

The Queen's Head #4



A 'literary' zine

EDITO EDIAL ORIAL

→ The largest bird to ever rule North American skies, with a wingspan of 16ft and a beak like a can opener, the wardrobe-sized scavenger *Aiolornis Incredibilis* of the late Pliocene era is likely the real-world ancestor of the mythical Native American Thunderbird. Some tribes believe the creatures could turn their feathers inside out and tip back their beaks to reveal a face, thereby going unnoticed in the world of men. *Aetos kaukasios*, eat your heart out.

And so it is with the fourth issue of *The Queen's Head*. Birdmen are among us – whether invading our dreams, as in Bethany Williams' *The Cage*, or chatting us up on the dancefloor, in *The Birds and The Bees* by Andrew Blair. Even when unseen, the birds are strange – invisible and black in *Torryburn Jean* by Susan MacDonald; absent, giant and purple in Hazel Gore's illustrations scattered down-like throughout the issue; sisters to dark matter in the poems of *Samuel Tongue*. We don't go looking for themes, but they seem to keep finding us, as if hawks after hares.

Thankfully, we've more than a few outliers willing to keep the miscellany alive and twitching, with Sophie Casimira Kromholz, Alex Tobin, Liam Fogerty and Angela Meyer contributing a wild panoply of Canadian giants, improbable stomachs, regal giraffes and one ersatz early train.

Wyrd's of a feather, indeed...



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THE BIRDS AND THE BEES

→ A synth kick-drum in semi-quaver pattern. The slightly out of time melody fading in.

Classic.

A staple of this establishment. As much a part of the fabric as that which is saturated by sweat, Red Stripe, and OVD.

Other drinks are not available.

The Bird is drinking Red Stripe. The Bee is drinking OVD and coke.

"Hey," says the Bird.

"Hi," says the Bee.

"I don't see you here often."

The Bee pauses. The reason she isn't here often is because, like most indie-clubs, Novel Vagueness is full of seriously frivolous young men in striped t-shirts and chequered shirts. Their skinny jeans and brogues combine to imply that they don't have feet and toes, merely two tapered limbs. Sloth's paws on the dance floor.

Their hair is surely a parody of something. They have opinions.

Synth snare drum now. A bass line kicks in, followed by another.

The Bird leans over to shout moistly into the Bee's ear.

“The thing about Blue Monday,” he says, “Is that people always think the bassline is the bassy bit.”

The Bee sits and listens to the song. There had been a rush to the dance-floor after the messy cross-fade (previously the dance floor had framed three young men studiously enjoying themselves to some wiry post-punk), leaving the Bird and the Bee by the bar; a hole in the wall surrounded by secondary school desk-wood frame that implied skelfs and splinters and seventies graffiti carvings.

As ever, Angry Jim leans back against the optics, regarding the whole universe with contempt. He has only smiled once, back when the club President tripped over and pranged his head on a turntable. No-one knows why Angry Jim works here. His stillness seems like an attempt to absorb the music, defiantly symbolising the absence of dance. A Puritan Troll with no noun, but if he did have one it would sound German.

He looks beyond them to where the young people are enjoying themselves, spasming rhythmically in a circle-theme.

All this during a song where the

bassline isn't even the bassy bit, thinks the Bee.

“Do you not think that it's kinda reasonable, people thinking the bassline is the bassy bit?”

“No, cos Peter Hook's basslines always sound un-bassy, everyone knows that.”

“Well, clearly you know everyone better than me.”

The Bird has opinions and they are dreadful, but she has no-one else to listen to. Her friend Amy is in the throng, abandoning her as soon as chaperone duties were accomplished. I can't go alone, she had said, it's easier to talk to folk if you're with someone else. Thus, the Bee has accompanied her, lest she kept up that line of argument in the comfort of their own home.

She watches her friend dancing. Amy has spent most of her evening nodding and rolling her eyes at people, leaving the Bee to do the actual talking. It isn't totally terrible, she rationalises. It's not as if they're passionate about cars or guns or naming their genitals. They are just moany white men who like songs about poetry, girls and arsenic. For one of



their kind, the Bird has quite a handsome plumage, and his head darts from side to side quickly, like he is constantly curious. Also he doesn't notice when the Bee mocks him, which suggests to her a fun way to spend an evening. She downs her drink and asks for another.

The Bee, it seems to the Bird, is buzzing. She's just laughing away, even if the Bird considers his musings to be pithy and urgent tonight. He's come here for the same reason he always does – to try to find like-minded enthusiasts to start a band with...with whom to start a band – but instead he's discovered this knack for comedy. Indeed, he's become so funny the Bee is asking if he could stop talking for a while because it's physically hurting her to breathe, and she backs this claim up by rasping like an erratic skiffle band. The Bird has not appreciated how incredibly witty he can be, even when he isn't trying.

Erring on the side of caution, they play beer pong, a fun but humourless game. He loses, which is inconceivable. It is possible that he's doing it to be nice, but then that would be patronising, which he definitely isn't, so it can't be that.

