta be the ones to do it! Blasted eyesore is long overdue fer a felling!”

“As are you,” Faer whispered quietly,
but apparently not quiet enough. For his father heard and fixed him with a stare, his eyes aflame.

Thus the standstill moment.

“What did you just say to me, boy?”

Silence came crashing into the room, then only the sound of Faer shifting uncomfortably in his seat. At last he spoke, and as he did so he softened his voice and nodded to the pewter mug clasped in his father’s hand. “I meant only that you’ve had a thirst tonight, sir.” Like his quiet whisper that wasn’t quiet enough, his soft voice too must not have been soft enough, as Brutus clamored his free fist onto the table shouting,

“Insolent dog! How dare ye speak to me in such a manner! Me! The man who puts a roof over yer head, food in yer belly and clothes on yer back! I give thanks every night yer mother ain’t around to see the foul thing you’ve become!”

That last part settled over them with a weight Faer could physically feel. Under it his voice broke. “You give thanks Mother died?”

Brutus just looked at him, his eyes still aflame, kindled more now than ever before. “Every night. Every day. Every time I look at yer green face, I give thanks yer mother and those beautiful bluebell eyes of hers no longer have to.”

And then that physical weight suddenly grew heavier, heavier and heavier still. Under it now Faer found trouble breathing. His voice not only broke, but his heart did too.

Fighting against tears, he rose up from the table and managed to say, “Then I will relieve you of it,” before storming out of the cottage and into the night.

The very instant he left home was also the very instant he lost the fight against his tears. Faer moved out and away from his father without thinking about where or even in what direction he was going. Because right now “away” was the only destination that mattered and “out” was the only direction that could take him there.

Faer let his legs carry him under the drifting smog of Wetfoot, sniffing and slouched and slumped. Had his father been correct in calling him a dog, his tail would have been hooked between his legs and his ears would have been flushed back against his head.

On his walk through town Faer passed not a single soul—a phenomenon he rightfully accredited to the deepening night, the near approach of the Fall Equinox, the Day of Peril rounding the corner. Once the clock tower bell struck midnight, all would bar their doors, pull their families close and hope the sun would ride the sky without incident. Regardless of what this behavior implied, it should be said nothing ever came out of the willow door. Things only went into it. And so it’s worth noting that the Wetfeet locked their doors not to keep anything out, but to keep themselves and their families in.

With no door or family to contain him, Faer roamed the cobblestones searching for his destination, “away”. The closer he got to the center of town—for it was there his feet seemed to be taking him—the closer the houses hugged together. He slunk by one home in particular just as a woman was emptying her chamber pot out of her window.

The beef stew slopped against his leather boots, the only pair of footwear he owned, and, rather pitifully, a gift his late mother had handmade him.

It was then, dumped out and now defecated on by this horrid place, that the fog of his unconscious cleared and he willingly understood his destination, what “away” really meant. The willow tree, the

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door, and beyond it the Land of Peril, for nothing could be worse than the peril he lived.

He stood buried beneath the shadow of the willow, casting his gaze upon the tree and mastering his fear, when that clock tower bell struck midnight. The peal of it echoed throughout the town and throughout his bloodstream. *DONG! DONG! DONG!* Almost like knocks, knocks, knocks on a willow door.

And sure enough the willow door answered the calling. Seemingly on its own accord, it cracked inward and gave way. Only a cleft, the slightest sliver, separated the door and its frame. In that manner the door still concealed what lay therein, yet also invited any traveler, any hand, to just push and come inside.

Faer raised his arm out towards it and, as if walking prudently on a tightrope, tiptoed closer, careful not to lose his balance, slip from the tightrope that was his reckless courage (which might just be heartbreak renamed) and fall into the chasm of fear below.

Down there childhood stories swirled and echoed through his memory. Flashes of the past blazed across his mind. He suddenly unearthed all his knowledge on the willow door and the Land of Peril.

"Promise me you won’t ever, ever, go open that door," his mother said to him, her bluebell eyes overflowing with maternal concern. "Promise me, Faerwald. Swear on your very life."

"I promise."

"Let me hear you say it."

"I swear on my very life I won’t ever, ever go open that door."

And here now with his arm extended, Faer motioned forward. One step closer to forsaking himself and that long-ago promise. Then another skein of his memory unspooled.

An elderly woman pounding at the willow door, begging it to open, shouting after her lost son, and throwing all of her weight into the trunk, leaves showering all around her, falling lifelessly, hopelessly, then her falling with them, down on her knees sobbing, reaching up, and in one final effort slapping an open palm against the grooved bark of the willow and whispering, “Please, please give me my Jacob back.”

And later that night Brutus cursing at the tree, at the door that will only yield when the days and nights stretch to equal lengths, the Equinox, then Faer’s mother demanding he renew his vow.

"Let me hear you say it."

"I swear on my very life I won’t ever, ever go open that door."

Years later, Faer bit back on the memory. He shook his head to shake it out of consciousness, but instead only repositioned another memory on top, this one a fresh wound still bleeding.

"Every night. Every day. Every time I look at yer green face, I give thanks yer mother and those beautiful bluebell eyes of hers no longer have to."

Feet planted firm, spine straight and eyes ahead, Faer landed on the other side of the tightrope, having bridged his fear, and found himself face to face with the willow.

"I won’t ever, ever go open that door."

He went and he opened that door.

So easily it relented beneath his touch. Under the lightest amount of pressure, the door folded in. A floating veil of darkness, sheer darkness, greeted him, complete and utterly opaque, yet not a void, not empty. Faer felt that the instant he beheld the threshold.

And the instant he crossed it, his feeling proved true, for the darkness melted away. Above him sprawled a night’s sky,
dominated by a pregnant moon and its abounding litter of stars. Below him spanned an army of bladed grass, all the individual soldiers bowing down to the breeze that soughed through. In front of him loomed a great forest, its trees coiled and braided, like how his mother used to style her hair. And firm behind him stood the willow, the door still open should he change his mind and seek to return.

Nothing about this land evoked in Faer a sense of peril, as its given name might suggest and as Wetfoot so often did. Returning held no place in his mind, only exploring.

“Hello!” Faer called out into the realm. The feeling that this wasn’t a void, wasn’t empty, hadn’t left him in the threshold. “Can anyone hear me? My name is Faerwald and I’ve come from the tree!”

Just then he heard a snicker, inside the forest her heard something snickering at him. When the merriment died out, a disembodied voice floated back under the moonlight, over the sea of grass,

“Of course you came from the tree! Where else? We all come from the tree!”

Faer welcomed a moment of contemplation, more or less a moment of uncertainty on how to disentangle both the presence of the untethered voice and its rather strange claim, before responding.

“What do you mean, ‘We all come from the tree’? The other children who have ventured in and never out again, is it them you reference?”

“Children?” the voice tasted this word and seemed dissatisfied by it. “Seldom they! Adults more than children, I reckon. But that’s plenty talk now! Won’t you do what you’ve come for? Or have you come for what you won’t do?”

“Pardon?” Faer said, not bothering to waste any time disentangling that. When the voice fell silent, he struck out towards it, determined on locating its origin. And by so doing he unknowingly answered its question.

Once he reached the tree line he halted. Over his shoulder he glanced back at the willow door, his exit, then he corrected his neck and glanced forward at the many avenues cut between the timber pillars.

“Apologies, I didn’t quite catch that last bit! What is it you said?”

“Oh nothing!” the voice volleyed.

“Won’t you enter the forest, Faerwald?”

“And why should I?”

“Because it is ahead of you.”

“That is no reason—” Faer started but never finished.

