

This is a work of auto-fictive cultural criticism commissioned by *Cunning Folk* magazine in Autumn 2023. Writing it was a key moment in first developing my ideas for GREEN MOTHER. In terms of tone, style and content, it's a good illustration of what I hope to achieve in long-form fiction with this project.

Blood and Milk

by Faye Keegan

The gothic is always about transforming bodies: bringing out a sweat, making blood run cold, catching breath. Goosebumps. Birth, then, is pure gothic: waters broken, flesh torn, blood spilled, a whole new life - a new body - brought forth. But the transformation doesn't end there. In those first days and weeks of early motherhood, the uncanny creep of change is all around. It will catch you unawares: in your sleepless haze, you might look into the mirror and not see yourself reflected. You might fail to recognise your own scent, a foreign milkiness mixing with your sweat, your blood. You are, after all, a different creature now. You belong to someone else.

There's been a change in me: I carried her inside for thirty-five weeks and six days until, in the too-hot heat of late July, she ruptured the skin I'd grown to keep her in. After seven days in bed, hooked up to strange machines as my waters spilled in slow motion, they pulled her out face-first with silver tongs; kicking, not screaming. In films they always scream - that's how we know that they're alive - so her silence chilled me. 'Why isn't she crying?'. None of them spoke. 'Why isn't she crying!?' I begged, then, suddenly, they placed her in my arms and here she is - slick with creamy vernix and the red of fresh spilt blood. My little change.

We place her on my tummy, like they tell you in the books, to be guided by her nose and natural instinct. It doesn't work. Instead, I lay her next to me, hover breast above mouth, breath

suspended. She latches - a bright, brief miracle - but can't sustain it. In the end we feed her my delivery-room harvest, drop by tiny amber drop, painstakingly squeezed from my breast and collected by syringe; 'like liquid gold, that stuff', one of them had said, 'like liquid gold'.

According to Irish folklore, malevolent fairies steal new-borns away and replace them with their own; changelings. The supposed reasons vary: some say it's vengeance, that the fairies seek to punish parents who've insulted them; others, that they're simply entranced by the child's beauty. Some say it's because the changelings - those fairies left instead - have developed a taste for human milk. Indeed, it isn't only babies who're taken; new mothers are at risk, too. If, after giving birth, a woman seems strange, confused, emotional, she is, in all likelihood, a changeling. Her real self? Away with the fairies. They wanted her milk.

Those first few hours pass in bleary haze. She is weighed and measured, I am checked and medicated. One of them comes to inspect our latch. 'Looks good', she says, but it doesn't feel good; already, I am sore, bleeding, blisters forming.

We're sent home, but something's wrong: she's limp and listless, her skin tinged with quease. She sleeps too much. She doesn't cry. She will not feed.

We rush back, and they give us over to machines: she's placed under lights, a sunshine simulacrum meant to bleach out her disease. I, meanwhile, am hooked up to a monstrous contraption of plastic and tubes which will extract my milk.

That first night the sobs rattle through me. I imagine how I'll feel if she goes; decide to follow.

They say to feed her every two hours, from my breast and then a bottle, to make certain she is satisfied, so I feed her, and I feed her, and I pump.

In the film Baby Blood (1990), pregnant Yanka's womb is invaded by a mysterious parasite which transforms her growing foetus. Now able to communicate telepathically, the foetus tells Yanka that she must

drink human blood if it is to be properly nourished. She capitulates, embarking on a gory, murderous spree. Because that's what you do, right? You give them what they need.

I feed her, and I feed her, and I pump; and I feed her, and I feed her, and I pump; and I feed her, and I feed her, and I pump. They take her blood - tiny prick to her left heel - and send us home. A day passes; a night. Again, they come to take her blood, and we are called back in. And I feed her, and I feed her, and I pump; and I feed her, and I feed her, and I pump. And they take her blood, and they send us home, and they take her blood, and they call us back.

In all, I spend thirteen nights there.

Sometimes I hear other mothers crying behind curtains.

