

The Guardian

Jo Lloyd wins BBC national short story award for 'timeless' tale

Welsh writer takes £15,000 prize for *The Invisible*, based on a real 18th-century woman who spread tales in her village

Read the story below



Llynau Cregennen in Wales. Photograph: David Noton Photography/Alamy

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A story inspired by a brief dictionary entry about an 18th-century woman described as a “volute hypocrite” has won Jo Lloyd the £15,000 BBC national short story award.

In *The Invisible*, Martha, who claims she is friends with an invisible family, is living in an invisible mansion in Carnarvonshire. It opens: “Mr Ingram and his Invisible daughter

Miss Ingram live close by, Martha tells us, in a grand, impractical mansion of the type the wealthy favour - except Invisible, of course - made from dressed stone the colour of spring cream, with a slate roof and glass in every window.”

The Welsh writer discovered Martha’s history by chance, when looking through the online Dictionary of Welsh Biography. The dictionary says Martha “succeeded in persuading many people of that neighbourhood” of her stories - although eventually doubts began to spread.

Chair of the judges and BBC broadcaster Nikki Bedi said the decision had been unanimous. Five authors had been shortlisted: Lloyd, Lucy Caldwell, Lynda Clark, Jacqueline Crooks and Tamsin Grey.

“The story is unplaceable but deeply resonant. The Invisible’s themes touch on wealth and class, what can be seen and not seen, and what’s precious and what should be valued in the world. You will read and reread it, and be richer every time,” Bedi said.

Her fellow judge and the winner of the 2017 prize, Cynan Jones, said Lloyd had painted “a timelessly relevant picture of how we obsess for access to worlds we cannot have”.

“It is,” he said, “also a story about story itself; our need for them, to allow us to see beyond ourselves, and how the stories we buy into can bring us together or push us apart.”

Lloyd, who grew up in south Wales, received her award at a ceremony broadcast live on Radio 4 on Tuesday night.

The Invisible by Jo Lloyd

Across the lake

Mr Ingram and his Invisible daughter Miss Ingram live close by, Martha tells us, in a grand, impractical mansion of the type the wealthy favour - except Invisible, of course - made from dressed stone the colour of spring cream, with a slate roof and glass in every window.

Is that so, we say.

They receive numerous Invisible guests, Martha tells us, who must travel here from other Invisible mansions, in other parts of the country.

That would follow, we say.

They attend fairs and sales about the district. They are regulars at our Wednesday markets.

To sell or to buy?

They are Invisible!

To accomplish trade both parties must be visible, a fact we have not previously had cause to contemplate.

Mr Ingram's mansion, Martha tells us, stands on the other side of the lake, at the foot of the mountain. We have inspected the spot she indicates and confirmed it is in no way remarkable. Cold eels of water slide among rushes and sedges and tumps of starry moss. Cat-gorse and furze cling to rafts of drier ground. Spearwort and flag dip their toes and shiver.

Not that we need to search for evidence. If there were a mansion across the lake, our dogs would be howling every time an Ingram passed by. Our daughters would be scouring their pots, our sons sweating in their stables and gardens.

Some accuse Martha of fraud, although what she has to gain by it we cannot determine.

Others say her wits are failing. We've known her put her clothes on back to front and summon her cow with the call meant for hogs. She will stop for minutes on end to watch rooks or lapwings tumble about the sky, as if they bore porridge and dates and the answers to life's mysteries in their beaks.

But most are happy, eager even, to take her at her word. We want to believe that the Invisible have, for whatever purpose, established their Invisible home next to us. It pleases us to imagine them prodding the fat rumps of our livestock, testing our grains with their clean Invisible fingernails.

Tell us more, we say, and Martha dimples like a girl.

There are many of them, she says. Sometimes the Invisible outnumber other visitors.

But why do they come to market?

For amusement, I suppose. Entertainment.

We look each other up and down, wondering which of us is most entertaining.

The Ingrams have called at Martha's cottage, of an evening, to pay their respects.

Miss Ingram has such pale hands, Martha says. As if she keeps them folded away in a linen chest.

What language do they speak?

It is English, I presume. I seem to understand some of it. But their speech is strange. Until you are very close, it's like a noise of leaves or water.

We cannot think why, of all of us, they would choose Martha. She is not the most educated or wise. Not even the most gullible.

Invite us along next time they visit, says Jacob. That should sort the wheat from the goats.

They wouldn't allow it, Martha says.

What are you afraid of? Jacob says. Let's settle this once and for all.

Come on Martha, we say. Let's settle this. Unless you have reason to be afraid.

I would love to see Miss Ingram's dress, says Eliza. And her jewellery. I would love to see how she does her hair.

Oh yes, we say. We'd love to see her dress and her hair and her jewellery.

It's out of the question, Martha keeps saying. They would never agree.