“That is all the reason, dear boy! What’s behind you is behind you because you put it behind! What’s ahead of you is ahead of you because you put it ahead! Do your heels not agree? Do your toes not concur? Enter the forest, Faerwald. If you should like what’s behind you to stay there, enter the forest!”

Faer dropped his gaze. Stained dry on his boots he saw the chunky chamber pot stew, and beneath it the leather his mother had gifted him.

“Every night. Every day. Every time I look at yer green face, I give thanks yer mother and those beautiful bluebell eyes of hers no longer have to.”

He entered the forest.

From the depths soon arrived a man, a brilliant man the likes of which Faer had never before seen. In his eyes shimmered what could have only been starlight, reflected not from the ice shards twinkling above, but from the deep recesses of his soul. Though strongest in his eyes, this light emanated through, or from, every inch of him. His skin, his hair, his garments all emitted an angelic glow. His translucent being in turn made him appear porous, half-present.
When this man witnessed Faer’s reaction to him—a dumbfound expression that spread across his face like a wave, widening his eyebrows and disengaging his lower jaw—he let out another snicker.

“Have you any idea where you are, Faerwald?”

“Not the faintest,” Faer frowned. “Can you tell me what this place is?”

The man shook his head. “Afraid not, but I can show you to someone who can. Someone with an answer to that question and more.”

“But what if I don’t have any more questions to ask?”

The man broke a smile. In his eyes the light pulsed, an excited heartbeat. “I think, dear Faerwald, once you see this particular someone, you will have a world of questions to ask.” He turned on a swivel. Under twisted boughs arching above, beneath the starlight sieving through the forest roof, he began trekking into the depths from which he came.

Faer followed. Leaves crunched underfoot, twigs snapped and the child’s voice peeped, “I heard of people like you before.”

“Is that so?” the man asked, enticed and somewhat amused.

“Back home, we even have a name for your kind. Fairies, or the Fae. My mother read me all the stories. I know Puck and Morgan and—”

“Yes, I am sure you could go on. I know them as well, for I too had a mother who enjoyed her letters. But that’s all they were, all they are. Letters written on a page. Stale ink kept imprisoned in parchment. I am not a fairy. This is not Fairyland. My name is Jacob.”

Faer puckered his lips. Without realizing it he reinstated his question. “Then what is it? What are you?”

But the man kept to his word, and so kept to silence. A few footfalls later, Faer spotted in the distance what he first mistook as an iris flower—its stem a hunchback man, its head a half-yawning explosion of deep indigo. It wasn’t until he nearly stepped over this flower that he realized it wasn’t an iris at all. It was a bluebell.

As they progressively infiltrated the wilderness, sidestepping briar bushes and traversing groves where wild flowers grew, young Faer absorbed all of the evidence around him and with it made his ruling, his conviction:

This land did not deserve its name, the Land of Peril. Unravished by rackety forges, ever-pouring alehouses and chimney stack smog, this land deserved only to be called the Land of Beauty. Even the inhibitor—who the land must have either begotten, or who had himself begotten the land—greatly (and quite literally) outshined the drunkards, abusive fathers, and careless chamber-pot disposers of Wetfoot, the real Land of Peril.

Not a full minute after Faer brought the gavel down on his conviction, he intercepted the soft whoosh of a running river. Soon the forest spat him and Jacob out onto a bankside, and there knee-deep in the water he beheld translucent men, woman, and children all swimming, all impossibly aglow, and all porous.

The water itself threw off a crystalline shimmer, as if those who were bathing in it were bathing in their life source. One by one they all caught sight of Faer and one by one they all froze. The river’s surface settled and sprinted past as quiet as a midnight breeze.

“You’ve come,” a woman said as she waded through the current towards the bankside, towards Faer.

And it was then Jacob’s prediction came true, “Once you see this particular someone, you will have a world of questions to ask.” Indeed seeing her now, seeing the exact
shade of her eyes, a world of questions spun madly through Faer’s mind. He swallowed dry spit and asked his first question, perhaps also the only question that mattered,

“Mother?”

She raised her arms out and returned his question with one of her own, a question slightly altered, however practically identical to the one the Jacob had not too long ago asked.

“Won’t you come into the water, Faerwald?”

Because of its repetition and because of the woman’s wide berth to his question, this marked the first instance Faer felt that something might be…off.

He retreated a step.

The light exuding from both the people and the river flickered then, like a candle buffeted by the wind, it flickered and for the briefest of moments even died out. All they amounted to in that split fraction of time were wraiths, silent shadows and still silhouettes, unyielding and unmoving in the river that only urged they do so.

“I don’t understand. Father…he…”

“Buried my coffin, yes. But I was not in it. Like everyone here,” she turned and presented those standing in the river behind her, the water tugging at their clothes, “I came from the willow door. Do you remember when I fell ill, Faerwald? How forgone I was in my final days? You were so young I am surprised you carry a memory of me at all.”

Faer could only shake his head no. He didn’t remember and always counted that a blessing.

“I contracted a disease so horrid, the local wise woman took one look at me, one sniff, and declared my doom. It was early autumn, then, and just as the leaves began to die, so did I. Bedridden I withered alongside the world. Death’s door I knew would open and the Reaper I knew would shove me through it. So after everyone came to my bedside and paid their respects, I decided to try my hand at another door.

“Your father initially opposed the idea, as any rational man of Wetfoot would. What goes into the willow does not ever come back out; all our lives we are warned of this. But is death not the same? I argued, and I don’t think your father had it in him to deny my final wish. When the Equinox at last arrived, I couldn’t even stand, too frail, too brittle. But your father, he picked me up and in his arms under that harvest moon of yore he took me there, to the tree.

“He despised it back then, before I ever left him for it he despised every branch, every leaf, right down to the roots. I can’t imagine how much he despises it now, after it stole me and never returned me. I might think he despises all the branches, all the leaves, no matter on what tree. I might think he despises the world.

“I suppose he kept it a secret all these years so that you wouldn’t ever follow. Yet here you are.”

This struck young Faer how a battering ram might strike castle gates. The world of questions that spun madly through his head halted abruptly. Just standing, breathing and being present exerted everything inside him, every ounce of strength, every reserve.

“Mother?”

She had waded through the current, advanced on the banks, but yet wouldn’t step foot on dry land. In ankle-deep water she tarried. “I am not her. Only what’s left of her, what the current didn’t whisk away.”

Then she gazed downriver, at a terminus beyond sight where the water, the light, flowed into a pool far greater. “So my boy it is time now I ask you, won’t you do what you’ve come for? Or have you come for what you won’t do?”

Faer shot a glance at Jacob, who then left him and joined the others in the water. “I
don’t know what I’ve come for,” he said. It tasted like a lie almost as much as it sounded like one.

“You do,” his mother assured him. “You came here for the same reason we all came here. Escape. You ran away from the world and the problems within, are running away. But this, my Faerwald, is the end of the road.” She nodded down at where the river water met the earth, only a few feet between her feet and his. “You can step into the water, into the light, and let the river bear you on. Or you can turn around now. The Equinox is still yet upon us. The willow door remains open. So which is it? Will you do what you’ve come for? Or have you come for what you won’t do?”

So clearly Faer heard blazing through his mind, “Every night. Every day. Every time I look at yer green face, I give thanks yer mother and those beautiful bluebell eyes of hers no longer have to.” He felt the unbearable pain. He noted the short distance between him and the lingering trace of his mother. And he made his decision.

The motivation behind his choice, what ultimately decided whether or not he would surrender himself to the river—the real and everlasting escape—lay hidden in his father’s scorn.

“Every night. Every day. Every time I look at yer green face, I give thanks yer mother and those beautiful bluebell eyes of hers no longer have to.” And preceding that, “I give thanks every night yer mother ain’t around to see the foul thing you’ve become!”

