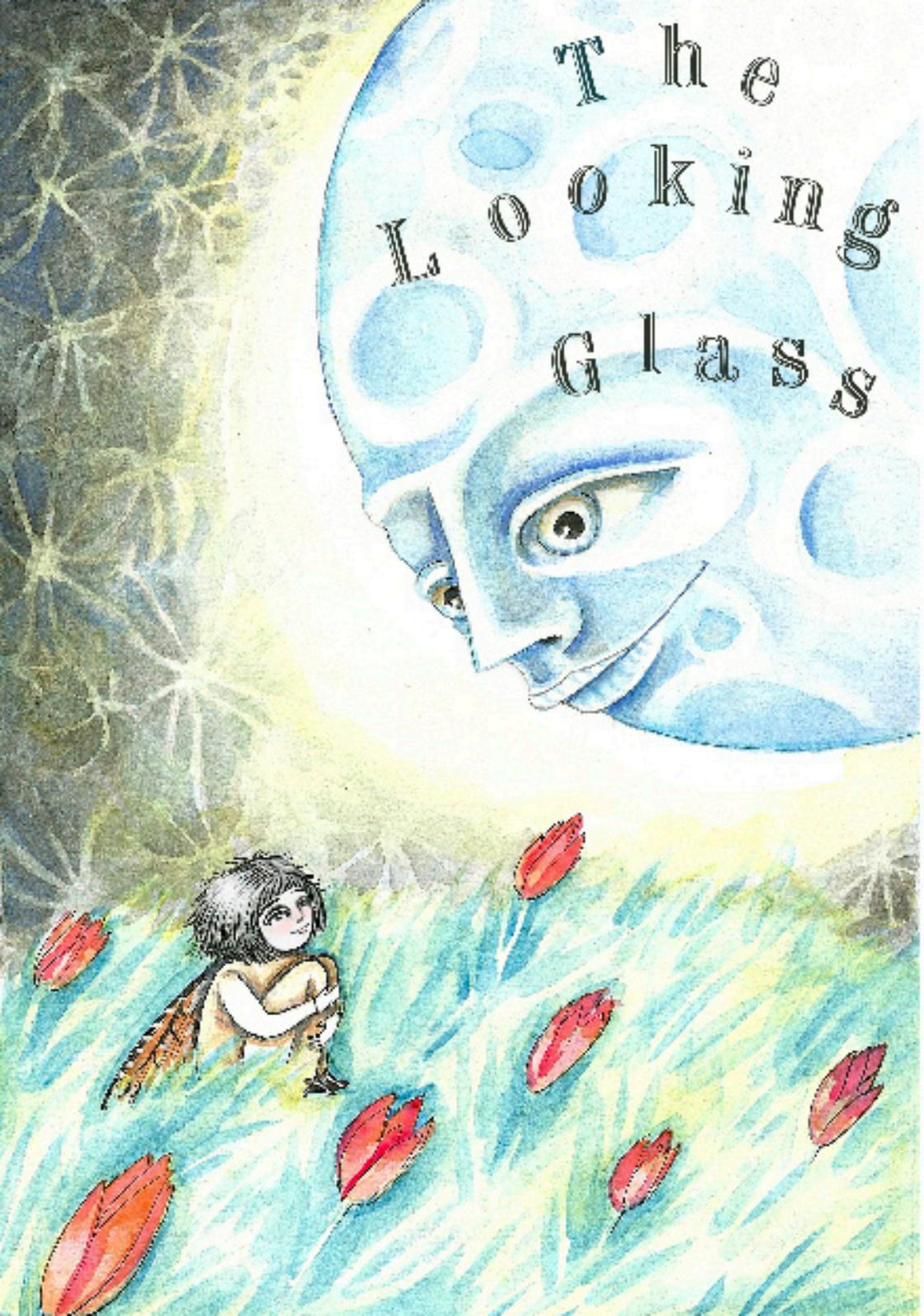


The
Looking
Glass



A Note from the Editors

Dear Reader,

This Issue of the magazine was challenging to bring together due to a variety of personal reasons. Life has a funny habit of getting in the way sometimes! This magazine is run on an entirely volunteer basis, meaning time is not always our friend. Working as a bookseller and fulltime student respectfully, we struggle to find the time to get together, read hundreds of submissions and debate endlessly over creative pieces. The main thing we don't struggle with is receiving inspiring creations that make us laugh, cry, smile, squeal, jump, and dance (to name a few reactions). Some of the pieces we receive make us more jealous than we are willing to admit. The scope of imagination and inspiration that exists in this world is unbelievable. Within the pages of this magazine are works of imagination and talent that we have selected for you from an ever growing sea of creativity. What struck us most this time around was the variety of narrative voices and perspectives. This issue, as you will soon see, spans the age groups (although we frown upon assigned age groups given that we are both women in our twenties dedicating our lives to children's books!). What connects these pieces is (ironically) the individuality and originality of voice. Is the fire lighting? Is the tea poured? Good. Now you may begin.

Your Editors,
Elena and Emily

Cover Art by Yuriko Hoshino

About the Cover Illustrator

Yuriko Hoshino is a largely self-taught artist who got her start illustrating and designing tattoos and vinyl album covers in college. In 2014 she and her musician husband Clark Williams published their first children's book Bloomers' Bloomers. She currently works as an illustrator/bartender in coastal Northern California and is looking for a publisher for her forthcoming book A is for Amaranth, a vegetarian bestiary. Her work can be viewed online at yurikohoshino.tumblr.com.

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The Sky

Frances Quinn

There were ten strangers on the air tight bus, all younger than seventeen. None had talked during the tedious journey making silence the eleventh member of the group. The only interrupting noise was the beige leather seats squeaking with each shift of their bored bodies. The grey curtains were drawn shut. They helped block out the poisonous rays searing the earth. The sun was like a greedy child on Christmas morning ripping apart the wrapping paper to claim the prize.

Only one curtain remained open.

At the back of the bus, a slim girl was staring in wonder at the sky. The windows were UV protected and three panes thick, making the world obscured and hazy but she was insistent on looking. The chance to see the outside was too amazing to miss. Especially as it would be their last opportunity to see the broken scenery. She was curled up in her seat, body contorted in awkward angles. She wore golden sunglasses and her dark hair hung loose around her face. From her second hand dress to her sickly skin, everything about her was pale and washed out. She fiddled with the thick gum holding the window in place liking the feel of the smooth rubber. It was there to stop the toxic air from suffocating the passengers but she was sure touching it would be fine. Mostly sure. She pushed her hair out of her eyes with an impatient, practiced movement desperate to steal everything in. The seat beside her was empty. Its former occupant sat in the opposite aisle staring at her in dislike.

The sprawling landscape was an explosion of colours. Browns and reds toppled over each other in the setting light. Yellows and oranges tinted the battered ground below. Textures she couldn't imagine stared up at her, a mixture of dead moss and desert sands. The ruins of cities had scattered the landscape but the metal skeletons had disappeared now leaving only open ground. Mountains sat in the distance staring across the land in disappointment. They owned such dreams, had seen such beauty and for it to end with rust and burning. Their anger shadowed the ground around them as they brooded down at the passing humans. They had caused this. They had eaten it all up and left only

the chewed-up husk rotting in the heat.

The last of the fighting light illuminated the sky with an angry burn, highlighting the clouds in shades of pink and gold. The glow stretched out showing a wasteland littered with dead trees and dried lakes. The once pregnant earth was now seen only in books. The younger children thought it was a story. They knew only this dead place and the inside of the orphanage.

Her eyes strained against the darkening sky and the brightness of the bus to catch her last glimpse. She wished she could breathe the outside air. Something different from the artificial taste of her childhood. She watched the immense moon rise, an unforgiving face staring down. She imagined she could see the failed lunar colonies. They were the first attempts at escape, long abandoned to their cold fate.

She longed to be out in it, wanted to feel the cool breeze on her face and the hard ground beneath her feet. She did not remember if she ever had tasted fresh air. She owned a memory she clung to with her few belongings. A laugh and the sound of water. The wind picking at her hair and pulling it across her face tickling her. She wasn't sure of it was real or a dream but she held onto it, focusing on the details and etching them into her brain. Her only convincing reality was the crisp recycled breath of the air-conditioning in the orphanage.

She glanced at the boy opposite her. He must only be sixteen but he had the hard jaw of a man. He watched her eyes squinted with distrust. The only man she had ever met was the doctor who came into her dorm once a month to give the girls physicals. Now she was meant to marry this man-boy, to leave the earth in giant spaceships and live in a satellite ship already built somewhere up in that vast sky.