She grins at him, and he decides she will suffer his wrath in a best-of-three scenario.

But not yet.

His loss will have to remain a mystery, for Kennedy by The Wedding Present is being played, a song that the Bird feels compelled to dance to. A quick glance over catches the Bee in indulgent mood, and she joins him on the dance-floor, a sticky laminate square in the middle of scuffed purple carpet. There they jump and shake, throw themselves at the floor and miss.

The Bee hasn't heard this song before, but she likes it. She exchanges knowing glances with Amy and they all stay for the next song, again and again. The Bee knows what she was doing. It is harder for them to have opinions when you are dancing.

The next morning, the Bee wakes up because her head feels like a hailstorm, battering her skull and filling up her throat. She has a vague memory of Midori - a taste like Calpol crossed with Soylent Green - a row of shots; a taxi ride home; Angry Jim actually smiling.

act prove too difficult. The compromise that ensues...

"I think that last night might have been a mistake," says the Bee eventually.

"Oh," says the Bird.

"Sorry, I just...it wouldn't work out. It really wouldn't. We're too different."

"Right."

The Bird hovers and hums. He isn't sure what to do next.

"Could you go away now please?"

The Bird wordlessly slips out of bed, and searches for his clothes. He glances back once at the Bee who is hugging a pillow to her chest, pointedly avoiding eye contact.

"And please don't, y'know, tell anyone," says the Bee.

He shuffles into a corner to dress. He feels sticky, awkward, and plucked. The walk of shame. It gets easier once he leaves the house.

She waits until she hears the front door close, then pulls on her dressing gown and heads downstairs to fry the hell out of something. Amy is sitting at the kitchen counter, drinking a tiny coffee and eating cereal bars.

"Ugh," says the Bee, "How dare you be happy and awake at this hour?"

"Good night last night?"

"No. He had literally no idea where anything went."

"Yeesh. Not a keeper then?"

"Nooo. One to forget. Gonna pretend it never happened. You know how rumours start."

"Oh, well," says Amy. She grins through a mouthful of oats. "I certainly won't tell anyone."



Ugh.

At this point, the Bird alerts her to his presence in the bed by farting loudly. The sound of the Bee coughing, spluttering and scrabbling out of bed wakes him up.

For a few seconds he doesn't know where he is, then he notices the Bee fleeing the room, wrenching violently. His neckerchief is on the floor. There's a bad smell in the air, and an empty condom wrapper on the bedside table. He'd bought it in a pub toilet three years previously, and was worried it would reach the expiration date. All in all things had worked out rather well in that respect.

He breaks this news to the Bee as she returns, wipes drool from her mouth and staggers back into bed. She glares at him, and sinks back into the pillows, pulling the sheets up around her.

There is a long pause. Gaps from her recent history fill in, like earth into a grave.

Rows of shots. She introduces the Bird to skanking. The exact moment the words "Why the hell not?" appear in her brain. Collapse, giggling, as the logistics of the

Sophie Casimira Kromholz

~~YOU WILL MEET A TALL, SPOTTED STRANGER~~

*On the second tallest
lady to ever pass
through Paris as a
political gift*

→ She had a graceful long neck and batted lengthy curled lashes a drag queen might attempt to imitate with some quality Shu Uemura stick-ons, while gazing from the kind of big brown eyes Van Morisson sang about. She was the epitome of Baz Lurhman excess, a gift worthy of a king, which is of course exactly what she was. The lady in question is the giraffe Zarafa, one of the fairest and most extravagant gifts of the 19th century, given by Muhammad Ali of Egypt to Charles X of France.

Her name derives from the Arabic word for 'giraffe', and she was France's first giraffe, a significant role that she carried with gravitas. She was presented to the French Royal court in order to encourage the French to stop supporting the Greek army, which was fighting for independence from the Ottoman empire.

In order to procure the gift, Muhammad Ali sent his men out to capture a young creature in its natural habitat. Thus, Zarafa was poached as a wee elegant sprite from Sudan, strapped on the back of a camel, and taken to Khartoum – a bizarre sight you might take a minute or two to ponder. From there, she journeyed by boat along the Nile to Alexandria, after which she boarded a ship to Marseilles and traversed the waters for 32 days. In order to complete this journey, form followed function and a hole was cut through the deck

to accommodate her Amazonian height.

In order to help the creature acclimatize upon its arrival in France, there was an initial over-winter stay in Marseille.

There the giraffe was visited by naturalist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, who insisted on ordering shoes and a coat for the beloved creature – who knew animal couture stems back this early?

A pilgrimage on foot commenced on May 1827, wherein Zarafa walked the 900 km from Marseille to Paris. Saint-Hilaire accompanied the giraffe on her final journey to Paris, which took 41 days, alongside the giraffe's three cows which, much like three Shakespearean nursery maids, had been providing daily milk to nourish her, and her only constant

companions from Sudan.