Green face. Foul thing. Although these disparagements could only be described as severely unwarranted, young Faer had no way of knowing that. In his life he lacked a variance of perspective, like, say, that of a mother’s, and so developed his understanding of everything, including himself, from the only man who bothered teaching him anything, his father.

Faer truly thought of himself as a “foul thing”, unworthy of his father’s praise, unworthy of even sharing a table with him (hence his leaving). Beholding his mother’s glory, he could not bring himself now to enter the river as a failure, as this green-faced foul thing she wouldn’t be proud of. He would go back. He would better himself, and when he finally gained his father’s approval, maybe he would travel through the door again and let the river wash away his existence. Maybe, if at that time he still sought escape.

“Can’t you come back with me?” he asked imploringly. “Any of you?”

“No,” and in her voice she held no note of regret. “None of us can leave. We all made our choice, for one reason or another, we call committed ourselves. We aren’t really here, Faerwald. There isn’t enough of us to go back.” As if intentionally punctuating this, the light enclosed within them all blinked off. Silent shadows and still silhouettes.

“Tell your father I found peace,” she went on as light radiated once more. “Tell him I’m waiting and I’ll see him soon. And if he wants to honor my memory, tell him he can do that by honoring you.”

“But what if he doesn’t believe me?” Faer protested. “How will he know this isn’t all just in my head? How will I know?”

“There’s a bluebell in these woods. Take it with you through the willow. Remember me by it. Your father knows how rare the flower is. Show him and he’ll come around.” She glimpsed up at the pregnant moon. “You should go now, Faerwald. Night here never ends, but time flows still. Much of it has past. You should go now.”

In what felt like the most difficult motor function of his life, Faer turned his back on his mother. Clambering back up the
bankside, her heard the final whisper of her voice flutter out over the *whoosh* of the river.

“I’m proud of you, Faerwald. Facing the world and the problems within, escaping no more, remaining dry, I’m proud of you.” And then all the lights flicked off.

Tears followed young Faer through the forest. But when he plucked the bluebell flower, his tears ran dry, for in his hands he held something that inspired not sorrow, but hope.

From that day onward Faerwald, the first and only person to ever survive the Land of Peril, was considered a miracle by all the Wetfeet, and more than anyone else, by his father. He spread his knowledge about the tree and the luminescent river the tree harbored. Henceforth, September 22nd was known as the Day of Light, and so too the magical realm was known as the Land of Light. The willow stood evermore at the heart of Wetfoot, and often the sick, the weary and the downtrodden passed through there. Once in a while runaway children seeking escape slipped by also, as the ugliness of the world was an indelible mark not even a miracle could efface.

In his later years when, like his mother, he himself relied on others to carry him—long after the color of his face changed from green to grey—Faer returned. With his bluebell clutched in his hand and with his loved ones sending him off, he at last did what he came for.

He entered the river.
Once upon a time there was a fisherwoman who lived on a little rocky island, in the midst of a forgotten sea. She did not hunt for fish, but for shells, collecting them to sell on the mainland.

Every morning she walked along the garden of a beach, her eyes keenly hunting for anything beautiful that washed up upon her shores—black cowrie, lacy lady’s fan scallop, and warm sunny nautilus. Every afternoon she rode the waves on her boat, pulling other shells from the lines she had anchored out at sea. Every evening she curled up by the fire in her home of wood and mud and fashioned the shells into things of beauty for the people of the mainland to enjoy. She loved the island, and in turn the island blessed her with these gifts, the homes of creatures who had outgrown them.

The fisherwoman had only the seabirds to keep her company, their mournful crawing along the shoreline the only music she heard. Now and then a ship would pass by her island, and the fisherwoman would fetch her boat, and trade her shells for firewood or crackers or—sometimes—a book of music from a faraway land. When they sailed away she sat in her boat and watched them, hoping to hear a snatch of a sea shanty. She never boarded the ships, or asked them to sing for her. But despite her shyness she longed to have such music with her always. To comfort herself she retreated to the quiet of her empty shack to read her books of music, for she could not play or sing even a little. One day, she thought, she would find music that played for her alone—but then the joy of creating beautiful things overtook her, and her days and nights passed in industry and silence.

On a bright, misty morning, when the fisherwoman she collected the shells on the beach, she heard music. It was closer than any ship, and seemed to echo against the steely water. She scolded herself for daydreaming, when there were so many shells to collect, and so much work to be done. Yet—the notes rang in her ears in as real a fashion as the cormorants’ squawking. Just as suddenly as she had become aware of it, the music stopped, leaving nothing but the sound of her pounding heart in her ears. Perhaps she had imagined it, the fanciful desire for music getting to be too much for her. But a moment later it began again. It floated to her from beyond the shining rocks ahead of her.

The fisherwoman knew her island by heart, and picked a way over the stony shore that would bring her to the top of the rocky outcropping without revealing her to sight.
on the other side. In a moment she crouched behind a large rock, and peeked around it to see a young man sitting on a rock, the tide receding around him into swirls of white sand.

He looked like a desert prince, finely formed and regal though modest in his carriage; naked skin the color of dark clams, and with green urchin hair pushed back and curling up at his neck. Here and there she could see the marks of fairy blood in him—shining scales along the curve of his legs, and from the nape of his neck to the base of his spine there ran a long fin, folded now, but green and shining in the sunlight. He played upon a lyre made from a conch shell, and sang a tune not unlike the shanties that she loved so much. But these were softer, darker, more hollow and unearthly than anything she had ever heard before—the songs of the merfolk that swam below a ship’s hull. The notes he sang and played were as beautiful as the foamy sea and the clouds above, but he stopped before the final chord, as if he did not know how to play it, or did not remember.

She knew him to be a Merrow, a fairy of the sea; for when he stretched out his legs on the rock she saw that they were not the legs of a man—long, thin, with long webbed toes. The toes curled around the black rock as he tried to play the song again. She also knew him for a Merrow by the cap that had been laid out to dry on the rock beside him. A Merrow’s cap, it was said, kept the water out of the Merrow’s pointed ears—perhaps it let them dive to the depths of the ocean. The cap gleamed red against the ocean, the rubies encrusted upon it shimmering in the waning sun, the scarlet feathers fluttering in the breeze.

She saw the cap rustle as the water threatened to drag it out to sea. The Merrow did not notice it, having taken up another song to play. She wondered at it, for she knew that if a Merrow lost his cap he was but a landbound fish, tied to rocks and air as a goldfish in a bowl, or a marooned sailor with the spirit of the ocean trapped in his bones. How careless—when a stick or a branch would hold the cap very secure. The fisherwoman watched in horror as the cap slid further and further into the surf, and could not help herself—she snatched the cap up just before it sank away.

The cap was indeed a fine thing—full of unearthly splendor. What a thing to leave in the sand! She brushed the sand away and began to return it when the Merrow sang again, and bathing the island in music. The very water danced around his legs at its sweet notes. It was just as she dreamt it would be. To have such music with her, always...the thought made her ache with longing, and the thought of living without such music made her quiver.

But it was, after all, her efforts that rescued the cap from the depths, was it not? The laws of fairies were unknown to her, but—surely her possession of it, her rescue of it, entitled her to the Merrow’s service? Such creatures were not of her world—a fairy, and everyone knew that fairies were tricky, soulless things. Perhaps it would not mind being kept by her.

The Merrow looked up. Their eyes met for a moment. He had brown eyes, gleaming and smooth like turtleshell beyond a curl of his wild hair. He gazed on her in as much astonishment as she had on him.