The planet was dead.

It had been ruined by centuries of abuse and violence like a battered wife who allowed the hurt to continue out of some misplaced sense of duty. Only now, even with her loyalty, they were abandoning her for a younger model. Something with a sleeker body and the ability to last.

The crackling voice of the audio system overwhelmed the space. Everyone sat up in their seats as if they were being watched.

“This is base control one to bus 47. You are approaching the hanger and will need to be aware of the safety procedures. Firstly, please stay beside your assigned partner. We will be processing people in pairs.”

Silence echoed through the bus making everyone strain forward begging for more information.

“Secondly, please wait until the vehicle is safely through decontamination before attempting to disembark. The robots do not react well to any form of hostility and they will perceive this as a hostile action. Finally, please have all papers and documents ready. You will be leaving at 0700 hours.”

The voice cut off into sudden static, crackling through the bus and pushing people back. Despondency and fear hung in the false air. Some of the partners were already holding hands, muttering comforting words and accepting the inevitability of this new life. She looked over at her future husband. He was staring straight ahead, back straight and hands folded in his lap. Just like the good soldier that he was. She knew little of how the earth was destroyed but she was sure it couldn't be the simple story of a planet dying. She had heard two of her minders talking once, older people with longer memories, and they spoke in hushed words of greed and death and want.

She wasn't sure if this was true, if people would kill something for money and power. But she had seen things in the orphanages, heard noises in the nights and the rumours that spoke of such pain and cruelty, that told her maybe people could be that selfish and callous. Maybe they were responsible for the death of their home. If that was true, she was glad they were leaving it and granting it some semblance of peace in its final resting place.

The hanger came up in front of them, a massive grey mark on the already damaged view. It was at least three times the size of the orphanage and that had housed over ten thousand of them. She could see the rockets beside it, hundreds of them stretched out across fields of concrete.

“They've been busy, haven't they?” A quiet voice whispered in her ear making her jump.

She nodded, looking into the eyes of the man that would soon be her husband. They were a dull brown, cold and conforming. His voice didn't quite sound like a man. It was still just an octave below. He reached across her and she froze but he was just closing the curtain.

“Need to follow regulations or you'll get us into trouble. You're going to be a soldier's wife. You need to start playing by the rules.”

“I've never been very good at that,” she whispered, trying to keep the anxiety she felt at him being so close from her voice.

“Well you're not the only one who can get in trouble now so try.”

She felt the weight of his words settle onto her shoulders. The panic she had been suppressing exploded in her chest. She was about to become a wife and have to do things with him, things the girls whispered about in the dark. Things the soldiers in the orphanage did to some of the older girls, willing or not. She had only managed to escape by working with the babies. That was why she was chosen for this mission because of her “good motherly instincts”. Not everyone got to go. It was an honour, a privilege. She never said it out loud, but she would have preferred to stay in the orphanage with the little ones. Even as the world burned. Anything other than being lost in the vastness of space.

The road beneath the bus became smooth as the grit was replaced with a manufactured surface. The clanging of a door told her they were in the hanger. The familiar buzz of robots echoed through the vehicle. She relaxed into her seat knowing at least they were safe for the moment. He sat back too letting their arms casually touch. She jerked hers back and wrapped it around her. The decontamination took over an hour. She felt tiredness wash over and her head slumped into her chest. He shook her awake jolting her from dreams of wind and laughter.

“Come on, we've got to go.” His voice was rough and impatient trying to hide his fear.

She followed him, eyes still half closed and trying desperately to cling onto the dream. The processing passed in a blur of prodding and syringes, questions and tests. They had to do it together, naked and exposed, learning more about each other's bodies than she wanted to know. They slept in the same room sharing a small bed. He was stretched out, completely comfortable in his nakedness, having spent most of his adult life in army barracks surrounded by crass, unclothed men. She clung to the side, terrified to move, listening to the sounds of the night and hoping he wouldn't touch her.

Barely four hours later, someone arrived to wake them with the regulations

uniforms they had to wear. They also left a small breakfast, enough to take the lonely ache off while still leaving the sound of rumbling. She dressed quickly, hiding as much of herself as she could, ignoring the soft chuckle behind her. They were brought across the hanger in pairs and walked up a hundred steps to the entrance of the ship.

She counted each one, appreciating the importance as it stole her safety.

She looked longingly at the window seat and he graciously let her have it, the only girl to have snagged such a prime position. They were strapped in with suffocating precision and told that when they had left orbit they would have the freedom to move and eat. She waited impatiently, fingers and toes tapping a beat to match her racing heart. He took her hand after a while, stopping her constant movement. His hand trembled and so she allowed him to lace his fingers through hers.

The rocket exploded into life with the deafening roar of a monster. It shook them so badly she was sure her teeth would fall out and her skin would sag. It went on longer than she thought she could bare it, and continued still, shaking and rattling, until a sudden stillness. Her ears were ringing and her whole body vibrated. Their fingers were linked together so tightly it hurt when he separated them. He pointed out the window and she looked in excitement. The earth floated below them, rancid scars littering its face showing the clear evidence of years of abuse.

She leaned against the cool surface looking for any sign of life. Something to show the world would be able to move on without them but there was just darkness.

About the Author

Fran Quinn is a writer and Social Media Coordinator at Big Smoke Writing Factory. She is currently working on her first full length novel. She enjoys travel, music and anything tea related.

<http://francesquinn.blogspot.ie/>

The Night Sky

Vanessa Proctor

The night sky
fills with the shrieks
of flying foxes,
street lights
cast strange shadows
and the last ferry
blinks across the harbour,
the tide lap-lapping
the foreshore,
as the city stretches,
then curls in
upon itself.

About the Poet

Vanessa Proctor is originally from the UK but now lives in Sydney, Australia, with her husband, two children, one dog, two cats and numerous wild birds who keep dropping in for tea. She has a Masters Degree in Creative Writing. Her poetry for children and adults has been published in many countries around the world. A boulder engraved with one of her haiku is part of the Katikati Haiku Pathway in New Zealand.

I am Memory

Catherine Prasifka

We steal away into the night, the darkness lightening with every step that lands on the ground. I am sure we are silhouettes against the rising sun. I think I hear shouts, but how can I be sure? There is so much noise going on inside me.

There are bangs that are harder to ignore. Gunfire. They are coming. My mind is focused on my flight. My constant flight. I've fled over glen and mountain, across beaches and through forests. It feels like I should have, by now, just run off the face of the earth. God knows, I haven't been careful enough. Maybe I could have avoided this. But my mind is full of fear. Running. Always running. And fear, always fear. Constant flight through barren landscapes, afraid of my very shadow. I can't let them get me, so I must keep going. That is how I have lived. I have spent every second afraid of being caught, and now that that reality is on my doorstep, it is both better and worse. My lungs remind me that I can't keep up my flight for much longer, and soon I will leave this world.

I know I will be leaving Grace to her fate, all alone, and that is my one regret. She has been my anchor in a world that long ago shucked me off of its surface. She has kept me sane. And now, I am going to leave her when she most needs me. It's awful, I know, but there isn't much I can do. It's no longer up to me. I will stay with her for as long as I can, it's not really up to me.

We run until we can see the horror of the fire to its fullest extent. It is still burning. We are so far away from it it is just a glowing blaze on the horizon, but the smoke billows out from it, as though it too is seeking us.

We stumble along, my legs half buckling with every step, and the shouts begin to die away. For a minute, I think we may have actually lost them in our mad dash. I don't allow our pace to slow, however. Just because we have lost them for the moment, doesn't mean they won't find us again. I have no doubt they will. They probably won't find me – they will just stumble across my body.

I don't stop until Grace does. Some question half forms on my lips,

asking about her well being. Is she dizzy? Is she sick too? Guilt twists at my insides. Did I make her sick? And then I see it. There is a hole in her top. A tiny, insignificant hole, that has blood leaking from it like a flower blossoming in the spring. Her legs crumple and she hits the ground, her head smacking off of the hard packed earth. She lies still, her body bent in unnatural ways. I run to her, my legs failing as soon as I reach her.

I pull her into my arms, and feel for her pulse. I can't find anything. It's because I've never been any good at that kind of thing. Of course, that's the reason. It's the only one that makes sense. Nothing else will be processed through my brain. I have never been able to take my pulse. I haven't tried since my dad tried to teach me, and I couldn't do it then. I'm doing it wrong. That's why I can't feel the life gushing through her. Of course that's why!