The giraffe, or Cameleopard, as referred to by the English of the time, was a rarity. She was not only the first giraffe to arrive in France, but also one of the first giraffes brought to Europe, an exquisite and exciting rarity that drew a crowd and applause wherever she passed. She was at once declared "*Le Bel Animal du Roi*," the beautiful animal of the king.

Zarafa was finally presented to the king on the 9th of July in 1827 and took up residence in the Parisian Jardin des Plantes. Before Beatlemania, there was "giraffemania": approximately one eighth of the Parisian population came to visit the giraffe while she was getting settled and she inspired a trend in spotted patterns, general giraffe imagery and towering hair à la giraffe – an aesthetic muse and icon. Zarafa continued to live in Paris and was happily present for a further 18 years. After her passing, her corpse was stuffed and displayed in her former home at the Jardin des Plantes, until she was eventually moved to the museum at La Rochelle, where she can still be visited today.

Although delighted (after all, one does not look a gift giraffe in the mouth), the French were not swayed from their support of the Greeks.



Samuel Tongue

Oak Branch and
Tree Warbler

After Shotei Hiroaki

Tiny bird perilous on pencil thin branch,
sure as she can be in this floating world.
Hard acorns drop into the still loch.
Even atoms are mostly absence,
electrons circling like birds
never coming in to roost.

Pushkar

Ghandi's ashes were scattered here
at the edge of the desert, between the teeth
of the Aravali mountains, a fine dust blooming
out across Pushkar lake, opening slowly
like the lotus which bore Brahma
from the birth-curl navel of Vishnu.

The mourners fell silent across the ghats,
each one stopped inside their own head,
as the open-mouthed fish arrived
at the surface like silver pilgrims,
disturbing the silence and sinking again,
each with a bright yellow petal
in place of an eye.

Alex Tobin

EARLY TRAIN

→ “Yeah, so I was saying to him that we can’t do that! We just don’t have time.”

“Yeah.”

“We’ve got the Eastern project, and that stuff in the, you know...”

“Yeah,” echoed dully off the subway platform tiles.

The train pulled in.

“Four minutes early.”

“Yeah.”

“This guy’s getting a raise.”

“Huh.”

“Looks full.”

The train doors shifted open. About fifteen people on the subway platform shifted in through the doors. Nobody came off the train at this stop. The carriage was full.

“So instead, I got him to keep us on his schedule, you know, later in the...”

“Yeah.”

“...”

“What.”

“What’s up with these people?”

“Who?”

He indicated round the carriage with his free hand. There were about six people who’d just got on the train in this carriage, they were all standing. Of the seated people, no faces were visible, everyone apparently was facing the front of the train.

“There’s something up...”

None of the seated people on the train moved. This was because they were made of papier mâché.

“They’re made of papier mâché.”

“What?”

“They’re made of papier mâché. They aren’t real people. They’re made of papier mâché.”

“What?”

He poked one of the seated people, whose hair was painted on in brown. The seated person flopped forwards and their forehead rested against the seat in front of them.

The people who were standing at the other end of the carriage had also noted

that everyone else in the carriage was made of papier mâché. From the front of the carriage, they could see the papier mâché people’s faces, which were drawn on in poster paint.

“All of these people are made of papier mâché.”

“I’m not.”

“I know you’re not. Why are there lots of fake people on this train? I don’t know what’s going on.”

The intercom crackled and said “Ping pong”.

All of the people not made of papier mâché that were on the train looked up at the intercom.

“Hello ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the train. We are running ahead of time this time. Please keep well away from the doors. Please familiarise yourself with the emergency procedures. Please don’t smoke. Please do not leave luggage unattended or it might be mistaken for a bomb and might be destroyed by the security services. Ping pong”



The train went past another platform without stopping. At this point, someone pressed the emergency button for talking to the driver.

“Hello, this is the driver.”

“All of the people on the train are made of papier mâché.”

“...”

“Did you hear...”

“No they aren’t.”

“Yes they are, I am looking at one now. It... he’s... it’s made of papier mâché. Its face is painted on in poster paint.”

“...”

“Did you hear...”

“Please only use the talk-to-driver button in an emergency. Misuse of the talk-to-driver button will result in a fine of up to one hundred pounds. Your luggage might also be destroyed by the security services.”

“Are you a real train driver?”

“Yes, of course I am a train driver.”

People started to notice that the train was actually quite old and in a bad state. Someone

had patched a hole in the floor with corrugated cardboard and elephant tape. There was a padlock on the door between carriages, but the glass in the window in the door was missing anyway. It looked like someone had got hold of a decommissioned train and renovated it by hand. There were some stickers on the windows that seemed to have been printed off on A4 paper. They said “Don’t smoke on the train”, and “Rail Company”.

Somebody tried to pry open the train door. It didn’t open. Somebody pulled the emergency brake lever, which came off in their hand, and made a ‘parp’ noise. Somebody else went to look for the emergency hammer for breaking the glass in the windows. The emergency hammer box was empty – the linoleum wall had a

light hammer-shaped shadow where the hammer had been a long time ago. There was a small paper note that said “hammer” instead.