The fisherwoman drew a shaky breath. She spoke seldom with anyone, much less fair-folk. “I-I am—“

But the Merrow did not let her finish. The Merrow leapt for the cap, fast as any frog, but she jumped back too quickly, and he landed in the wet sand before her. Though he could leap prodigiously his legs were not used to walking on such uneven ground, and, when he found himself unable
to secure the cap, he changed his mind and leapt into the water, swimming away toward the horizon.

The fisherwoman knew that, without his cap, he could not swim for long out at sea. At once she tucked the little cap into her belt and brought her boat to the spot where the Merrow had disappeared, and cast off to look for him. While she kept watch with her spyglass she floated one of her fishing nets in the wake of her boat. But hour after hour passed, and she saw nothing of the Merrow.

The sun set, and she just was beginning to think that the legend of capturing the Merrow’s cap was false, when the bell at the net rang with energy. She looked over the edge to see the Merrow thrashing and choking in the net. She hoisted the net from the water and took her catch quickly back to the island. She pushed away her guilt as quickly as the water that streamed past her boat, and thought only of the music she would hear played. The Merrow only shivered in the net, and offered no resistance as she brought him inside her house. He lay still on the cold hearth, still bundled up in the net, heaving great breaths while his gills flapped at his neck—he had not gotten used to air yet.

It was a good thing that she left him in the net, for once she finished lighting the fire he began to fret in it once more. His legs kicked savagely, only getting himself more tangled up in it.

“Be still!” the fisherwoman urged in panic. What could calm such a foreign creature? She was only a fisher of empty shells, and hated to see him so frightened. She fetched a blanket and put it over him, anxious to calm his shivering at least. “Please, it’s alright,” she said, drying him off, though there was no way of knowing whether he understood her. Perhaps…She prepared herself, and then sang as best she could to him. Music, it was said, spoke to all, and though her notes faltered, that seemed to calm him. He looked at her from beyond the netting, an elfish sadness in his eyes.

“Please do not die,” she said, almost beginning to tremble with fear for him. “You shall eat me,” he said. His voice was as fair as his features—lilting, ethereal, trembling as much as her own.

The fisherwoman jumped back. “Eat you? No, of course not! Why should I save you, only to eat you?”

“But here I lie next to the fire, and humankind is so hungry for the flesh of my people. I will dry out and die, and then you might as well eat me.”

“Y—you will not die, dear fish,” the fisherwoman said, trying to sound cheerful. “Fire is only to warm you. I would never harm you.”

“You have my cap. Give it to me.”

“I—I cannot. I have rescued it from the sea, and now you are bound to me. But I will cut you loose, and then you may be free to move in my home—you may call it your home too. Would that please you?”

The Merrow gazed at her, and a tear sprung up in his eye—it nearly broke her heart to see him so full of despair before her. She quickly withdrew to another part of the house, and hid the cap straightaway, so that he might forget about it. When she returned he lay still sniffling, curled and as unhappy as a hermit crab out of its shell. She was so moved that she spent much of the evening cutting him loose from the netting, and came and went from the well three times to bring him water to drink. He drank each bucket she brought him without pause, and looked as if he would drink a great deal more if he could.

At least his spirits improved with the net gone, and he sat looking around the house with interest. “Lady, why have you caught me, if not to eat me?”

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“Lady!” What a fine thing to be called. Though her manners were coarse from a life alone she tried to emulate his fine words. “You sang so beautifully on the shore, my fish,” she said. “Will you not sing for me now, and finish the song you began?”

He looked surprised at her request, and touched his lips with his webbed fingers. “I cannot sing,” he said.

“Perhaps you cannot sing without your lyre,” she said. “I will fetch it for you.” Indeed she found herself eager to do for her fish anything he asked—except that one thing she could not do.

The Merrow’s cheeks glowed sienna, a fairy’s blush. “I have not yet learned the secrets of instrument making—that lyre I tried to craft from seaweed and shell. But if you heard me sing today, you know that the music has gone from that instrument. I must find a new shell before I may sing again.”

“Then, sweet Merrow, it is prodigious lucky that I found you!” the fisherwoman exclaimed, “For I have a boat, and line, and every means of finding any shell in the sea. I shall find you a shell from which only the sweetest notes will play, and then you may sing for me.” And, feeling kinder than she ought to be to a fey, she added, “I shall make you a promise, my fish—that when you sing for me, I shall give you your magic cap, and you may return to the sea.”

At such a prospect the Merrow became even more cheerful, and even smiled at her, a beautiful parting of his lips that made his eyes twinkle. But there was tiredness in his eyes, and he pushed his hair back sleepily. Sailors said the powers of the ocean fairies ebbed and flowed with the sun, and that if he had his cap he would be slumbering among the sponges. She would not have it said that she did not care for her catch: she let him sleep, sandy as he was, in her own bed, while she lay down by the fire.

The next morning the fisherwoman arose early to find the sea huddled low on the beach, and she searched the sands with every art of her trade, combed away with net and rake to see if she could find a shell worth presenting to the Merrow as a gift. As soon as she found a worthy shell she would run home and let him make it into whatever instrument he wished so that she could hear him sing. But as the sun began to rise on the beach glittering with worthy shells, she remembered her promise. As soon as she heard him sing she would have to give him his cap, never to see him again. Her steps slowed, and the silence of the island fell away around her, leaving her empty.

Well, she reasoned, if she was never to see him again after he sang for her, she would have to find the perfect shell. If she did not find the shell, then—well, it stood to reason she could not let him go. She closed her eyes from the shimmering bounty of the sea and ran back to her home. Another day, she would find the shell and make him an instrument to play, to form such a beautiful memory that she might never want for beautiful music again. But not today. When she returned she had convinced herself that she had no interest in the sea or its treasures.

“Shall we find the shell today?” the Merrow asked.

“Not yet—you cannot sing without any clothes,” she said. “I will sail to the mainland and bring you back something to wear—then you can sing for me and return to the sea.”

She let him follow her to the boat, going slow enough to allow his unsteady land legs to keep up. As she cast off he sat watching on the beach, his dark figure standing out against the sand until the waves hid him from view. With few shells to trade she had precious little money, but she spent it all on gifts for her fish: the most handsome and sturdy clothes of the softest blue and green wool, tall, fur-lined boots to keep his feet
dry, scarves to put about his neck, watches and folding knives to keep in his pockets; and lastly a beautiful comb made from a venus shell, sturdy enough to brush even his barnacle-encrusted hair. Such a fine comb had the power to render any tangled mane tame.

When she had purchased this and more for him, she sailed back to her island, half worried she would find him gone, that it was all a dream. But as she rounded the coast she spotted his dark shape sliding into the sea, and in a moment he surfaced beside her boat, his hands gripping the rail as he looked in on what she brought him. He seemed very impressed, and expressed his thanks at her attention with such fullness as she had only seen glimpses of in humanity, though being of fairy blood he did not know what any of it was for. The buttons confused him until she sewed little cockles in their place, and then they came very naturally to him. As she helped him dress she discovered with some embarrassment that his fishy feet did not fill the boots as a man’s foot might. She started to take them away, but he held them close and would not let her. She placed the watch in his pocket and showed him the knives, which he marveled at, happy to have a tool to cut seaweed with. She brought him such seaweed to eat for his dinner, and when he had eaten, she revealed the beautiful comb. He shied from her as she went to brush his hair, however

“It will do you no harm,” she said, and started to brush out one of the shining-black locks. He resented her for it, and no wonder, for it was terribly tangled and matted, but once the barnacles were combed out and he saw how lovely his hair could be with such a tool, he thanked her again. No longer fearing to lie down beside the fire, he went to sleep there at the hearth.

The next day he rose as early as she, and dressed in all quickly except for the boots.

“Perhaps today we might find the shell and I can sing for you,” he said.