Water drips onto her face, and I look to the sky for rain. But there are no clouds. The sun has risen, and a bright shining day meets my blurred vision. And that's when I feel it. I'm crying. Curious, that. Surely, someone would have to realise that they are crying. And why am I even crying? People don't just start crying for no reason.

A low moan starts in my throat, and it echoes out through my mouth, like an old house that is settling during the night. I bury my head in her hair and cry. I have no breath to do anything, and soon I cough up lungfuls of blood into her matted hair. Her hair, that used to be blonde and bounce about her face, but now is still, and filthy, and dead.

My mind shuts down as I look at her. My thoughts stray far from their constant battle for survival, forgetting that this means we've been found. I just think about the blood that is spreading down her stomach, blood that now coats my hands. I can't breathe. My throat has closed over. I try to swallow, but it hurts. My heart stops. A fog seems to settle on my mind, blocking out every sense, making blinking an ordeal. Yet I still see the blue eyes that bore into mine, so similar to my own sisters. I see them lose their light.

I close her eyes with my hand, leaving fingerprints of blood on her eyelids. She could be sleeping, coated with blood.

She's gone.

I am no longer anchored. I am adrift, and drowning. My mind has come apart in my head, and nothing is making any sense. I can't have lost

Tara twice. I can't have. I can't have failed her again. I can't. I break down, sobbing and wailing, my pain blocking out everything as they approach me. I am tired. I'm just so tired. Everything sags out of me, and it's like my insides have become jelly that leaks out through my feet. I am hollow. I am nothing. I feel a pinch in my arm, and handcuffs on my wrists, but I do not react. There is no point to anything. The world, once vivid and bright, has been watered down to a grey. There is nothing left for me.

They march me back, over fields and mountains, passed lakes and the burned ashes of things that used to be homes. I feel as though I have seen some of these places before, but after a while, everything looks the same. I cease to notice my surroundings. I feel as though I should, knowing that I won't have many opportunities to see the outside world, but I don't care.

I do not make a sound for the entire journey. Not when they prod me to get me to walk faster, or when they shovel food into my mouth. I do nothing.

But mostly, I do not die. Why don't I die? They have prevented the one thing that could have given me peace. They have denied me the simple mercy of death, and have gone as far as to prevent it. No matter, I have developed a way of shutting out everything, and leaving my body. Nothing matters, not really.

They keep me on the same chemicals that I was given at the camps. The same grey-brown sludge that fed me for almost my whole life. I do not need to stop, or sleep, or feel. That's ok. Sleeping scares me. I can't control my dreams. I think maybe I'm the one who has prevented myself from feeling. I simply don't want to. Things are simpler that way. Now, I finally understand why my fellow campers shut down. It is too difficult to deal with these things. I can't. It has broken my mind. My mind, that I thought could withstand anything, is disordered and incapable of telling me what to do. My spirit lies inside me, cowed and shattered into a million shards that pierce me when I breathe.

They place me back into a camp. Not the same one. The people aren't the same. But everything else is; the uniforms, the food, the grey-brownness. Well, not the work. Instead of breaking stones, they have me cutting trees. I am destroying the world, like one of them. Like I knew I would always end up doing. No matter, each swing of the axe blocks

everything out of my mind. Everything. The guards take no notice of me. And I take no notice of anything. I am numb. I fall into line, like I never stuck out in the first place.

Memory is dead; I lost him long ago, I think. I did not need him. I was Sam, and Sam was enough. But Memory was the one who could survive in this place. He knew how to keep his spirit alive. I do not. I am not Sam, nor am I Memory. I am the number they have sown into my clothes. That is all I need to be. It doesn't matter. I have ceased to care. I cannot make myself relive anything, or experience new things, because I do not exist in my body anymore. I am not in the camps, or in the bunks, or the remains of the ruined forest. I'm still out in the open air, with Grace. I still feel her blood on my hands, and her head in my lap.

About the Author

Catherine Prasifka is a senior freshman English student at Trinity College Dublin. She writes novels, short stories, poetry, and anything else that comes to mind in that particular moment. She spends her time consuming content on Netflix and reading young adult novels, which inspire her work.

The Empty Mirror

Mali Kristine Lunde

Once upon a time not so very long ago there lived a young girl in a country where everybody wore masks.

Why they did so or how this practice had come to be nobody really knew, but however it began everybody was doing it now, and nobody would ever dream of taking their own mask off.

The young girl whose story we are to hear had made a very pretty mask for herself. Made from white, shining plaster with red painted lips and eyebrows as blue as the summer sky, it was quite a sight. The girl was very proud of her mask, and the only time she would ever take it off was when she was all alone in her bedroom. In these rare moments she would stand in front of the mirror and study her real face for several minutes. In the mirror every flaw and imperfection, no matter how tiny, appeared monstrous to the girl, and so she would quickly cover it up again.

With time the girl grew into a woman, and her mask was more beautiful than ever. Under the eyes poured a shower of golden stars and the lips were a bright shade of coral. She wore the most elaborate dresses of red silk to match it, and around her neck she would tie a single blue ribbon.

The young woman was very fond of music and dancing and often went to the pleasure gardens for an evening of fun. One night, while standing by the fountain, she was approached by a young officer.

“Excuse me, Miss,” he said. “I was just passing by and I noticed you and was wondering . . . may I have this dance?”

Behind his mask friendly a pair of eyes were glittering, and the young woman nodded.

While he was guiding her around the dance floor the young woman didn't fail to notice how well he filled out his brisk, blue uniform, or the warmth of his young hands.

It turned out to be the first of many dances, and when the bell struck midnight and the gates were closing, the officer walked her home.

“Good night, Miss,” he said. “May I see you again tomorrow?”

The young woman, who had walked with a lighter step than usual, gave

him a quick nod, and even winked at him before she said good night.

The next morning the officer rang the bell to her lodgings, and she followed him on a stroll in the grand park.

“Your mask is the most extraordinary thing I've ever seen,” he confessed to her, while they were resting at a bench by a little pond.

“Do you really think so?” the young woman asked.

“Oh, yes! Your mask turns everybody around you grey. Surely you must know this?”

The young woman blushed behind her cover and sent him one of her secret smiles, already planning how she would repay him. The same evening, the young woman sat down in her room and meticulously added some more golden stars to the shower under her eyes.

The change was a success, because only a month later the officer turned up with a small box. Inside was a simple band of gold.

“Yes!” the young woman exclaimed, while the officer placed the ring on her finger. “I thought you weren't going to ask!”

“I know this isn't enough,” the officer said. “You deserve a big diamond. But this was all I could afford.”

“Nonsense!” the woman said. “This is perfect!”

The same night the young woman wanted to go out to celebrate, but her soon-to-be-husband had some sad news.

“I can't, sweetheart,” he said. “They need me at the barracks. We can go out tomorrow instead.”

“But my friend's hosting a party,” the young woman said. “It's what everybody has been talking about for months! We can't miss it! And besides,” she added, “it will be the perfect place to announce our engagement.”

“I'm sorry, my love,” the officer said. “Duty calls. You go. I wouldn't mind. You have fun for me.”

The woman departed in a rented carriage and entered her friend's house. But the party turned out to lack in both noteworthy people and in elegance, and the young woman drifted over to the punch bowl to ease her already bored mind. While standing there nursing a glass of punch,

a man in a green velvet uniform approached her.

“Excuse me, Mademoiselle,” he said, and gave her a bow. “It seems like your glass is almost empty. Let me refill it for you.”

The young woman didn’t fail to notice the golden chain extending from the man’s pocket, or the colours on his shoulders that marked him as a baronet. She silently held out her glass for him to fill.

“Would Mademoiselle like to dance?” the baronet asked.

“Of course,” the young woman answered, and he led her to the dance floor.

The baronet danced so much better than her fiancé. The officer had clearly learned to dance from his fellow soldiers, and half the time he expected her to lead. The baronet on the other hand danced like he owned her, and even after the music had stopped he wouldn’t let her go.

“Listen,” the baronet said, “I know of a little salon only open to a selected few. I happen to be one of those few, and I was wondering if you would like to join me? It’s the most cosy little place, I can assure you.”

The young woman wasn’t difficult to convince. She took his offered arm, and followed him to his private carriage, which drove them to a nice looking house in the nice part of town.

The baronet ordered coffee for both of them, and then turned to the young woman.

“I have to admit that your mask is the most interesting thing I’ve ever seen,” he said.

“It really is the most unusual piece of art. Did you have a professional do it for you? You did it yourself? Surely, you are an amazing artist! But you hear that all the time, I’m sure.”