“Ping pong.”

All of the real people on the train stopped trying to escape and looked at the intercom.

“Please stop trying to escape. Please



sit down on the seats on the train. If there are no seats, I guess you can move some of the papier mâché people out of the way.”

“Aha!” cried someone, clearly indicated that the driver had admitted some of the people on the train were made of papier mâché.

“We will be at our destination quite soon. Please sit down and be quiet until then, ok? Ping pong”

Some people on the train started to sit down, carefully picking up some of the papier mâché people and placing them into the luggage racks.

“Also, don’t try and jump out of the windows or whatever, because the train is going really fast just now and you might get hurt. Ping pong.”

The train was speeding through the subway tunnel very quickly, and bits of flashing lights could be seen streaking past the yellowed perspex windows. Somebody tried to call the police, but there was no reception in the subway. Somebody said “I don’t think this is a real train.” Somebody else said “Are we being kidnapped?”

The train seemed to slow down after a while. It was still inside a dark tunnel, and so nobody could tell exactly where they were. The tunnel here was very narrow – enough to accommodate one train only. If a window could have opened, someone could have reached their arm out and touched the brick walls of the tunnel. After a short period of slowing down, the train seemed to come to a stop altogether. The engine was still running.

One of the papier mâché people fell out of an overhead luggage rack where a real passenger had put it.

Somebody pressed the talk-to-the-driver button again and said “Ping pong” to the driver, then waited for a reply.

“Yes, this is the train driver.”

“Why have we stopped?”

“Ok, can you not talk to me for a minute, I have to concentrate here, right?”

“Why?”

“May I remind you that there is a one hundred pound penalty for misusing the talk-to-driver button. Are you the same person as last time?”

“No.”

“Good, because you would be up to two hundred pounds now. Sit down please. Ping pong ping pong.”

The engine revved a bit, and the train started going backwards. It was also going around a corner. The driver seemed to be attempting a three-point turn at a junction in the tunnels. Somebody said “Can trains do that?”

“I didn’t think they could turn around. I thought they just went backwards and forwards.”

“No, if there is a junction in the tracks, the driver can steer it a bit. Only basic steering though, I think.”

“Did he miss a turn? Is he going another way?”

“I think we’ve missed my stop. Maybe he is going back to let me off there.”

“I don’t think he’s letting anybody off anywhere.”

The train had pulled backwards and



round a corner about ninety degrees. Now it started to go forwards again, into a different tunnel from the one that it had been going through before. This tunnel looked like it had been knocked through from outside the regular subway. There were no maintenance lights in this tunnel. The track was quite bumpy. Another one of the papier mâché people fell out of a luggage rack and landed in someone's lap.

"Ping pong! Ping pong! This is your train driver!" The driver sounded very excited. Somebody on the train said, "He sounds very excited."

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for getting on the train! We will be reaching our stop soon! We will be arriving ahead of schedule! I feel great! Please make sure you have all personal belongings with you! Please make sure you have your ticket with you! If you got on the train with another person, make sure they are with you! I guess if you need to leave stuff on the train you can do that too."

The train bumped as it went downhill slightly. The passenger who had previously had a papier mâché person land in their lap now held the papier mâché person quite tightly against their chest. The tunnel was very narrow indeed now, and it smelled terrible.

There was suddenly a horrific grinding noise. The train slipped along the track, and part of the track seemed to come away with it. The train seemed to be stopping now, perhaps on purpose because there were some grinding brake noises from under the train. Something bounced off the underside of the carriage

and went 'bong.' One of the passengers on the train fell on top of one of the papier mâché people on the floor. The carriage teetered onto its front right corner and then stopped, squint, in the pitch darkness.

After a little while, everyone started picking themselves up off the floor of the train. Somebody, sensibly, went round gathering up all the papier mâché people into the large luggage compartments. There were no lights, so people were using their otherwise useless phones as torches. Somebody said, "I think we're here."

"We're here!" The driver was clearly so excited he forgot to say "ping pong" this time. "Hooray, it worked! It really worked! Hold on everyone, and I'll be round soon. Oh my god, I'm so happy!"





THE SPARKLE HORSE

Making most people
happy since 2012

Angela Meyer

THE NORTH, 1883



'Schubert moves with the assurance of a sleepwalker'—Brendel

I'm not sure how many days I've been awake. The light— blue, grey and white— is incessant. Yesterday I went in search of food, and everything was closed. The only people I encountered were drunk, and I realised I had not checked the time. It was the middle of the night.

The ground kept one step ahead of me, I was disembodied from myself. I felt I could have done anything, in that bright middle of night, and would wake from my actions.