The fisherwoman gasped, fear gripping her. “Oh no—how could I let you sing for me, when the crashing waves and cormorants drown out every sound! We must build a proper place for you to sing.”

So the fisherwoman went again to her boat, and again the Merrow accompanied her, though she did not have to go so slowly for him as before: he was used to the land now, and could manage the sand and rocks easily. He watched her go from the rock, and on the mainland she gathered every amenity for the building of a finer cottage: rose oak, smooth plaster, rugs and curtains from lands far away. She had no shells to offer, so she offered her precious collection of sheet music instead. As she sailed back she worried that her fish had found his cap and fled her little island, for he did not greet her at the side of her boat. But as she approached the rocks she saw a figure against the gray rocks and sighed to see that it was the Merrow waiting for her in the surf. She stopped him from looking too closely at the things she brought with her, and straightaway took the Merrow to find a place for him while she worked. The sea lay even lower on the beach now, leaving behind murky tidepools filled with black weeds. She brought him to the biggest one.

“I apologize for these poor accommodations,” she said, wringing her hands, “But will you wait here for me, fish? When I return for you, I promise you will have a house of beauty to live in.”

She worried greatly that this little pool would be too small for him, but he gave that fish’s smile of his and set about arranging the tidepool how he liked it, making the seaweed to look more presentable and putting the starfish in order. She left him to his strange work, and began her own work.

It took her determination no time at all to
transform the lonely, draughty shack into a cottage worthy of her wonderful fish. The Merrow in her absence completely transformed the tidepools all around, brightening their tired corners and reminding them of the magic they could pour into the world. It was an incredible transformation, even if playing in the water invited new barnacles into his hair. She feared he would never want to leave such glittering gems, but at first sight of the house he stared in wonder and joy.

“It is magic!” he told her, looking around at the beamed ceiling after her fortnight’s toil came to an end.

“Magic?” she laughed. “No, not magic at all. I just built a better house for you.”

The Merrow shook his head. “Dance with me, lady,” he requested, “For I have never danced in a magical land-house, nor with a land-fish.”

This estimation of her and her craft so delighted her than she could not refuse, and though there was no music they danced before the fire, making shadows into splashing waves and firelight into the play of light on the water. And as their dancing fell to laughter she realized that the Merrow possessed more beauty than that of music, that fairies were not as soulless as she thought. That she could not keep this magical, wonderful fish with her forever.

The next morning, while the Merrow slept, the fisherwoman stole down to the water’s edge with the magical cap in her hands. It fit loosely over her hair, which was fine and dry and not encrusted with barnacles, but she rinsed the cap with seawater and it shrank to fit tightly over her ears. She dove into the depths of the sea, the Merrow’s cap letting her dive faster and further than she had ever done before. She passed all manner of ocean creatures, drifting suspended around her like characters in a great mobile, and the bright morning sun grew darker and darker. The depths called to her, begging her to come to them, and she felt them swell beneath her, offering to envelop her in its magic and never let her go.

And there, she saw it: floating in the water, a beautiful empty shell of gold and coral and pale umber, perfect for making into a lyre. She snatched it from the water and held it to her ear to test how it might sound—and laughed at herself when she remembered the Merrow’s cap would not let her hear anything. She kicked her way to the surface to hear better.

But she heard no music. Just a small voice that whispered, “A net put upon a fish ensnares the fisher. Freedom is found in a fairy freed.”

The fisherwoman dropped the shell with a squeak. It slid away into the darkness, and she barely managed to catch it just as a little silvery fish darted from its coils and was away in a flash of its scales. Perhaps it was the wise fish of the sea, to deliver such an omen. Or perhaps it was just a mean little minnow meant to frighten her. She waited, water undulating around her, before she dared resurface and hold the shell to her ear again. But now she only heard the hollow tones of a shell perfect for lyre-making.

“Lady!”

The fisherwoman turned in the water to see her dear Merrow swimming toward her—though without his cap he was clumsy and slow. He called out to her again. Water sprayed, and then he slipped under the surface.

Gone.

The fisherwoman dashed through the water. Her fish, her music-bringer—oh, she had been foolish to keep his music, his cap from him for so long. The sea had every right to claim him from her—but not like this. Her fish brought beauty wherever he went, and she could not let him go. She shot
forward and caught the Merrow up before he could slip away into the current, and with her arms made strong by fishing she bore him back to the shore. He coughed wetly into the sand. There was so much sand on her island now, the shore pulling back even farther. The fisherwoman felt stretched, exposed, exhausted. She hid the cap as the Merrow rolled over.

“I heard you cry out,” the Merrow said softly. “I was worried.”

“Oh, my dear,” she said, feeling dreadful, “Do not worry—I am well and—look! I brought you your shell, to make into an instrument for you!”

She held out the shell as if an offering to him, and watched him take it with shaking fingers. The webbing had disappeared from between them—no wonder he had such trouble swimming. He smiled at the shell, but when he held it up to his ear, his face turned sad.

“What’s wrong, dearest fish?” she said, fearing the silver fish had come back to whisper horrid things to her own fish, “Is it not pleasing?”

“It is very pleasing, lady. I am well. Only…the sound of the sea is so beautiful.”

He sighed, ear pressed to the shell. It pained her to see the Merrow so saddened, and so she took the shell away, promising that soon, soon she would teach the Merrow how to make it into a lyre. That only made her feel worse, feel the ocean slipping away from her toward the horizon leaving her beached and helpless. But she sustained herself with the promise of creating a perfect instrument for him. If she could only have him a little longer….

Winter came. The tide continued to recede, turning the fisherwoman’s island into a hill, then a great mountain. Neither she nor the Merrow minded, and while the Merrow explored the island and brought beauty to the tidepools, the fisherwoman forged the instrument in secret, carving and polishing and working each piece with the Merrow’s smile in her mind. She shunned the mainland—every tool she needed she found with the aid of the Merrow’s cap, which let her dive so deep into such a beautiful weighty world though she still kept the cap well-hidden in the house from him. It seemed that creating the instrument came easily to her, and she wondered if she might be able to create the most beautiful lyre the word had ever known, just for her Merrow to play. As the days passed the Merrow’s hair untangled, his skin grew warmer. His fishy legs began to look more gentlemanly, and he soon wore boots and socks wherever he went. She so grew used to the Merrow’s company and the magic he brought to every moment of her routine life that she could not bear to think of the day with the instrument would be completed and she would have to say goodbye to him. But she found herself compelled to return to the instrument by an old magic that ran deeper than the sea’s call, and in secret moments she continued to work upon the piece until one day it was all complete. Handcarved tuning pegs, shining golden lacquer, pale strings that almost sang even without being played. She was almost compelled to play it herself—but it would sound very ill in her hands.

Still she held it back, unable to face how lonely her little island would become without him. They ate dinner, walked along the cliffs, watched the sunset. The fisherwoman never found much magic in a sunset, but with the Merrow everything seemed magical.

“I should very much like to sing for you,” he said as the sky turned emerald, azure, indigo. “Will you show me how to make the shell play music?”

She stopped, thinking of the instrument wrapped in a box, knowing that only the Merrow would do it justice. She hung her
head and nodded. “Yes, dear Merrow. Tomorrow I shall show you.”

She cried bitterly that night, knowing what beauty and sadness would befall her lonely little life tomorrow, when she would have no one to talk to but the birds and the sea and the echoes in the shells, and no one to create for but herself.

She arose early and started the long walk to the water’s edge, and sailed in silence with the instrument in the boat next to her, savoring this last day before she heard her music. In the bright sun she was able to put away her sadness and only look forward to it—perhaps the cap gave her this power of the fairies, too. But she only felt the sun’s encouragement as long as it hung in the sky— at the end of the day she sailed back home to surprise the Merrow with the instrument already made. She held it in her hand now, waiting to see him burst out of the water at the side of the boat and rest his chin on the railing—or wave at her from the shore.