“No,” said the young woman, shaking her head. “I mean, it’s just a mask.”

“Certainly not,” the baronet said. “It’s so much more. I tell you, every man in the world would be honoured to own such a beauty.”

They didn’t leave the salon until sunrise. The baronet brought her back to her lodgings, and before she got out he kissed her hand and made her promise that they would see each other again.

The young woman entered her room, and found her fiancé leaned over the table in heavy sleep. He stirred as she closed the door.

“You must have had great fun,” he said. “You stayed all night.”

“Yes,” the young woman answered. But she was tired, and didn’t wish to stay up to tell him about it.

The following weeks a great change occurred in the young woman. When her officer treated her to a visit to her favourite café, she would be dreaming of the fancy restaurant the baronet had brought her to a couple of nights before. And when they walked home afterwards the woman would grudgingly be thinking of the nice carriage she would be riding in if the baronet were at her side.

So when the baronet told her to move into his house with him, the young woman was not difficult to convince.

“Finally!” she said. “You had me all worried, you sneaky scoundrel!” She returned home to pack, but found the officer there.

“Where have you been?” he asked. “I’ve been waiting. I was thinking, what about we go on a little cruise down the river tomorrow, like we’ve been talking about?”

The young woman shook her head. She took off her ring and handed it to him.

“I’m afraid I’ve made a mistake,” she said. “I can’t marry you after all.” The officer blinked. “But, why?” he finally said.

“I’ve met someone,” she said. “We’re far more suited for one another, and I’ve decided to live with him.”

The officer begged her to stay, but the woman could not be persuaded. She packed up her belongings, and when the servant came to collect her, she drove off without a backward glance.

The baronet’s home was a beautiful house, filled with the most exquisite artefacts from all four corners of the world. Being new to such grandness, the young woman could hardly wait to show it off to her friends. The baronet would not allow it.

“But they are my friends!” the young woman said. “I promised to invite them!”

“I have nothing against parties, as you well know, my dear,” the baronet said. “I just don’t like them being held here.”

The discussion ended here. The young woman spent her days – and many nights also – in the big house, often all alone. The baronet however frequently went out, telling her he simply had too much to do to keep

her company. He would always return late and with an uneasy step, falling into bed like a heavy rock.

In her unwelcomed solitude, the woman thought it would be a good idea to glitter up her mask by sprinkling golden dust across the forehead. But when her beau came home that evening, he didn't compliment her.

After almost a year in the grand house, a thick envelope smelling faintly of perfume was one day delivered to her. It was from her friend who had invited her to the party where she'd first met the baronet. The woman pleaded with him:

"Please let me attend! I'm so bored! I sit here all day with nothing to do! I promise to be home early."

"Alright, you can go," the baronet said. "But if you're not back by 10 I will lock you out for the night."

The woman promised, and the same night she was off to the ball.

She was standing under the heavy garlands decorating the entire ballroom, when a man in a red silk uniform glided up to her.

"Good evening, Milady," he said, and bowed before her. "Such a lovely creature like you should not be all by herself. Could I borrow you for a dance?"

"You most certainly can," the woman said, having noticed the beautiful gilded sword he carried in his belt and the rubies on his cufflinks.

He danced much better than the baronet, who always held her too tight and crushed her hand. This man manoeuvred her as if she was a spirit of the air, and when the dance was over, he had something important to ask her:

"Milady, would you like to come back to my chateau with me? It is nothing much, really, but it is more intimate than this place."

The woman couldn't argue with such an offer. She let him take her hand and lead her outside, and when she saw the handsome carriage with the coat of arms of a count painted on the doors, she had to suppress a squeal.

At the chateau she was led through many sparkling rooms. Every surface was covered with gold and crystal and beautiful paintings, before they reached a long hall of mirrors. Here the count motioned for her to sit down on a soft, plush coach, and took a seat beside her.

"Your mask is really the most extraordinary thing that is around," he began. "And I have seen some beauties in my time, made by the utmost craftsmanship. But you, your mask put all of them to shame."

The young woman tilted her head ever so slightly, just so the stars would twinkle at him, and the mirrors answered in kind.

She quickly forgot everything about her promise to the baronet, and the night flew by.

When the first rays of dawn spilled through the windows, the count said: "Such a mask as yours belong in a place like this. Would you like to come here and live with me as my wife? You will have full reign of my household, and more clothes and jewellery than you will ever need to do your mask justice."

The woman knew that the chance to catch a count as a husband most likely never would come again. So the same morning she drove in the count's carriage back to the house of the baronet. She packed her belongings without a word, leaving her former beau dumbstruck, and married the count without delay.

In the years to follow the woman lived in great content. Seasons came and went, but she never let a brush touch her mask. It was, much like what her life had become, perfect.

One day, when the woman was sitting by her boudoir putting on her jewellery, her husband approached her.

"You have to leave," the count said.

An eternity of silence followed. "But, why?"

"Your mask doesn't fit in here anymore. It is old fashioned and simply out of style, and the paint's got cracks. Pack your belongings and get out."

She cried and begged him, but the count could not be persuaded. He left her with her suitcase on the stairs, and slammed the door shut without a second glance.

The woman was alone again. But it was while she was walking through the streets that she noted something truly unsettling: No one was looking at her. Nobody followed her with their gaze. Their eyes drifted past her as if she was nothing but air. Like she was like everybody else.

The woman reached her old lodgings and was let in by the landlady. With nowhere else to turn, she was shown to her old room. In the privacy of her chamber the woman immediately strode over to the mirror to see if the count was right. A gasp escaped her.

Over the entire mask fine lines were running through the paint, and the colours, when she came to think of it, really was quite out of fashion. Nowadays all masks were painted in bright colours from the top of the forehead to the tip of the chin, giving them a flavour of fiery peacocks. Her own looked quite mundane in comparison.

The woman brought out her paints and brushes to give her mask a makeover, so that the count would take her back and everybody would look at her again.

She took her mask off and put it down on the table. Then she happened to look up, and a scream pierced the room. What she had seen was her own reflection. Only there was nothing there.

Her face, that the mask had hidden for so many years, was now gone. Nobody, least of all herself, had ever cared for what was beneath the beautiful surface, and over the years the face had withered away. No eyes, no nose, no mouth, nor any features. Only an empty slate the colour of old parchment remained.

The woman forgot everything about painting and put the mask promptly back on.

About the Author

Mali Kristine Lunde is a Norwegian expat who has been living in Dublin for the last three years. In her spare time she writes original fairy tales and aspire to expand the genre by creating new stories and new motifs. When she's not writing she enjoys reading and to go hunting for vintage clothing.

Besides The Empty Mirror featured in this issue she's had one more story previously published in The Looking Glass; The Sunken Cathedral in Volume Three Issue Two.

Monty's Island

M. DiGrandi

Ten year old Monty took a deep breath as the group of boys surrounded him.

'You see that red cotton they're crocheting with?' said Jake, the leader of the group, pointing to the elderly women huddled together in the town square, 'it's been dyed with human blood.'

'Yeah and they get it from babies like you,' piped up Nick, another boy.

Monty didn't believe the boys. He knew that the old ladies on the island, including his grandmother would never use human blood to colour their cotton.

'Well?' asked Jake, 'are you coming to the castle to see the vampire or not?'

Monty shuffled his foot backwards and forwards shaking his head. He'd been trying to avoid these boys ever since he arrived on the island two days ago.

'You kids from the mainland are all the same,' said Nick, 'weak and weird.'

He was right in one way; Monty was pasty faced, wore thick glasses and he had strange shaped teeth, but he was proud of his blood line. He didn't want any trouble, he just wanted to spend his holiday at his grandmothers free to roam the island.

'What's your name anyway,' asked Nick.

'Monty,' he replied.

'Monty,' smirked Jake, 'what a weird name.'

The boys laughed.

'Come on Jake,' piped up Tom, the youngest in the group, 'let's get

some lunch.'

Monty looked across at the squinty eyed boy with pale skin and jet black hair. Was it just him or did he give him a wink? Monty smiled back anyway.

'Don't you ever stop thinking about food, Tom?' asked Jake. 'You're always eating yet you're so scrawny,'

Jake jumped on his bike and sped straight toward Monty before slamming on his brakes. The bike skidded to a halt flicking up the red soil. Monty jumped back to avoid being covered in dust, but he still ended up with a mouth full. As he spat it out some dribbled down the sides of his chin, it resembled blood.

The boys sped off down the track jeering and laughing.

'Monty monster, Monty monster,' he could hear them chanting. I'll show them, he wiped away the last of the caked on red dust, I'll show them.