The fishermen were setting out, it must have been very early morning. The bakeries would soon be putting dough in their ovens. I felt in my pocket, though I knew all it contained was my last 18 øre. To pass time I walked past painted wooden houses on the waterfront, with thick, luxurious drapes in their windows. I would give everything off my back for just a few hours behind one of those windows. This is how my mother felt, when I was a mewling newborn; how a

pianist feels when he's not yet half-way through a difficult sonata, and there's still the danger of it taking over.

Today I have not left my room. I've tried again to hang my clothes, my sheets over the window. But there's a skylight, too, in this cheap attic room. What an invention! Perhaps put there to see the spectacular coloured lights in the winter sky. But in this season of light, it's a device of torture. I have also draped clothing across my head, but my clothes are light in colour and the scratchy fabrics suffocate.

My calf muscles ache and threaten to cramp, there's a steady twitch just by my left eyebrow. I try to picture the darkest paintings I can, but sunflowers and waterlilies crop up in my vision.

I had thought this would be the place, that the light would bring everything to relief.

The landlady is at the door, squinting against the light. "The basement room has become available, I thought I'd check..."

I weep. In my pockets there is nothing left.



FOREIGN BODIES

→ Some of the women bulked up, others used a belittling wit, but Kate asserted her superiority the day she swallowed a small paintbrush during our art therapy class. Kate was small-shouldered, with a nondescript hair colour. She was new, and her place in the hierarchy hadn't been established, but most of us assumed her smallness pertained to vulnerability. We didn't hold much hope for her. But then she began quietly swallowing objects and we marvelled at the strength and flexibility of her oesophagus.

We soon became curious about how the objects were passed, but out of respect, we left her alone to go to the loo. The security guard in the toilet would have an idea, as would the women in the cells beside her. But nothing was said.

One day in the cafeteria she casually removed her shirt, and we, surrounding her, blocked the view of the guards. She

then bundled the shirt, fold by fold, into her mouth and down her throat, her jaw working like that of an armless animal—a shark, or a kookaburra—to gulp it down. We all gripped our own hands, nervous and excited at the thought of blockage. This was far better than Paul Newman and his eggs. But her belly did swell like his. When she'd finished, she stared ahead; no smile, not a hint of sweat. And then she took a sip of water. We had to applaud. A guard rushed over and asked where Kate's shirt was. No one said anything and she was sent off to the laundry for another.

It went on for months, the objects becoming larger and firmer. She too, seemed to grow, both broad and tall, as though these objects contained life-enhancing nutrients. And then one day, she was gone. She'd left the key swinging in the lock and though they dragged the river, the guard who had been on duty was nowhere to be found.



Bethany Williams

THE CAGE

→ She'd been dreaming for weeks of a young man wrapped in chains. He was very medieval looking, slumped in some corner with bars behind him, curving rib-like and keeping him in. His dirty hair was long and butterblond, seeping down his neck, over his shoulders onto his clothes, which were the most medieval bit of him really, the reason she could tell he was history - a yellow tunic covered with stains, ripped and a bit baggy so you knew he used to be bigger than he was, bless him, before he'd been taken by whoever and held in a cell in fat chains.

Sometimes he'd be sleeping himself when she dreamed him, breathing in, out, soft, and she could look at him then and he couldn't look back because his eyes were shut, though he never did seem to see her even when he was awake. She'd rove then over his closed face, pale and smoothed flat like a seashell. He had a jagged slash of a nose, but it didn't stop him altogether from being handsome. More, thought the girl, it kept his face from fluttering off into the realms of the too delicate, what with his lips, pouting

full to cushiony bursting, and his yellowy hair dripping over a forehead so gently sloped over such well lashed lids and, behind them, such eyes. These weren't exactly delicate either. Too unusual to be handsome, deep black and so strange, and she couldn't pin down how they were, exactly, but they were big and sat like two strange holes dug in his soft face.

Sometimes he'd be awake when she dreamed him, like she liked, though it did always make her feel shy and a bit confused and she couldn't pass all over him unseen. His face would be turned upwards, empty-eyed. Watching something vacantly, not the sky – the cell had no windows – but a fly, maybe, or the paths of the dust motes or the grains of the darkness itself, moving against itself. She could never seem to manage to turn herself round to look, or even to move her body at all in her dreams, and so the girl never knew what it was that her young man stared at, if indeed he was staring at anything so solid as can be looked at and named.

Sometimes he'd be singing when she dreamed him. A rich, creamy voice that she could hear the way you do in dreams, far off as though through water but still quite distinct. His songs were all in a language she didn't understand – swooping vowel sounds and key changes tight as a fast car round a bend. Tart crushed velvet lows and trills and highs that flooded out his mouth like yolk. The girl didn't understand any meaning of any word in any of his songs, but she still loved to listen to him, crumpled and bony in his chains, his face bright as the tune held it. His voice made her think of hills, clocks, old green stones like marbles, dying running staggery horses, snow. It

made her feel heavy and lovely, and very sad.