He did not appear.

She drew up to the island and went to the cottage. It was dark and empty in the waning daylight. The house looked as if it had been freshly cleaned, everything swept and laundered. She dashed into her bedroom, and all became clear to her: Her sweet Merrow, showing her a kindness, had cleaned the house as he had all the island’s tidepools, bringing light and magic to every nook. And in doing so he had found the magical cap. She could not blame him. She knew how great the pull of the sea might be, and he no doubt was happy to return to his first home.

“It is well,” she thought. Salt came to her eyes—the sea, calling her. She let the tears come. “I will bring him his lyre. I may never hear it, but it is the least recompense I can make for the joy he has brought me.”

She went out to her boat and cast off—away from the mainland, away from the ships, heading for open, empty sea, heart breaking. No shells or sheet music to trade. Just the instrument to give. Little did she know that the Merrow felt his heart break too, drawn to the sea and drawn to his landfish on the rocks. This rending shook the sea to its own heart. It trembled and quaked, and the tides rushed back in to the island in great waves along with the fisherwoman’s tears, clouds gathered and wrung themselves into rain overhead. The fisherwoman’s little boat found itself no match for the tempest. But it was too late for her to turn back—nothing would make her turn back now. She pressed on into the heart of the storm, imagining that perhaps the Merrow’s rage had so upset the waters. The sea would easily ensnare her as she had her Merrow. Perhaps that was for the best. Repay the debt, and the sea would no longer hide from her shores or blast her island with waves. It would lie still along her shore, balance restored.

“Forgive me,” she told the sea, for she knew she did not deserve to see her fish again. That the music would never be heard. She cast the dear instrument into the care of the depths with a prayer that it find the Merrow. Then the storm crashed in with its loud cacophony, and came over her boat.

The fisherwoman woke with a start—a bubble jumping from her mouth and floating away. She found herself in a shallow pool in an anemone bed. Their petal-like tentacles brushed against her, soft with no sting. Someone watched her from beyond the water’s surface, their image distorted. She sat up and broke through the surface to see her beloved Merrow sitting at the edge of the pool—he held the lyre she made in his hands. He smiled at her.

“Are you well, lady?”

“Yes, I—” she realized she was sitting in one of the Merrow’s tidepools on her island’s shore, and she stared in amazement. Every anemone was in bloom, every blade
of seagrass shining in the morning sun. It was only then that she realized how strange it was to wake up in a tidepool, to breathe underwater when she was asleep...she felt her head, and gasped as she pulled it off—the red cap of the Merrow’s!

The Merrow didn’t try to snatch it, and just watched her. “When I found the cap, I felt so dry and hot, and heard the sea calling to me,” the Merrow said, “But so did the promise you made to me. Of the lyre? Somehow—I could hear it calling to me through the waves.” He blushed, and there was pink in his cheeks as well as blue.

“Such a thing has never happened before. The sea grew angry in my turmoil, and brewed such a dreadful storm, I feared you were lost, but you had so much of the sea in you, the cap revived you. For this I am—I am so glad.”

“Oh, fish,” the fisherwoman sighed. “You should not have saved me, for I am wretched. I stole you from your home—you had every right to flee from me.”

The Merrow cocked his head. “But your world is so beautiful, Lady! Full of—sun and foot prints and collecting. I never thought to collect anything before. And the things you have built with your hands are so beautiful—” He crept to the edge of her pool. “Lady— Could I can make a bargain with you, as you made with me? I would be happy to share my cap with you, if you would make such beautiful things for all my people?”

The girl blushed. “Oh, fish—sweet, loved Merrow—” She used his true name for the first time, and kissed him. She tasted the ocean and something warm and sun-baked on his skin. “I could not do such a thing. How could I? The cap may let me dive for shells, but it leaves you upon the land! And when you are gone with it....I will drown looking for you.”

The Merrow gave his big fish smile. “Oh my land-fish—” he stopped, and started again, “—Fisherwoman. What say you—may we inhabit the land and the sea, drying out and drowning, together?”

He kissed her, and played her a song for her alone. When faced with such kindness the fisherwoman found herself utterly ensnared. She now saw that, like the hermit crab, she had outgrown her still, silent island home. His gift of the cap to her granted her entrance to the sea fairie’s land, and her gift of the music let him come into her realm—so the fisherwoman and fish reached a new balance. Between them they cared for the magical cap in turns with the changing of the tide—the Merrow’s presence made known by the beautiful gardens he left in the tidepools, the fisherwoman’s by the crashing waves and gathering shells. The music they built for the sea fairies may not be heard over the crawing of cormorants or the crashing of the sea, but it may still be heard in the shells they leave behind.
Havenforge

by

Bran Blackwood

Daedalus cannibalized Ymir
an aimless-drifting long ship,
and built for himself a shell:
a fire in the cold wild waters,
an isle atop the waveless waste,
a haven in heaven’s starless space.

Clay fires, iron and bronze smelt
in dark forges found below.
The bellows bellow black lungs.
They cough in cast iron cages,
the will-o-wisp from their lips,
dim amber lantern’s breath aglow.

That black field of dreamless night
folded to the work of his hands.
A labyrinth rose from the depths,
inhabited with Scorpio’s seed,
metal sons and porcelain daughters
erected to amuse an ancient tinkerer.

A council of stars presides there,
precise stems and gears to keep time
and space, left to the aged ageless.
A crippled captain crowned in cogs,
is king of a newly formed New World,
a shelter of retrofitted nouveau.
Voyagers

by

B. L. Blackwood

Huginn:
I've been to the ends of the ancient earth
And seen the wood beyond the world beyond
Where grow the fabled elder trees of olde.

There I saw Yggdrasil's roots unearthed,
Hyperion's rings laid bare and barren,
All Eddic bindings loosed by twilight's flood.

I've flown on wings of wax and wind:
I rose up to the highest of high heavens;
I dove down to the deepest of depths,

Where the sky is swallowed in blind abyss,
Where watches water through black—black darker,
Thicker than pitch, oil, or raven wings,

Where light explodes and dark subsides and ceases
To cease until I perceive it does not
Return as smoke, spoken by the flame.

Muninn:
We sailed upon the night to unsure shores,
Buoyed on the black, that endless well of deep
Resting silent still in stardust charcoaled.

The masted tips of our wings graced gold rings
Of seven spheres spun as we slipped by,
As though through the great gait of Heracles:

Mist like a waterfallen sheet, a veil
Of heavy light as we would never grasp,
Obscuring the beams and bones of the truth

Curved columns of steel and rough stones turning,
Groaning, clicking into place as we passed,
They sang to us lost lore of siren tomes

Some tone of elder days we drifted on
Like twin feathers on an æther breeze
Sailing flammarion into the night.
ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

J. R. Alfieri is a published writer and devoted lover of all things mythical. He currently resides in the backwoods of New Jersey, but will soon be migrating to England for a graduate study in Creative and Critical writing. There he hopes to polish his craft, sip the finest of tea the country has to offer, and if he's especially fortunate, pick up one of those dashing accents.

A.A. Azariah-Kribbs lives in Virginia with her Griffon, Fuffle. She has been published in several venues, including Carus Publishing’s *Cicada, The Bards and Sages Quarterly, Fēlan, Chantwood*, and *Mystery Weekly Magazine*. Two of her short stories won awards from the *Bethlehem Writers’ Roundtable’s* 2016 annual competition. Her blog, [Wallieswentletrap.com](http://Wallieswentletrap.com), features original art and fiction following the adventures of Wallie the Imp.