On his walk to the top of the island Monty had managed to avoid the sun's sharp rays, but when he turned to look to the left a penetrating glare cut deep into his eyes. Shielding his eyes he grabbed a rock hurling it at the blinding silver object, with a thud and a clang it hit its target. Monty soon realized that the blinding light came from the polished chrome on Jake's bike, 'Monty monster, Monty monster,' rang through his mind.

He walked over to the bike, grabbed hold of the handlebars and gave it an almighty push, 'I'll show them,' he thought.

The bike hurtled off down the bumpy track jumping and leaping about until it crashed into a large rock, the boys quickly approached when they heard the noise.

'Oh oh' thought Monty.

Monty hoisted himself up onto an overhanging branch of an oak tree

that was growing inside the castle walls, he clambered further up the tree just in time to avoid being seen as the boys marched past.

'I want his blood,' hollered Jake as he examined the mangled wheel.

Monty leapt to the ground and dived through an open window of the castle. A jagged piece of glass sliced deep into his leg, causing droplets of rich red blood from his gash to collect in a pool on the castle's stone floor.

'Have you found that weasel yet?' cursed Jake

'Not yet,' said Nick. 'But I know he's in here somewhere.'

'I hope that we get him before the rats and vampires,' said Jake, 'otherwise there won't be anything left for us to thump.'

The boys all laughed.

Monty zipped around the castle walls sticking to the shadows, the afternoon sun dropped out of the sky and it was getting dark.

'Ooooh Monty,' called out Nick, 'the vampire is ready to drink your blood.'

Monty heard a swishing noise behind him. He spun around. Tom, the small dark haired boy was standing in the corner of the room. He couldn't believe that someone could sneak up on him like that, 'how did you get there?' he asked.

The boy winked and beckoned to him. Monty took one step closer, then another, and then another until he was standing directly in front of this pale, squinty eyed boy.

'Want to show them a vampire?' said Tom who produced a small black case with the words, 'Vampire Kit,' written across the top, he pulled out a tube of fake blood and smeared it down both sides of his chin

'What do you think?' said Tom. 'Do you think we can scare them?'

Monty took off his glasses and sniffed the air. The boys were getting

closer, he could smell them; he could smell the pounding blood of their bodies.

He smiled exposing his pointed canines.

Tom stared in amazement.

‘Yeah’ winked Monty. ‘Let’s show them a real vampire.’

About the Author

M. DiGrandi lives in Queensland, Australia and writes short stories and picture books for children.

Cloud Doctor

Roisin O’Regan

The Cloud Doctor lived in an old crooked house, perched on top of an old crooked mountain. His job was to look after all the clouds in the sky. He grew apple-blossom in his garden, in great puffs of soft white bushes. When the apple-blossom shivered its petals off in the spring-time, the Cloud Doctor stood at the top of his garden and took a deep breath. He blew all the apple-blossom petals out of his garden, and it showered everyone in the town below, in little apple-blossom kisses. When he walked down from his old crooked house, perched on top of the old crooked mountain, it was to get ingredients for his favourite dish, a meringue with marshmallows on top of a giant stick of candy-floss. The Cloud Doctor stands as tall as a ladder, but his old crooked knees mean he is not straight anymore, so his legs are like two old bent paths pointing in different directions.

His neck is cranked so he is always looking up at the blue sky, with his big chin, full of foamy beard, pointing forward. The Cloud Doctor’s snowy beard tickled his toes when he stood, and swooped and swung in the opposite direction when he walked. It needed brushing. It was a mischievous beard. Sometimes it would tap people on the shoulder and then fall limp and quickly hide inside his coat. The Cloud Doctor could not tame it, but he loved it and let it do what it wanted because it went with the Cloud Doctor wherever he went, and helped him with cloud business.

The reason the Cloud Doctor fixes all the clouds, is because when clouds are broken, they cry raindrop tears on everyone. Therefore, the Cloud Doctor had to learn how to cure each cloud so that it would not rain everyday and wash everyone away. The Cloud Doctor could fix all manner of cloud complications. The Cloud Doctor wore rainbow-multicoloured socks that he pulled right up to his knobby knees. He wore a green coat that was forked at the bottom that bashed his ankles as he dashed around. It had hundreds of tiny pockets, which meant all kinds

One day the Cloud Doctor reached inside one of the pockets and found a little brown mouse asleep, twitching his pink nose. The Cloud Doctor lifted the mouse into his hand and brought it up to his face. He could see little bubbles of cheese soaked dreams floating from the mouse's head. The mouse was in a little paper boat, rowing across a sparkly river to get to his kingdom of cheese. The pavements were made of thick slabs of cheese stuck on with pickle. He walked into his kingdom with his furry chest pushed out and sat on his cheese throne, wearing a golden crown that kept slipping past his ears. A single raindrop fell into the Cloud Doctor's outstretched hand, and stirred the mouse. His cheesy dreams all burst at once.

'Excuse me Mr Cloud Doctor, I need your help.' A feathery cloud had drifted directly above the Cloud Doctor's head.

'Of course, what can I help you with?' asked the Cloud Doctor. Closing his hand, he put the mouse back into his pocket. The mouse had stood up and was shaking his fist at the cloud with the other resting on his hip. 'Well, the bigger clouds come along and bump and dump me out of their way.'

The fluffy cloud was crying raindrop tears with every word he spoke.

'It's as though the sky is a giant blue bumper car playground, but I don't have a bumper car!'

'Right' the Cloud Doctor stroked his long beard, 'I think I know what to do.'

He reached into his pocket below the mouse and took out a magical needle and thread. He sewed on a magnificent mermaid's tail on to the back of the cloud. The green and blue scales of the cloud's new tail glistened and glittered in the sunshine. The cloud spun in delight showing off his new behind.

'Thank you so much Cloud Doctor!' and without a rain teardrop in sight, the cloud swished and swam his way through the clouds.

No sooner had the Cloud Doctor wiped his bald, shiny head with his beard, drying it of cloud tears, when another cloud came shuffling towards him, crying on his coat.



This cloud was as white as a dandelion wish, and was quivering with fright. He whispered to the Cloud Doctor, 'I'm v..v..v.. very scared of falling out of the sky Mr Doc.'

'Oh, I see.' The Cloud Doctor looked up at the sky for ideas. 'Close your eyes and stay here, I won't be long.'

The Cloud Doctor walked to the Golden Gate Castle and knocked on the heavy wooden doors.

'Hello?' the princess answered, poking her head around the door and looked up to see the Cloud Doctor, who was holding a meringue with marshmallows on top of a stick of candyfloss behind his back.

'Hello Miss Princess, I have a present for you. Although, I do wish to ask for something in return.'

The Cloud Doctor brought his hands around from his back. The Princesses eyes swelled with delight at the feast in the Cloud Doctor's hands and nodded her head. 'You see I need a strand of your hair.'

The Princess looked confused, but instantly twirled a long hair round her slender finger and tugged it out. She passed the hair to the Doctor and asked, 'But why do you need my hair?'

'Strictly cloud business' the Cloud Doctor passed the candyfloss over, wrapped the hair into a knot and put it in one of his pockets.

'Good day Princess, thanks!' he shouted as he ran back to the milky cloud, clicking his heels.

The Cloud Doctor returned and wrapped the princess hair around the cloud. Princess hair is as thick as rope, and it grows for miles and miles, much longer than little boy's and girl's hair. It was so white it was nearly invisible. He used two hands to tie a big bow around the clouds belly and hung the loop onto the crest of the moon.

'Open your eyes!' the Cloud Doctor chuckled.

The cloud looked around and found himself swooping and swinging across the sky, as secure as a rocking chair up in the air.

'This...is...fun!' the cloud shouted between swishes.

'Thank you! I'll never cry again.'

The Cloud Doctor was happy with the clouds he had helped that day. He walked home, up the crooked mountain, up to his crooked house.

He sat in his chair and watched his fire flicker. His eyelids were getting heavier as the sky's black starry curtain was slowly pulled across.

Suddenly there was a splash at the window. Like someone had thrown a great bucket of water on it. The Cloud Doctor woke up his beard and walked to the window. He saw a ragged purple edged cloud with bright blue eyes, wide-awake crying thunderous tears at the window.

'What's wrong?' The Cloud Doctor asked the scruffy cloud.

'I just can't fall asleeeeeeeep.' The cloud screeched as he zipped off into the distance.

The cloud whooshed back past the window and yelled. 'Please can you send me to sleep. I haven't slept in weeks.' He whizzed away.