Sometimes, though, he'd be crying when she dreamed him, hulking out great chokes of sobs that screwed up his face, tears all everywhere and coming off his sharp nose, his skin red and sore from the salt. He looked broken up, and the shards of him were wailing. Those times she'd leave him be. Not wanting to disturb something so raw and so private, even if they'd never spoken to each other, and he'd never made a single sign to show he knew she was there, even if it couldn't possibly matter less to what was, after all, a figment of her own imagination, she'd still turn off sideways in her dream without ever quite knowing how, and dream of colours or nothing, and wake up in the morning feeling a bit sad and silly for it.

And then she'd pull herself out of bed, stick on the kettle and let her thoughts float lazily round the young chained man until the water had boiled. It took four spoons of instant coffee, black and unsweetened, to spark her awake enough to dress and wash herself without mistake or minor injury. It was still dark when she left for the bus stop on the Tuesday we're talking about, streetlamps shining off puddles and weary, closed faces that moved along the high street with eyes fixed straight ahead.

By the time she got to the office, the sun was just poking itself up into the sky, casting a weak greyness over the whole town, roads and buildings and pigeons. The light stayed thin and watery throughout the day, creating a listless atmosphere that made it very hard to concentrate on the angry phone calls of complaint that came through in droves.



Seven and a half hours of sliding calm sugary words down the phone to clients and she was just about ready to shriek or else explode. Instead, the girl heaved out a sigh and stumped out the door as soon as the clock flipped over to six.

The sky was growing dark again as she stepped onto the bus and dropped down in a seat, next to a tired looking boy with dreadlocks and chunky red headphones. For the first time all day, the young blond man of her dreams popped back into her mind. She leant back and closed her eyes, and let her mind tilt slowly towards his sleeping form, clear as at nights.

The bus moved and hissed to a beat, warm rhythms wrapping themselves round the image of him, curled up ragged yellow, noble long face with features too alive to be so stained-glass perfect. She was watching him, deep pulled-in fascinated by her man, very handsome, very far away unreal and then his eyes flicked open and he smiled at her. Right at her, straight in-between the eyes for her like he never had before – grinning, crinkling his hot dark eyes right up, and he looked that glad to see her. He knew her.

The girl sat up quickly, alarmed at her own imagination. Going round the bend, she was. Looking at the city out the steamed-up window, she decided she'd have to call Yann to come over tomorrow, or Thursday. She was too worn out tonight.

"You know, you mustn't think that I don't know what you're doing, dear," said the woman to the room.

Her voice was calm and very kind, and she was smiling gently as she leant

on her frame to make her slow elegant way across her sitting room and into a high-backed lilac armchair that was deep enough to thrust her knees above her head, she was so little, only she'd arranged a dozen cushions just so to prop her up ladylike straight.

She sighed a small comfortable sigh and picked up the pile of knitting that was laid neatly on the arm of her chair, humming Sinatra softly as she clicked and clacked her needles, knitting and purling something that made up for what it lacked in shape or apparent design with the unusually forceful shade of its pink. Occasionally she'd warble a line or two of the song, or make a gleeful observation about her knitting progress. A floral print tablecloth covered a curved box shape in the corner next to her, and she seemed to be addressing her remarks towards it.

Almost an hour passed in this way, the lady sat all snugly and plush dressing-gowned in her chair, knitting pink row after pink row and smiling peacefully. Then she stopped, mid-stitch, and put her work back down. She was no longer smiling.

"No," she murmured, widening her big pretty blue eyes so that both of her retinas were completely visible, two pale circles that could've been snipped out of the sky. "No, it just won't do. I'm sorry dear. I am. But you've brought it entirely upon yourself, you know."

As she spoke she was getting up out of her chair, using the armrests to push herself into a standing position. Leaning heavily on her frame with her right arm, she used her left to grasp the corner of the cloth covering the curved box, and then she yanked, hard.

The cloth came off in a fluid, tulip-

patterned motion to reveal a large birdcage, about average waist-height and the same again in width. A tiny bright canary was tucked into the corner. The woman bent herself painfully down to the intricate latch arrangement on the side of the cage and undid it carefully so the cage front swung slowly outwards.

She peered in at her canary, which hadn't fluttered or shown any agitation at all at the opening of the front of its chamber. It didn't try to escape, either. It stayed perfectly still, a hunched-up-small ball of yellow feathers, as the woman reached into the cage and grabbed its stiff clawed feet. She raised her hand, and the bird with it, about half a metre inside the cage, and then stopped, because the thin silver chain that was wrapped around the canary's ankles had stretched as far as it could. She pulled on it slightly, a test of its strength rather than an attempt to snap the fine thread of metal that was wound tightly around the bird's legs and just as tightly around the cage bars. Then she dropped her pet, open-palmed and deliberately, and it tried to flap, bless it, but the chain weighed it down and it landed with a muffled thump on the floor of its small prison. The bird made no sound to indicate pain, or anger, but its strange black pellets of eyes shone hard and hot in very unbirdlike fashion.