Bethany Abrahamson gained degrees in biology and history from the University of New Mexico and enjoys writing in the fantasy genre in her spare time. Her inspiration for her drawings comes from Dungeons and Dragons. When she's not writing or painting you can usually find her playing fiddle or vielle, or crocheting.

Shane Blackman received a B.A. in English and History from Wabash College and an M.A. in History from Indiana University. Shane has been a Visiting Scholar at Oxford University, Visiting Research Fellow at Princeton University, and Assistant Editor at the *Indiana Magazine of History*. At Wabash, Shane won two writing awards: the Walter Fertig Prize for Excellence in Writing and the *Callimachus Literary Journal* Award for Best Essay. He has taught Creative Writing, Composition, and Literature in Arizona's high school system and served as Lecturer in History at Indiana University. Shane currently is writing a novel which depicts various aspects of American history and which considers the role that family, close friends, and mere acquaintances can play in a person’s development. The novel also takes a journey through parts of film history and the history of literature.
B.L. Blackwood is a Central Florida artist and author of La Mer: Dawn to Midday on the Sea, exploring the world and our place in it through an eclectic blur of myth and science fiction. You can find more of his art, poetry, and musings at blblackwood.com/<http://blblackwood.com/>" 

Ron Boyer is a scholar, teacher, and award-winning poet, fiction author, and screenwriter. He completed his MA in Depth Psychology at Sonoma State University and is also a graduate of the Professional Program in Screenwriting at UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. He is currently undertaking doctoral studies in the PhD in Art and Religion program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, where he is dual-enrolled at UC Berkeley. Ron’s scholarly research emphasizes interdisciplinary, archetypal theory applied to mythopoetic imagery in narrative art, including mythology, ritual, literature, and film, with a concentration on the mythopoetic art of Dante Alighieri, William Blake, and J. R. R. Tolkien. He has presented academic papers at the first Symposium for the Study of Myth at Pacifica Graduate Institution and the International Conference for the International Association of Jungian Studies at Arizona State University. He is scheduled to present at the upcoming 33rd Annual International Conference on Indigenous and Ancestral Wisdom, Healing and Transformation sponsored by the Society for the Study of Shamanism. Ron is a two-time Jefferson Scholar to the Santa Barbara Writers Conference, and two-time award-winner for fiction from the John E. Profant Foundation for the Arts, including the McGwire Family Award for Literature. His first short story was published in the horror anthology, America the Horrific. His poetry has been featured in the scholarly e-zine of the Jungian and depth psychology community, Depth Insights: Seeing the World with Soul (Issues 3, 5, & 7), Mythic Passages: A Magazine of the Imagination, Mythic Circle, and other publications. Ron’s essay on “The Rebirth Archetype in Fairy Tales: A Study of Fitcher’s Bird and Little Red Cap” was recently published in the peer-reviewed journal, Coreopsis: Journal of Myth and Theatre, where he is a reviewer and regular contributor.

Marina Favila is an English professor at James Madison University in Virginia. She has published essays on Shakespeare, poetry, and film in various academic journals, including Modern Philology, Cahiers Elisabethains, Spiritus, and Texas Studies in Literature and Language. Her published fiction includes pieces in Jersey Devil Press, Wraparound South, Fabula Argentea, and Harvardwood’s Seven Deadly Sins anthology.

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Gwenyth Hood was born in White Plains, NY, but moved with her family to Brandon, Vermont at the age of seven. She developed a love of reading and writing at an early age, discovering some favorite authors—Rudyard Kipling, Shakespeare, and J. R. R. Tolkien—at roughly the same time, in early adolescence. In 1982, her first novel, *The Coming of the Demons*, was published by William Morrow. She is currently in the process of finishing the next two books in the series and updating Book I to agree with the changes. She has been the editor of *The Mythic Circle* all the years of this millennium and a few more.

Justin D. Lyons is Associate Professor of History and Political Science at Ashland University in Ohio. A life-long fan of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, he incorporates as many references to them as possible into his university classes as well as explorations of the mythological underpinning of ancient regimes.

Emily Metcalf is a visual artist born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii, and currently living in Indiana. She holds a BA in Drawing & Painting and Graphic Design. A voracious childhood reader, Emily grew up visualizing and drawing the scenes from her favorite books. Today, she views creativity as part of humanity’s essential nature, and as a way to reflect the love of God. Emily works in watercolor, pen and ink, photography, and digital media.

Ryder W. Miller edited *From Narnia to a Space Odyssey*, cowrote *San Francisco: A Natural History*, and is the author of *Tales of Suspense and Horror* and the recently published *Ocean Beach Diary*. He is currently working on a hybrid genre novel called *The First Half Million*. He has had stories published in Mythic Circle and The Lost Souls website. He was a regular community environmental reporter for San Francisco Community newspapers (*West Portal Monthly*, *Sunset Beacon*, *Richmond Review* and *Potrero View*). He is also a critic who has been published in RAIN TAXI, *The Electronic Green Journal*, *Beyond Bree*, and *The San Francisco Book Review*.

Trent Walters was once a co-editor of *The Mythic Circle*. Poems of his have appeared in *Asimov's; Fantasy, Folklore & Fairytales; Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*; and *The Pedestal*. Morpo Press published his chapbook, *Learning the Ropes*.

Lee Clark Zumpe has been writing and publishing horror, dark fantasy and speculative fiction since the late 1990s. His short stories and poetry have appeared in a variety of publications such as *Weird Tales, Space and Time* and *Dark Wisdom*; and in anthologies such as *Corpse Blossoms, Best New Zombie Tales Vol. 3, Steampunk Cthulhu* and *World War The Mythic Circle #39, pg. 56*
Cthulhu. His work has earned several honorable mentions in The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror collections. An entertainment columnist with Tampa Bay Newspapers, Lee has penned hundreds of film, theater and book reviews and has interviewed novelists as well as music industry icons such as Paddy Moloney of The Chieftains and Alan Parsons. His work for TBN has been recognized repeatedly by the Florida Press Association, including a first place award for criticism in the 2013 Better Weekly Newspaper Contest. Lee lives on the west coast of Florida with his wife and daughter. Visit http://www.leeclarkzumpe.com/.

This Rock

by

Simon Perchik

This rock no longer tries
though you give each grave
the tool it needs
--does it matter
you haven’t looked here in years
--you bring the dead
and your forehead each day
closer to the ground
easy to grab, hold close

let it harden, already
scraped for the powder
that cures, can stop the breathing.
Dusk gradually nibbled away at the evening until darkness swallowed the sky. A high, thin layer of mist held back both moon and stars, and the forest of Kilern grew as black as a bat’s hide. Atop the ridge crests of surrounding mountains, Oquada spied the faint glow of a dozen bonfires set to commemorate the start of holy night.

“We’ve done well, Dumaar,” Oquada said, referring to the profits of the day’s sales. Business always went well in the human settlements, but this trip had proven particularly lucrative. Still, his senior partner seemed somewhat less than satisfied. The dwarven trader grinned as he plucked a drumstick from the hot coals of the campfire. “We’ve made more in one afternoon than we have throughout the whole harvest season, you secured the icon desired by your patron, and we dine on fresh game on the Eve of Shadows, yet you do not smile. What troubles you?”

“I am pleased with our earnings,” the elder dwarf responded, tugging on his long, gray beard, “But something has bothered me since we left Bhanberg. The forest is not as it should be...”

“You are old,” the young peddler said to his elder. “I fear your senses are failing you.”

“Perhaps it is just this night which disturbs me. You forget that I lived during the last age of wizards, and I beheld the ceremonies they practiced on the Eve of Shadows.” Dumaar gave thanks that the festivals now bore little similarity to the ones that inspired them. “Still, I feel as though someone has trailed us since we set out.”
“Ha!” Oquada had never met a human brave enough to face Kilern after dark. “None of those villagers would set foot in this forest after nightfall.”