The Cloud Doctor patted down his jacket pockets and felt for the army of silkworms that lived in the pocket on his arm. He put his hand up to the pocket and watched a hundred elderly silkworms shuffle out onto his hand. The grandma silkworms wore great big glasses with thick cardigans and scarves wrapped around their perms. The Cloud Doctor spoke softly, 'Hi girls, haven't seen you in a while. I have a job for us to do. We have to knit something'

The silkworms replied in one slow voice. 'Of course, what would you like us to knit?'

'A starry patchwork quilt'

'You want us to sew a sparkly see-through kilt?'

'No, no,' the Cloud Doctor smiled, 'A starry patchwork quilt'

So the elderly silkworms got their knitting needles out and knitted a starry patchwork quilt to wrap around the cloud. When it was finished the Cloud Doctor climbed up his secret spiral staircase that came out of the top of his chimney, and with the comfy quilt, tucked the cloud into the night sky. He reached into his pocket and found a special night star and glued it in the sky above the cloud. Before the Cloud Doctor could climb his spiral staircase to his own bed, he could hear the cloud snoring and turning over in the sky.

The Cloud Doctor slept well that night and dreamt of flying high in a hot air balloon surrounded by all his happy clouds.

The next day the Doctor and his beard were each lying on a stripy deck chair, enjoying the sun's warm hug. The sun was sizzling a bit too warm and the Cloud Doctor's bald head was slowly turning an angry shade of red. He went to lay under the shade of his apple blossom tree. When he got there he didn't see great puffs of soft white bushes, but the angry brown bark of a rotten tree.

'Where's my beautiful apple blossom tree gone?' The Cloud Doctor shouted to his garden, accusing the sly sunflowers that had been getting too big for their plant pot boots recently. But there were no sunflowers to reply, or tulips or vegetable patch or willow tree. The Cloud Doctor swizzled round on the spot and noticed that there were no plants or flowers in his garden. 'That's odd' he thought. 'Where's all my garden gone?'

He peered over the side of the crooked mountain into the town below, and saw that all the green bushes and plants had gone. The whole town had turned into a sandy dessert with not one single blade of grass growing.

The Cloud Doctor returned to the crispy curls of dry dirt that were scattered around his garden and realised what had happened. He had gotten so good at repairing the broken clouds, making each cloud so happy, that no rain was falling from the sky. This meant that the plants and trees started to wilt and die.

Over the next few weeks, the roads cracked with dryness and everyone was thirsty. Everything started to shrink, including the Cloud Doctor's beard, because everything needed a drink. The Cloud Doctor knew what he had to do. He had to make all the clouds cry again, but he couldn't bear to make each cloud upset.

He thought long and hard and tried to come up with a way of making

the clouds release their raindrop tears without being sad.

Everything was shrinking. The old crooked house was shrinking, and so was the old crooked mountain it was resting on. The Cloud Doctor himself started shrinking so much that his nose got a lot closer to his toes. The Cloud Doctor looked out the window at his empty garden and bowed his head with sadness. He looked at his toes and asked himself, 'What can I do to make the clouds release their raindrop tears without being sad?'

He wiggled each toe and yanked up his multicoloured rainbow socks up to his knees, because now they were gathering around his ankles because they were too big. He stood on one leg and heaved one up. With one leg hopping around the room he suddenly stopped with his eyes as big as two kites, and his mouth as open as a cave.

'By beard, I think I've got it!' The Cloud Doctor shouted.

He climbed to the top of his secret spiral staircase and asked his beard to herd all the clouds in one place, right above his old crooked house, on the old crooked mountain.

'Huu Humm' The Cloud Doctor cleared his throat, 'Clouds of the sky, I have a surprise for you.' The clouds all nudged each other and listened closely to the Cloud Doctor. 'You see I know you are all happy, but I have something for you that will make you even happier.' The Cloud Doctor then spoke to the Rainbow. 'Hello Miss Rainbow. I know it hasn't rained in a while, but would you mind coming out please?'

Miss Rainbow peeked her head in-between the clouds. She always moved them out of her way because they were colour blind, and they never saw her coming.

'Yes Mr Cloud Doctor?'

‘Well Miss Rainbow, please would you help me make it rain again, so all the trees and grass can grow?’

‘Of course, Cloud Doctor, just tell me what to do’

The mouse that was hiding in the Cloud Doctor’s pocket, had woken up and wanted to help the Doctor, so he whispered into the Rainbows colours.

The rainbow then draped herself across the curtain of clouds in the sky, and wrapped all her colours around them.
The clouds all started talking at once.

The yellow feels like your hair being combed with your coat buttoned up right to the top, and it tastes like a lemon drop.

The blue sounds like jumping in puddles in bright wellies and it smells like warm blueberry pie resting on a kitchen window sill.

The orange feels like kicking a squishy ball high up in the air, and it feels like twirling a sparkler in the sky wearing fluffy mittens.

The red feels like a dog running across a beach to catch a runaway ball, and smells like red stains on your t-shirt from the strawberry field.

The green tastes like sucking a straw full of apple juice, and feels like grass tickling your ears as you roly-poly down a hill.

Orange like the orang-utans that swoop through the trees, looking down at the tigers stalking their prey.

Yellow like the canaries that sing into their trumpets of sunflowers, all day.

Red like the ladybirds that guard the roses, eating their way through the strawberries.

Green like the jumpy frogs that dance through the grass, lying on the lettuce patch after a long day.

Blue like the bluetits that soar high above the oceans and wash in the puddles on the pavements.

Some clouds smelt the colours.

Some clouds tasted the colours.

Some clouds heard the colours.

Even though the clouds couldn’t see the colours, they all loved them.

The Clouds were so happy that they could feel, hear, touch and taste the colours instead of see them, that they cried tears of joy, and it rained again. The Cloud Doctor had learned that you need a balance of sunshine and showers to make bright happy flowers in his garden of his old crooked house, perched on top of the old crooked mountain.

About the Author

Roisin O’Regan works at a PR consultancy in Farringdon, and writes children’s stories at night. She is constantly given inspiration from her niece and nephews, Annie-Mae, Freddie-Max and Alfie.

About the Illustrator

Fiona O’Regan is Roisin O’Regan’s big sister. Fiona is a fashion designer and artist. She has recently moved into the field of bridal wear, and loves to design and tailor wedding dresses. The two sisters hope to create a catalogue of work with Roisin writing the books, and Fiona creating quirky, fascinating pieces of artwork.

The Kitten Tree

Vanessa Proctor

Two tiny stripey kittens
think that I'm a tree
with sharpened claws
and agile paws
they scale my legs
to the knee.

At table height
they alight
to see what they can get
a tasty treat,
some cheese, some meat,
two cheeky little pets.

Scratched and sore
I shoo them off
to scamper on the floor,
but turn my back
and just like that,
they shimmy up for more.

Lawn of the Dead

Alan Murphy

Novel Extract

“The expansion of the universe is speeding up!” I said.

A clenched fist froze in mid air. The oaf blinked, opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. Something resembling a thought process flickered for a moment in his dull eyes. He blinked once more. Finally, realising that this odd statement was wholly irrelevant to the task at hand, namely that of thrashing me within an inch of my life, he continued as was...

By which time I'd made good my escape.

I rushed off in the direction of home. That's a nifty little trick I learned - coming up with funny titbits of info (Baron Brainpower's Book Of Freaky Facts, p.203) often works for me in a tight spot, especially with nincompoops like Brian O Duffy, or as I affectionately call him, Neanderthal Man. I always find that such startling nuggets shock him and his kind out of their thuggish complacency, just long enough to escape their clutches. It's my cherished hope that one day all such brutes will be moved by curious facts about the starry heavens to give up bullying and become full time cosmologists. As I say, I live in hope.

And, you know, the universe thing, it's true. The big shot scientists pointed their gadgets at the sky and discovered it. Imagine a rhinoceros party in which all the rhinoceroses are moving away from each other. That's the expanding universe. But the rate at which the fellas are moving apart is speeding up, not slowing down, as was previously thought. The party just mustn't be happening, I guess. Or maybe they're all going off to throw their own ones. (What rhinoceroses are doing having parties in the first place is a problem for future scientists to solve.) So where was I? I'd escaped the jailhouse - that edifice that some call school - for the day only to bump into Neanderthal Man himself. You caught up with me there as I stunned him with a fact bullet, and rushed off shiner-free. The next item on the agenda was to run off home as fast as my legs would carry me for milk and cookies. Admittedly my parents are going through a vegan phase so it's more like carrot juice and tofu at the moment, but you get the gist.