"Of course, we'll have to move on again now," said the woman, clucking her tongue in a sweet, sad way as she pushed the front of the cage back and flipped its latch closed. "We can't have you staying here filling up that poor girl's head, can we? She has enough to be getting on with without your silly old face on top of everything else. Eh? Haunting her, you looker, you. My darling philomelly boy."

She moved back to her chair and picked up her shocking pink knitting.

"And," she added for an afterthought, "a deal is a deal, dear." She chuckled contentedly, and then, without waiting for her canary to reply, which, in any case, it didn't, she started again with her clicking and clacking needles, humming something soft by Peggy Lee.

As the girl went curled-up to sleep that night, she smiled into her pillow. She was ready, now, more than ready, to dream again of the handsome young man with the songs and the chains.

But she didn't. Not properly. Her mind formed half-pictures and strange sounds that reminded her of his sleeping face, of his singing and his weird obsidian eyes, of his helpless yellow-clad body, slumped under the heavy grey weight of the metal chain that held him tight. Only half-pictures and bent sounds, she dreamt, all unclear and somehow not as real or vital as any of the dreams she'd had before.

She felt disappointed come the morning, but, like yesterday, she didn't really have time to sift through her sleep's details. The cogs of her awake mind were already moving. Shower, bus, office, and another grizzly kind of day, all miserable skies.

She didn't dream him that night either, or the next, or the next. Bit by bit, she started to forget the young imprisoned man who had held her nights, who had made her think for a while of unordinary things. Sleeps were just sleeps again – comfy, deep and empty. A couple of months later she got engaged to Yann, and they were married the following May.



Liam Fogerty

His Name Was Paul

His statues can be found all over North America.
Without consensus they are all 21 feet tall and face north.
They watch for his return.

He was present at the cave of forms.
A truer form of man than man himself.
He stood in the back.
He cast no light.
He had no shadow.

But the world moved on.
The cave grew dim and he took his leave.
He found a great forest and felt at home.
He knew this land.
He knew its ways.

He was rarely seen but his presence pressed on the dreams of
those he passed.
By day the forest was full of whispers.
Those who listened would hear his name.

His woodman ways seeped into the hearts of the people and shaped the land.

His mark could be seen everywhere.

Some say giant trees would fall without a sound.

When investigated the cuts were found to be “too big for any known axe.”

The burliest of all men would sit deep into the night and speak in low awed tones.

But the world moved on.

He felt his place in the land dwindle.

The old ways were dying.

The forest, once a bounty, was now only a resource.

So he took his leave and he headed north.

Susan MacDonald

TORRYBURN

JEAN

→ It is easy to go back. We can all go back. Look down and begin with the shoes: shiny red with T-bar, high heel and shallow platform. Rebellious – but only slightly. Skinny ankles, spindle legs; black tights, laddered and mended with clear nail varnish beneath an A-line skirt, waist-band doubled over. Look at your hands, still smooth, taking notes in rather self-conscious handwriting, the slant and downward stroke still mutating. Aladdin Sane cover on your jotter. The scent of Aqua Manda, the dragging ache of a period pain and you are there.

It is easy to go back.

Predictably, I am a little in love with Mr McDiarmid. He wears purple cords and has a faintly flamboyant quiff. My big brother knew him as Frank Ifield but now he is Tarzan. Last term when we studied *Down the Mine* Mr McDiarmid told us that his own father was sent to prison for refusing to comply with the means test. Now we are reading *The Crucible*.

Mr McDiarmid has placed walking stick on his desk, highly polished reddish brown wood topped with a brass carving of an owl's head. He picks it up. We fall

silent. Except for Thomas Henderson who continues to chatter and snigger and leans back and stretches his legs over the sides of his chair. Hendo.

You remember Hendo. Everyone remembers Hendo. You were attracted to him or you feared him. Sometimes both. You tried to win his favour or you tried to avoid eye contact. Once a week he makes up a list of the ugliest girls in the class. Hunt the Pig. If your name appears on his list you can cry like Elaine or go red like Janet or pretend to laugh like Brenda. But you'll never feel pretty again.

"You were saying, Mr Henderson?"

Tarzan waves the stick mock-menacingly in Hendo's direction. Perhaps not so mock. Hendo joins in the joke, ducks and grins appreciatively. Perhaps not so appreciatively.

Mr McDiarmid now rests the stick in his palms, horizontally, reverentially. He tells us that the stick has been in his family for over fifty years. That his grandfather acquired it from the local minister in exchange for some gardening at the manse. That it was crafted from the same

piece of wood that made the stake for Torryburn Jean, the last witch to burn in Fife.

Years later, long after Tarzan has become Stone Age before retiring and opening a second-hand book-shop, I google Torryburn Jean. I find no trace.

Mr McDiarmid reads us extracts from the annals of Fife describing the suffering and torture of innocent women. The horror is somehow intensified by the use of the Scots words that I associate with my gran. I shudder. For homework, we have to write a monologue from the point of view of a woman accused of witchcraft.