“Aye, I’ll concede that point. I must say I myself would prefer to be nestled in a warm bed at the Troll’s Head Hostel.”

“Sleep in an inn?” Oquada raised a brushy eyebrow. “You are growing soft with age. Perhaps you should retire at the close of this trip.”

“With the sale of this icon to Lord Duhlon, I just might do that.”

“I should say!” Oquada’s face grew red, his eyes grew narrow with mischief. “Let us have another look at it, then, old man.”

“No!” cried Dumaar, drawing back from the campfire. “It is not a toy to be poked and prodded and handled by commoners like us.”

“Oh, bring it out once more, Dumaar: I’m not likely ever to see such a relic for the rest of my days.”

“Oh, very well,” the aging dwarf finally consented, “But only your gaze may settle upon it. If one of those dirty little fingers should happen to tap it, you will find yourself one finger short on your return home.”

From a pouch on his back Dumaar plucked the relic. The trader from whom he swindled it had neatly wrapped it in a piece of scarlet cloth. The dwarf now unfolded the fabric delicately revealing a long, curved object white as bone. Its smooth surface beckoned to Oquada; its dagger sharp point challenged him to run his hand across it to see if it could easily tear the flesh.

“It is exquisite.” Oquada stared at it intently, marveling at its size and form, trying to imagine the beast which had spawned it. He tried to envision the army that had vanquished such a horror, too.

“This is one of but a handful of dragon fangs now known to exist.” Dumaar gently picked up the object and held it close to the flames. The light shimmered against its burnished surface. “The wizards stole most of them from the pits in Gahldar where our armies slew the last of the Great Wurms many centuries ago.”

“Why did they plunder them?”

“The wizards wished to use them to complete their spells and augment their power. Given the opportunity, they might have tried to raise a new brood of dragons. I have heard tell that with a dragon fang alone, a new dragon can be sired.”

“That is not possible!” cried Oquada, his eyes growing wide.

“Have you never heard the Rime of the Last Wurm: ‘Slain be the dragons, never please their thirst, the last of the dragons, shall ever be the first.’ The wizards understood the meaning of those cryptic verses, and had they not been defeated they would have bred a hoard of dragons to claim as allies.” Dumaar studied the fang as he spun back down the years, remembering the wars of his generation. In his youth, he had fought against Siewak the Strange and Ubbo-Sumock; his contemporaries crushed the last of the wizards and cleansed the lands of their malfeasance. “Such relics are dangerous, and must be guarded closely by the nobility lest we recklessly invite damnation upon our souls.”

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“And this is why Lord Duhlon commissioned you to seek out and acquire this artifact?” Oquada succumbed to temptation and reached out to grasp the dragon fang, but Dumaar quickly snatched it away. “Do you not think that your patron might be plotting to harness the power in this relic, to use it for his own purposes?”

“No,” the elder dwarf said angrily, now busily replacing the dragon fang in the folds of fabric. “Lord Duhlon is a virtuous nobleman. His only goal is to see that this piece is kept under lock and key, guarded from those who might wish to misuse it. Surely you can see the value in that?”

“No,” Oquada said, drawing a dagger from his belt, “I am afraid I cannot.”

The black night split as a feathered shaft whistled from the shadowy thicket beyond the reach of the fire’s light. Dumaar recognized the gentle purring of the bow string too late. The arrowhead burrowed into his back below his right shoulder blade even as he reached for his sword. Its tip quickly erupted from the startled dwarf’s chest, loosing a cascade of blood. The dragon fang slipped from his grasp and tumbled to the ground.

“Oquada,” the elder dwarf gasped, blood already bubbling over his lips and trickling down his chin, “What have you done...you do not understand...”

Dumaar slumped forward and fell to the forest floor shuddering. He landed on the dragon fang.

“Move!” Oquada shouted angrily, kicking his senior partner roughly. “Don’t break the damn thing!” He rolled the old dwarf over on his back, snapping the arrow in the process. Blood soaked the scarlet cloth which sheathed the dragon fang, and Oquada removed it hastily. Inside, the relic remained intact. “I’d have slain you again had you broken this with your fall, you fat old fool.”

The dwarf’s blood made the dragon fang slick and it glistened in the dancing flames of the campfire. Oquada smiled, held his prize high and admired it.

“For this,” a voice rang out in the darkness, “You called on me?” Another dwarf stepped into the ring of firelight, his face covered with dirt. Leaves and twigs clung to his long hair and beard. “Could you not have slain this frail old one with your own hands?”

“Listen, Iquawlf: Dumaar was once a great warrior, a killer of trolls and slayer of wizards,” Oquada said, defending himself. “I thought it wise to take no unnecessary risk with a treasure like this.”

“Wipe it clean,” the old dwarf suddenly sputtered, his voice no more than a faint cry. “Wash my blood off the fang, quickly.”

“What is that he is saying,” asked Oquada, “Can you understand him?”

“Not with all that blood in his throat,” laughed Iquawlf. He picked up Dumaar’s own sword and finished the job. “Shall we strike south tonight, or wait for morning to head to Dahgil’s Keep?”

“While I long to see that sinister little wood-witch’s eyes ignite when she gazes upon this fine relic,” Oquada smiled, “I think it best that we rest here and travel by daylight.”

Together, the scheming brothers dragged poor Dumaar’s corpse into the woods, then settled down by the campfire. Sleep silently embraced the dwarves, and the forest of Kilern grew silent and still. Oquada dreamed of the rewards the wood-witch would bestow upon them, both in terms of gold and sensuality.

Oquada awoke shortly before dawn, coughing uncontrollably as thick smoke wormed into his lungs and choked him. Fire besieged the forest of Kilern, and flames hungrily lapped at the trees all around the clearing. He grasped his brother’s shoulder and shook him, trying to rouse him. Iquawlf rested on his side, his back to his brother.
He did not stir at Oquada’s urging.

“Wake up!” Oquada howled, tugging fiercely on his brother’s shoulder. Iquawlf’s mutilated body then rolled over, its featureless face looking skyward absently. The dwarf’s flesh had been ripped away, his guts half-devoured by some ravenous animal.

Though the light of dawn already painted the sky, a fresh and awful darkness suddenly swallowed the dwarf. Before he could take air into his lungs to scream, winds whipped the flames and whisked burning leaves high into the air. A cloud of dirt and dust billowed up from the forest floor around him.

Oquada raised his eyes skyward hesitantly. He saw it, and he shuddered. The little dwarf watched in terror as a newborn dragon swooped down toward him, eager to further satiate its thirst for blood.
The language of Birds
—for Taliesen
R. L. Boyer

I.
I am not your contemporary.
My song is older than the mountains.
My song was written before Time began.
My song is a symphony of ten thousand voices.
My song cascades, a waterfall, into the bottomless chasm.
I sing in a language more ancient than blood.

II.
I watched as the Inca hid their treasures of gold.
I watched as Osiris was nailed in his tomb.
I watched as the angels fell down from the heavens.
I watched as the God-child was formed in the womb.
I have witnessed the endless transformation.
I have flown with the eagle of time.
I have dreamt the chaotic history of the world.
I have awakened in the darkness while all others slept.

III.
I dwell in repose in the very Ground of Being.
I worship the mystery of Myself.
I am the One who shall be as I Am.
I am the One who does not change.
I am the Axis and Soul of the World.

IV.
There is something Eternal in everything.
At times it is as silent as the stars;
At times it fills the air with music.
Listen, and you will hear the primal warbling of Nature.
Listen, and I will sing to you in the language of birds.