I've always said that if running home from school was a sport I'd be an

olympic medallist. (The word from is key here. Running to school somehow doesn't get the same results.) It's a deceptively simple activity really and involves passion, dedication, all that biz to be world class at it, which, by my own humble reckoning, I am. Throw in the added incentive of getting away from O'Duffy and I would have thought I was in personal, if not world, record-breaking shape. Things were not to be so groovy on this particular afternoon though.

My feet were doing their thing, going all guns blazing, and I was sure I'd be home soon. After a while though I started to notice something funny.

Somehow, no matter how much effort I made, I didn't seem to be making any progress. Have you ever been reading a book and found that you've been on the same dumb sentence forever and ever? Well it was sort of the same biz here. My legs were a blur but, as George Lucas is my judge, the street around me was stock-still. The wind seemed to have died away to nothing, the street deserted. After a while the very colour seemed to be draining from my surroundings, which now seemed spookily unreal and distant. It was all very odd.

Suddenly I found myself running up a ramp and boarding a ship. When I say ramp, that's what should have been under my feet - as opposed to thin air - and when I say ship, I guess there should be a space in front of that. It was a huge white globe with funny dents in a regular pattern all over it's surface. Before I had time to admire the paintwork, or even puzzle over its kooky design, I was seated inside and had company.

Not the sort of company I usually keep, you understand. I guess if you board a spaceship, willingly or not, it follows that you're not going to find yourself in conference with, say, Mr. Hutchinson from down the road. It's more likely to be the type of character who peered at me now. This fella had pulled out all the stops in terms of weirdness. He was no oil painting as they say, unless the artwork in question was by some deranged modern artist. He had lots of tentacle-like arms branching out in all directions, all eager to perform separate bits of business. In a nod to convention he had just two large bug eyes, although one was above the other, which kind of spoilt things on the conventional front. His skin was a sickly pale green, and there was a lifetime's supply of nasty yellow teeth in his vast drooling maw. I would have gone "eww!" but it wasn't really an eww! moment. In fact dear reader, I'm big enough to

admit that I was more than a little scared.

The creature moved ominously towards me. Not that there was much room for it to move you understand - the spaceship was tiny. Ever seen Doctor Who's contraption that looks small from outside but's huge when you mosey on in? Don't believe everything you see on TV. This ship obviously had the same idea but had gotten things the wrong way round. Inside the dingy thing there was hardly enough room to swing a gerbil. The fella had clearly drawn the short laser beam as far as accommodation goes - in alien terms it was a sort of bedsit, I guess.

Which only made the cosmic geezer's advances all the more frightening. I should have been getting acquainted with my snuggly sofa back home, munching some late-afternoon treats, but instead here I was shooting the breeze with Joe monster from another planet, and something told me he hadn't picked me up to ask for directions. For a moment I thought he might want to tell me something about the expanding universe, but I dismissed the idea. He moved closer still, until his hideous bonce was just inches away from my face. Suddenly the air was filled with the sound of his weird incomprehensible babble. Though it was gibberish, by some dreadful stroke of physics I was able to understand it.

"Do you like badminton?", said the creature.

If you'd asked me to make a top ten list of things I'd least expected to happen this particular afternoon, being picked up by a passing alien would be straight in at number two, but I'd reserve the number one spot for being asked by said alien for my sporting preferences. I was, briefly, at a loss for words.

"Er, I think I prefer Tennis, if I'm honest," I said eventually.

I knew straight away that I'd said the wrong thing. I could see by his face that he was disappointed. It's like with portraits by that Picasso fella - the mug may be rearranged but it's usually possible to tell at a glance if the sitter's had a bit of a bad day. So it was with the dismay I read in my strange new friend's features.

"Look, I'm not really the sporty type", I said, in an effort to soothe his troubled brow.

"Pity", he said, still looking a bit miffed. "What about Table Tennis?"

"Nah."

"Volleyball?"

I shook my head.

“Curling?”

I stifled a laugh.

Short though fascinating as our chat had been to this point, I thought that it might be a good idea now to end the interview. The whole Get-sapo lite thing was beginning to wear a bit thin, and I had things to do, people with the usual number of limbs to see. But I felt I ought to ask some questions myself first - the kind that are sort of required in these situations.

“So... who are you, where are you from?”

“I am a Ruffian.”

“Eh?”

“From the Large Megellanic Cloud galaxy.”

“A ruffian?”

“Yes, from the planet Ruffia.”

“Oh.”

“Our - that is, my mission is Top Secret.”

“Do you have a... name?”

“My name is Des.”

“What?”

“That’s right.”

“You’re an alien and your name is Des?!”

The creature made a movement which I took to be a shrug.

“Okay... Des, it’s been sweet catchin’ up, but I gotta go. My feet are pinin’ for the ole terra firma, and my schedule is just CHOCK-a-block this afternoon. Could you drop me off at Rookfield housing estate please?”

“Very well then.”

The loveable ole slimeball was as good as his word.

Literally, man. As we hovered over my neighbourhood I saw a tentacle coil round a lever. Before I knew what the tune was a trapdoor had opened and I was plummeting two hundred feet to certain death. As the pavement rapidly approached and I was resigning myself to becoming gluten-free toast any second, I suddenly noticed that gravity was having a bit of a lazy day - that is, I was slowing down. Some two inches from my destiny as street lasagne I stopped altogether. I was floating a hair’s breadth above the ground. Fancy that. As I dropped harmlessly to the

ground moments later I noticed that the ship had disappeared.

About the Author

Alan Murphy is the writer and illustrator of three collections of poetry for young readers. Dublin-born, he currently lives in Lismore, county Waterford, where he writes, makes art, photographs cows, and occasionally reviews books. His latest collection, Prometheus Unplugged, combines rock music and Greek mythology. It was listed in a children’s and young adults’ books of the year article in the Irish Times.

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The Mysterious Saga of Robbing Hooks

Axel Kelly

Part the Seventh

In which two riders appear, and a Sheriff is gravely disappointed.

The young deputy tugged nervously at the Sheriff's sleeve, "Are you sure this is a good idea, sir?"

"Of course it is," the Sheriff sneered. "The Witchfinders will deal with this problem nicely – the Ministry seemed quite eager. They even said they'd send their best people. They were so keen, they were laughing!"

One might wonder why the Ministry of Posts and Communications was in charge of hunting down Amateur Witches...or, indeed, why Amateur Witches rather than Real Witches were seen as a threat. To understand this, the second question must be answered first.

For a long time, people in the Ham had greatly disliked Witches, but when they finally realised that Witches were frequently cheaper and more effective than doctors, they swiftly ended their dislike. The King, however, had already spent a great deal of money on setting up a group of people to find and banish Witches, and he certainly didn't want to see that go to waste! It was then that a solution was reached. It was decided that Witches who'd been licensed and certified and knew what they were doing were fine. Amateur Witches, on the other hand, who tried to heal people with crystals and played with picture-cards and Ouija boards, were clearly Meddling with Things they Didn't Understand. As such, they needed to be stopped, if only for the sake of all the people who ended up getting sicker whenever the Amateurs tried to heal them.

So, Amateur Witches had been made illegal, although the government soon found that enforcing this law had become unnecessary because of the Witches, who were very enthusiastic about stopping Amateur Witchcraft. Their idea of stopping it mostly involved getting hold of Amateur Witches and training them how to be Real Witches. So why was the Ministry of Posts and Communications involved in all this? Well, you see, Amateur Witches often advertised, using magazines and the postal system to ask people to send them money in return for the secrets of the cosmos.

The Sheriff straightened to attention, at the head of a long line of deputies. They'd gathered in the town square, to await the arrival of the Witchfinders.

The Sheriff was most enthusiastic.

He stared out along the road. Two riders were approaching. On wooden hobby-horses! One of them was a villainous-looking old man with a long, dirty-white beard, an eye-patch and a peg-leg. The other was a glum-looking teenage boy, laden down with a heavy-looking bag and clapping two coconut shells together.

* * *

Part-time Apprentice Amateur Witchhearer, Orson Davidson, sighed with relief as he rode with his boss into the town square and stopped. His arms were aching from clapping those dratted coconut-shells together all the way from Threeingham. And before that, they'd been in Fouringham, Twoingham, and Highham up North – seeking out Amateur Witches high and low. At least they'd managed to arrest a group of Morris dancers there. That had endeared them considerably to the people of Higham!