At the end of the day, I giggle and gossip with my friends but the pains in my back and sides have sharpened. Limbs heavy. Hot. I head for home. Our house is in Standing Stone Walk, right at the

edge of the Scheme. There is a barn beside the woods opposite. I see Brenda Gilhooley leaning against the wall, sharing a cigarette with Hendo. A murder of crows appears from the roof, wings opening like tattered umbrellas. Ziggy materialises silently, soft black fur oozing across my



ankles.

I need to lie down but my gran is sleeping in my room. She is staying with us after she stumbled in her garden and broke her ankle. My brother and I spend alternate weeks on the sofa. I go to his room and lie on the bed with my knees bent, feet pushing against the wall until the spasms of pain subside. In the alien surroundings of Ewan's Black Sabbath posters, Led Zeppelin albums, guitar and sports equipment, ideas for my witch monologue begin to take shape. My eyes grow heavy as Ziggy breathes deeply beside me and I stroke the patch of white fur behind his ear.

A bell rings. My gran is awake. At times she can be what is described as 'wandered' – in the days before medical terms become household words. She complains that there are birds on her bed.

"What do you call them? Jackdaws. That's it."

I make her a cup of tea and we look at her book together: *Those Memory Years*, pictures from the 1930s. No Orwell, no miners but Little Princesses, Jack Buchanan, Gracie Fields – the singing

mill girl.

"I never cared much for Gracie Fields," says Gran who was a mill girl herself. Her hands flutter like moths as she flicks away imaginary pieces of lint, the clatter of the looms still in her mind.

The next morning in registration I notice Brenda is absent. Hendo sidles to my desk, wearing his bad boy grin. He wants to copy some of my monologue because he hasn't done his homework for Tarzan. Usually I will do others' homework but this time I'm reluctant. I don't want him to see my monologue; it's too personal. Rummaging in my bag, I pretend I can't find the sheets and scribble some notes for him to copy. He is not pleased and I expect to see my name on the next 'Hunt the Pig' list.

We have a supply teacher in maths.

Hendo begins a chant around the class:

"It's-Monty-Python's-Flying-Cir-CUS!"

The teacher over-reacts so Hendo twists up the ratchet:

"Tam-Pax-Tam-Pon!"

Fewer pupils join in this time and Hendo is singled out and sent to the rector to be belted. He returns, brandishing the two familiar red stripes on



his palm like a badge of honour but his face is pale. At the end of the period as he passes my desk he pushes his hand against the back of my head. My hair is very dark – like a raven’s wing, my gran says – but at the back I have a small blonde clump, about an inch wide. I can only see it through two mirrors, of course, but I know it’s there. I reach back and touch the place where Hendo’s hand has been and I discover that he has stuck chewing gum on the blonde streak. After much tugging and pulling, I remove most of the gum, but some I have to cut out with nail scissors. For many weeks, that part of my hair is ragged and uneven, but eventually it grows back, still blonde.

That night when I go home, Ziggy is missing.

My gran stares blankly at the TV, once more flicking away imaginary lint and humming a waltzy lalala tune, probably from the thirties. I work on my character study of Proctor. If I concentrate really hard, I tell myself, Ziggy will come back. It’s difficult to focus, though, because a motorbike keeps roaring past our house.

“Jackdaws,” says my gran.

There is still no sign of Ziggy the next day but Brenda is back at school. No laughter from her today. She is wearing lots of make-up but I’m sure I see a graze or a bruise on her cheek. When she sits down she pulls her skirt over her knees and clutches the hem. I stroke my bristly blonde streak, stare in Hendo’s direction and concentrate.

That evening I have my part-time job in William Low’s, stacking shelves. Tins and tins of cat food. I bump my shin against a ladder. A tiny trickle of blood sticks to my tights and, though it’s not like me, I weep a little.

At home, my mum is waiting for me. She looks worried.

“Abi, Ewan found Ziggy. He was under the Donaldsons’ shed. It looks like, well, Ewan thinks he’s been shot with an air-gun. He’s up at the vet’s now.”

For the last time in my life I am a little girl again, clinging to her mother.

An hour later, Ewan comes home alone, ashen.

Ziggy’s dead.

“No, no, Abi. Ziggy’s going to be all right, the vet thinks. He’s stitched up his leg and his paw. Keeping him in overnight. But something terrible’s happened. That Henderson boy in your class. He’s been killed. Joyriding a motorbike. I can’t believe it.”

“His poor mother,” sighs my gran as a cold, dark fear wraps itself around me...

It’s easy to come back. Start with the shoes. Still red, but a matt, soft leather, the strap held in place by Velcro; thick, spongy sole. I have to wear flat shoes now because of the arthritis in my knee. And I walk with a stick. The stick my English teacher gave me the day I left school. Crafted from the same piece of wood that was used to burn the last witch in Fife.



cont. contri ribu tors

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- Liam Fogerty lives and works in Glasgow, Scotland. He is an artist and a maker of analog/digital interactions and curiosities.



*Want to share the weird? Get in touch:
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by Hazel Gore*

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