

Fairies Frequented Several

Adam Warne

this happened in the
old house and
behind the hop
garden and on
Tavern Street near
a former inn
along Bury Street by
the new bridge
over the steep
bank at the stroke
of midnight in
the early morning
when the sun was
beginning to set
about eighty years
ago and a couple
of months since and
just the other day

there was a
special way we
were taught by
those who know
who told us what
to look for if
we were well behaved
and didn't speak
to earn coins
we used to lie
hid on the floor to

see between the
comings and goings
of the people

and some have seen
near the estate where
the new homes are
tall and handsome
in the nineteenth century
it was green fields
in the sunshine stood
a pair of gates that
would open though
bolted and locked
when taking his dog
my father had
to restrain him

either herself or her sister
she forgets which
kept the secret for
forty years and
every morning
on getting up with
a feeling like
pins and needles
the light was
for a crucial moment
a milky mist
she would find
a gift in
her pocket at
the foot of the bed

the bed in which
old nana now lives
who always muttered
how she was a
fool to marry
another fool for
months after
hoarding broken shoes
and this and that
under the pillow
he always
when asleep
found it made
mended and cleaned

as sure as you
are reading this
he told me
as he heard tell
in the perishing
winter evening in
his cottage by
the fire when the snow
came down thick
his father when
a lad would
often expect
drumming his fingers
in anticipation

for some days I
was not alone
toiling with a heavy
load on my back

that I could
not account for
in another time
after a stroke
I could feel
a sensation by
my face I am
sure I knew
it was better
to keep my
eyes closed
but I opened them

I had such
a sense of joy
for about a
minute as I stared
and a feeling
of the loveliness
of being alive
I have all
kinds of experiences
that other people
aren't alert to
it was the
summer solstice
I am healthy and
I never take drugs

all the grass
in a circle
had been burnt
where my mum
and sisters had stood in

the meadow and
I took a photo
with the flash
a little way
beyond the spot
we didn't notice
anything until
I blew it up

there are few who
haven't heard of me
I linger among ancient
books to rekindle
the sacred fire
that helped me see
to the north-west
of the island
far from the rocky
inlets and sea-birds
where the pine
forest in summer
was made famous
after I told the
papers and people
still come having
heard my story

a man alone
across the moor
absconding from
the barracks about
to drink from
a well or a peasant
was ploughing

on examination
he found the furrow
already done
soon after a
hot cake appeared
as plain as can be
in the furrows
near him
which he ate

we had parked
the car and were
walking up the hill to
the ruins of the
abbey when all of
a sudden
I had to stop
I pinched myself
and my husband
says he made
a wish then insisted
we drive home
in a distant voice

speaking in songs
or rhymes was
a child's thing
the frightened men
threw down the sack
yellow and pink
you mustn't blink
yellow and pink
pick me, pick me
don't pinch, don't pinch

but nowadays
or during a picnic
I don't give
too much thought

but one Thursday
at the market
not to tell
anyone of it
the whole place
seemed to shiver
as if shaken
in a mirror
and she dropped
her basket
into the rut
from that time
she never
had the good luck

whereupon much
surprised I took
to my heels
and ran
the way home

One of the key qualities of a story about encountering fairies is that we, as the audience, are never there to see the fairies ourselves. They are always out of sight for us. ‘Fairies Frequented Several’ is a poem that focuses on this absence. Fairies are never explicitly mentioned except in the title of the poem. Instead, the fairies are a palpable absence as the poem describes elements such as when and where the fairies were seen, how the person or people reacted, what their emotions were, or how the experience changed their perception of the world around them. Such details can tell us important things about belief in fairies. For example, Francis Young has argued that in the nineteenth and early twentieth century most tales of fairylore were projected back into the past due to the tellers feeling ‘reluctant to share it with educated people (including folklorists) in case they were met with ridicule’.ⁱ In contrast, after the First World War, encounters with fairies were ‘more often reported as personal experiences, and seem to be situated with specific mystical, Theosophical, Spiritualist, Neo-pagan, or ‘New Age’ frameworks of belief’.ⁱⁱ ‘Fairies Frequented Several’ does not offer a systematic account of such differences, or offer interpretations of them, but aims to find something interesting and moving in the way people use differing conventions and frameworks to position themselves in relation to the story and the experience described while the fairies themselves are always just out of reach for us across the various tales and anecdotes.

The poem draws on various accounts of fairy sightings. These include historical accounts from books such as Walter Evans-Wentz’s *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911) and A. G. H. Hollingsworth’s *The History of Stowmarket* (1844) and modern sightings reported in newspapers or collected in Simon Young’s *Fairy Census, 2014-2017* (2018). To produce the poem, I rewrote, rearranged and mixed together accounts to create a montage of encounters, maintaining the diction and perspectives of the different encounters, but using various techniques to counter this continuity with ordinary language so that the way these stories are told no longer seems completely normal or natural. As Andrew Duncan has argued, ‘Montage can act like the conscious artificiality in Brechtian plays, anti-realistic gaits and gestures, which make us conscious of the rules of genre, directing attention away from the poet and towards the way social institutions and symbolism are constructed’.

The poem also uses other techniques to further foreground the artifice of the tales of fairy encounters. John Wilkinson has argued that ‘poetic identity increasingly is composed of multiple pronouns, of part-people whose intersection and interaction develop a populace, deposing both the regal author and the puppet persona’.^{iv} The pronouns in ‘Fairies Frequented Several’ have shifting referents, so that there is no consistent ‘I’ or ‘he’ or ‘she’ that exists as a recognizable character throughout the poem. Instead, the reoccurrence of these pronouns acts

as a structural device, allowing for a range of different perspectives and experiences to be placed in succession without centering any one voice.

Another way in which the poem foregrounds how the tales are told is through the use of jolting short lines to disrupt the flow, a technique that draws on the short *vers libre* lines of William Carlos Williams. The short lines of 'Fairies Frequented Several' slow down the poem and fragment the reading process, a process aided by the lack of punctuation. This hinders the reader from smoothly and clearly seeing 'through' the language to some world external to the words of the poem, but without making the language impenetrable or abstract.

Notes

ⁱ Young, Francis, *Suffolk Fairylure*, Norwich, Lasse Press, 2018, p3.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 101.

ⁱⁱⁱ Duncan, Andrew, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*, Cromer: Salt, 2003, p86.

^{iv} Wilkinson, John, *The Lyric Touch*, Cromer: Salt, 2007, p166.

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