On the last day, an intruder; a hot, red lump in my left breast. It's high summer, but I shiver in my own frozen world, teeth chattering, face pale. They take my blood, feed me drugs, insert shiny new tubes. I keep feeding her. It passes.

In the film Breaking Dawn: Part 1 (2011) teen newly-wed Bella becomes pregnant by her immortal husband, Edward. She drinks human blood to satiate her unborn child, but still her body struggles to contain a foetus which is only half human: she grows emaciated, eyes sunken, skin sallow, and, after a messily improvised caesarean, almost dies, but is saved by Edward's venom. We watch it coursing through her veins, a milky white substance overwriting the vibrant red of her human blood. As it does so, Bella's body changes: her hair thickens, her skin brightens, her bones heal. Having survived the ordeal of pregnancy and childbirth, she emerges stronger, but she is irreversibly transformed; a different creature altogether.

Finally, we're home for good.

We put her in a basket by our bed. I lie in the dark, anxious for each tiny exhalation that proves she's here. Sometimes I reach out my hand to check her heart still beats.

I'm fading: where once my bump bloomed magnificent, I am all apologetic sag. My nipples are cracked and crusted, my breasts bruised from squeezing out every possible drop. My skin is pallid, my hair thinning, my eyes - sunk low over purple shadow - vacant, bloodshot, tired. My movements are heavy and slow, and I only want to sleep, sleep, sleep. The world is overwhelming - too bright and busy and loud. I feel... weak. And thirsty. So thirsty.

She's growing stronger, though: sleeping less, crying more, feeding constantly.

The crying usually begins round nightfall: deep, guttural yelps contorting her whole body, eyes twisting shut, face purple, little knees pulled into chest. A tiny canon ball of pain and need. I want to scream, too, to join in. I bring her mouth to my ear and let her howl.

In Philippine mythology, the tiyanak is a bloodthirsty demon who takes on the appearance of a new-born human child. It lies in wait in the depths of the forest, luring passers-by away from the path with its plaintive, infant wails. They take pity on this poor, abandoned innocent, rushing to its rescue. Only when they are too close to escape does the tiyanak reveal its true form - pointed teeth and long, sharp talons - the better to tear them limb from limb. I wonder if they mind.

Feeding through the night means I never really sleep, but I'm never quite awake, either. I tend not to remember much. I find a tiny suction mark, a love bite, on my right breast. More than once I jerk awake to catch her just in time.

She's always hungry now; it is all I can do to sit here allowing my arms to be filled and my breast to be drained. I stare about me at the cobwebs gathering dust, at the food I'm not cooking, the books I'm not reading. I should be writing.

I can see my laptop, not quite obscured by laundry and nappies. If I reached out my arm I could touch it. If I could just reach out my arm.

Always I am desperate to escape, to snatch an hour with my old self, but when I do I'm overcome by gut-deep yearning. I sit in cafés with my notebooks staring blankly out of windows. I thought I would write mountain-tops and oceans, daring adventures and great loves, but I have forgotten how. Instead, I ache to hold her, to kiss her ears, like little pink shells. I realise I'm only slowly ossifying until the time we're reunited and she feeds, then oh! the relief.

In the film Little Joe (2019) Alice, a botanist and single mother, develops a new breed of plant which is designed to make its owner feel happy. She names it, with its blood red, oxytocin-inducing flowers, after her son, Joe. But Alice begins to suspect that the plant is exerting a nefarious influence over those who've encountered its pollen: they seem happy, yes, but eerily so, and utterly changed. Joe, for example, cheerfully asserts his wish to live with his father instead of her. An increasingly fearful Alice theorises that the plant is exerting mind control to ensure its own survival and wants her, as its creator - its mother - all to itself. She determines to destroy it, but just as she's about to, the plant releases its pollen. The film ends with Alice breezily dismissing her previous concerns, happy for Joe to move out so she can focus on her work.

I will put down my pen, now, and go to her.

Because: her eyes, like clear, cool pools.

Because: her laugh, like pealing silver bells.

Because: her hands, reaching out for me, always.