Orson had become an Apprentice Amateur Witchhearer about two months earlier, as a summer job to pay his college bills. Also, since it counted as community work, he could use it to try to get a scholarship – and, of course, the idea of fighting the Forces of Darkness had seemed attractive. The only reason he'd stayed with it was because he got a steady wage, and all expenses paid. His flatmates back in Fiveingham had taken part-time jobs as Warriors of Darkness, hiring their services out to Dark Lords. At least he was better off than them, with his steady job and fighting on the side of Right.

The boss reined in his hobby-horse before the town Sheriff, who was staring, mouth agape. Orson sighed. Unfortunately, the Amateur Witchhearers only got ninepence a year for horses. Even the hobby-horses had nearly been too expensive for them.

The boss saluted. "Arrrrr, be ye th' Sheriff?" he demanded, scowling fiercely. "I am...and you are...?" the weaselly-looking man asked.

"Yarrrrr! I be Amateur Witchhearer, Persistent Jack Suffer-not-the-Amateur-Witch-to-Meddle Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker!" Old Jack produced his wallet, bearing his ID card and the official badge of the Amateur Witchhearers' Office. Orson knew that Old Jack had once been a pirate, with a fierce pirate-band which insisted that their members take the names of birds as their last names. Old Jack had become a Witchhearer because, he reckoned, no-one was going to remember Captain Jack Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker – well, they might remember, but they wouldn't speak of him because his name was simply too long to say. If it had been shorter, something like Swallow, or even Sparrow...

but what was the point of thinking about that. He'd done well all the same! Witchhearer Persistent was the highest rank in the Amateur Witchhearers and, as a civil service job, it was secure even if not the best paid.

The Sheriff peered. "I see... er...I was expecting the Head of your organisation."

"Arrrr! Belay there, me boyo! I be the Head! T'other three were in Lowham in the South, and the Boy were the only I could bring!"

"Wha...there's only five of you?"

"Arrrr! Aye! But we be the righteous! And now, ye had Amateur Witches fer the Hearin'?"

The Sheriff nodded dazedly, "Yes. The main one..."

Old Jack raised his hand. "Nay, direct me not! 'Tis our job, and none other. Ye'll be required to lay hands upon th' Fowl Fiends as we direct, but we're the ones that find the Witches."

"Now look here..." the Sheriff bridled.

"Shut up, ye great weasel. Now, I understand there be an organic vegetable garden outside this den of iniquity?"

"Eh? How dare...that is, yes,run by a respectable widow woman...I mean, how dare..."

"Organic vegetable gardens are a leading sign of Amateur Witchery! Aye, I knew this place was a den of scum and villainy. Boy, with me! Let us seek this misguided servant o' evil out!"

Wearily, Orson turned the hobby-horse around and followed his master, clapping the coconut shells together. The Sheriff was just standing there, mouth open, while his deputies began following. They probably wanted to see exactly where this was going.

They'd gone maybe four feet before Old Jack threw up his right hand dramatically and bellowed "Halt!" He moved cautiously up to the small white picket fence that surrounded a neat, well-kept garden and a duckpond as well as what looked like a ten-acre field of neatly-planted land, he produced a battered coach-horn, and blew it loudly.

The door to the white cottage that stood at the centre of the garden opened, and a handsome, black-haired woman opened the door. Orson's heart sank – she was wearing a gypsy-style headscarf and a home-made red skirt. She was doomed.

"What?" the woman demanded, folding her arms.

"Arrrrrrrrrr!" Old Jack bellowed. "Be ye the owner of this festering mass of

unrighteousness?"

"What? How dare you! I've never been..."

"We'll take that as a yes. Boy! Mark it down."

Orson tiredly took out a mighty leather-bound tome, opened it, and said

"Name?"

"...so insulted in my life. What? My name's Morgana Smith, but..."

"Morgana!" Old Jack bellowed. "Th' name condemns the wench!"

He was roundly slapped across the face. Mrs Smith seemed to have quite the powerful arm. Old Jack was a while picking himself up.

"Arrrrrr!" he roared. "Seize her!"

"But..." the Sheriff began.

He got no further. His deputies, clearly starved for amusement, had decided to follow Old Jack's orders, and were positioning themselves on either side of Mrs Smith. Dusting himself off, Old Jack produced another old, leather-bound book and a huge set of brass callipers.

The Sheriff started. "What are those for?" he demanded.

"Arrrrr! 'Tis a well-known fact, me lad, that Amateur Witches have water on th' brain. Naturally, th' water causes th' head to grow at least an inch wider than th' norm." So saying, he placed the callipers over Mrs Smith's head – a task not made easy by the way she kept shaking it, then stamping on the feet of the deputies when they tried to hold her still. Eventually, Old Jack brought the callipers back, and held them over a faded scale in his old book.

"Three inches over!" he cried. "Arrrr, I've never seen a witch wi' such a big head."

"YOU'LL PAY FOR THAT, YOU..." Mrs Smith screeched, making a determined effort to fly at him with her long nails.

"One final test," Old Jack said calmly, taking a long rope from his pack. "Th' suspect must be swum, yarrrrrr! 'Tis fortunate that th' Fowl Fiend has provided a duck-pond. By its own hand, the Fowl Fiend is undone."

"Wha-?" that came from both the suspect and the Sheriff.

"Th' Amateur Witch's water in the brain will repel any water on th' outside. Thus, th' Amateur Witch will float! Arrrrrr!!!!"

"UNHAND ME..." Mrs Smith began, before the deputies – sensing Old Jack's intention – hurled her into the duck-pond, much to the annoyance of the ducks. Because of the shallow nature of the pond, Mrs Smith resolutely refused to sink.

"AN AMATEUR WITCH!!!" Old Jack crowed, capering gleefully. "SEIZE

HER!!!!!!”

The deputies, ignoring the frantic hand gestures of the Sheriff, grabbed Mrs Smith’s arms and hauled her out of the pond. Old Jack produced another book, this one smaller, with yellow and pink pages. Producing a pen, he scrawled names, dates and other information on a yellow page – hard enough that the pink page below it was marked too – then ripped out the yellow page and presented it to Mrs Smith.

“Yarrrr!!” he crowed. “Ye are sentenced to pay a fine o’ five gold splendours, or face thirty days i’ the jinkers.”

“The... what?” Mrs Smith asked, her voice reduced to a whisper, and duckweed trailing out of her hair.

“Prison, woman, prison!”

Mrs Smith swallowed. “This is utterly unjust...” she began, then thought better of it. “Here,” she snarled, pulling five heavy gold coins from a purse at her side and throwing them at Old Jack.

Old Jack bowed gracefully, then produced his receipt book and, having carefully noted the amount of the fine paid, took out a final book and began to write in Mrs Smith’s name and address.

As he did this, the Sheriff hurried up to him. “Wha-? A fine?”

“What were ye expecting, me fine bucko?” Old Jack asked.

“Well... I don’t know. Choke-pears! Smouldering Boots! Burning on hot peat!

“Are you some kind of sociopath?” Orson asked, shuddering. “Why would we do that?”

“But... you’re hunting down dangerous abominations! Evil sorceresses...”

“No,” Orson said patiently, “we’re the magical equivalent of the Lookman who pulls someone over for riding too fast through a town.” And we get half of every fine we collect, he thought silently. “Arrrrrr! Belay that! ‘Tis a vital service we provide, saving the world from the wiles of the Fowl Fiend!”

Orson sighed. Quite what Old Jack had against poultry, he didn’t know. But before he or the Sheriff could interject, the old man was off again.

“And now, to further business! ‘Tis cleaning up this town needs. I noticed many things wrong, including,” he dropped his voice, “black nail varnish on wimmen!” He turned to the deputies and began roaring loudly at them. Orson rolled his eyes – it was going to be one of those cases.

* * *

The Sheriff stared, aghast. Instead of the root-and-branch search for his enemies he’d hoped for, all that these idiots were going to do was to mildly fine people! People that they identified as Amateur Witches, by some bizarre criteria.

One of his deputies loped up. “Sir!” he hissed urgently. “We overheard a phone call to Naughtingham just now. We don’t know where it came from, but... you might be interested.”

He handed over a sheet of paper, with some barely-legible writing on it. The Sheriff began reading... then smiled. “Very good,” he said, chuckling evilly. “We’ve got a handle on things after all. Get a boat, and head out to the Pirate King. I want a word with him.”

About the Author

Axel Kelly is from West Cork. This is eight installment of Axel’s serialisation which has appeared in every issue of The Looking Glass so far. Axel was an undergraduate at Trinity College Dublin, studying Single Honours History when this serialisation began.

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The Looking Glass
Volume V
Issue I
March 2016