But if there is one thing we know, it is persistence.

Freckled peas

The Vestry can find no regulations that apply. In the past, Martha might have been suspected of contracting with demons, but the Parliament in London has repealed the law against witchcraft. We don't know if this is because we've progressed beyond such superstition or because all the witches have been drowned.

Martha has never been known as a fool or a liar. Once she claimed to have seen a yellow cat the size of a two-tooth hogget at her door, but perhaps she did, and if not, anyone could make that mistake. Jacob complained that she sold him a calf that was already sick and it expired within a day, but they resolved that dispute between them. Mostly she has lived the way we all do, evenly, tidily, respecting time and season. She plants oats and beans and freckled peas on her late father's holding, keeps bees and chickens, drives her cow to the grazings. She has no husband or children bringing home a wage from the quarry, but then she has no one for whom she must buy tea and sugar. She is a hard worker, if a slow one. When she was a baby her mother, Rebecca, stumbling, as we understand, let her fall in the hearth. In the moments it took the parents to react, flames bit through the swaddling, gnawed the tender infant limbs. We found Rebecca later in the church porch, hanged dead. Martha was left with a limp and, in her breath, a hiss as of hot ashes settling. But she is not one to make excuses. She salts her own bacon, gathers her own turf and bark. She has a reputation as a pickler and preserver, putting up the greater part of her harvest and whatever she collects from woods and wastes. She's able to sell her surplus to lazier households. She is careful with her animals, keeping them clean and dry. In hard winters, she stints herself to feed them.

Plump and handsome

Martha is adamant that the Invisible are not the Tylwyth Teg, who are known to be short and ill-favoured.

The Ingrams are as tall as we are, she points out. Taller. They're plump and handsome.

Also the Tylwyth Teg are spiteful. They bear grudges for generations. They hide robins' eggs in shoes, crumble owl pellets into the flour.

The Invisible, Martha says, are smiling always, and if they are not smiling they are laughing. They are generous. Once I saw Miss Ingram pick up a fallen kit and place it back with its fellows.

But on further questioning, she admits such acts of charity are rare. Mostly the Invisible keep apart, chattering among themselves.

How do they dress?

It is the fashion of the city, I suppose, all bright colours and embroidery. And everything always new. Not darned or frayed or even muddy. As if every day is Easter Day.

Do any of them resemble your father? John Protheroe the smith wants to know. Or Price Price or Mother Jenkins?

But we hush him. We don't want to think that the contents of our graveyard have got themselves up in their best clothes to trot about among us, formulating opinions.

Martha shakes her head. They're not like anyone I've seen before. In looks or behaviour. I believe they're different from us altogether.

Only child

Martha's limp identifies her from some distance. It is of the lurching, stiff-legged variety, like a boat hit side-on by a swell. She uses a stick, for walking only, never hitting. When a beast jibs or straggles, she chides, like a doting granny, in a voice you could mistake for praise. She combs the burs from her cow's tail. Sometimes, milking, she seems to fall asleep with her head on Pluen's flank.

The only child of only children, since Enoch her father died, Martha has no family at all. She can breakfast at midnight if she pleases, not even trouble to prepare dinner. She has grown thinner these last years. If there were a tempest, such as our forebears talked of, strong enough to strip the thatch from our roofs and topple animals in their stalls, it might blow Martha away altogether, leaving only her shawl hooked in a blackthorn.

Enoch wanted Martha to marry Abel Pritchard. There was a conversation and a

handshake and for months Pritchard would call to smoke a pipe or play chess with Enoch. On Sundays, Pritchard would walk her to church, and a comical pairing they made, Martha bobbing in the lee of his ox plod. But in the end he found a girl younger and quicker, with a dowry worth the promise. The bitterness between Enoch and Pritchard lasted until the older man's death. We do not know what Martha thought.

The Reverends

The Reverend Doctor Clough-Vaughan-Bowen comes all the way from the next county to see Martha. He lodges with the Reverend Rice-Mansel-Evans and early next morning the two men pick their way through a sparkling drizzle to the door of her cottage. Doctor Clough-Vaughan-Bowen is a learned man, of good family. He has written scholarly works, we understand, on subjects of interest to the clergy – adult baptism or the wearing of the chasuble. Rumour says he had a wife who died giving birth to their dying child. Rumour shrugs. When our neighbours and families suffer such losses we take gifts of hyssop or honey to their door, weep with them beside the new graves. But it is hard to believe that men such as Doctor Clough-Vaughan-Bowen have feelings as sharp or deep as our own. Mwynig and Brithen, we remember, bellow through the night that their calves are taken, but next day turn their inquiries instead to turnips.

The Reverend Doctor has not come to reprimand Martha, nor to interrogate her. He talks, in his educated, university English, of which she comprehends a third at most, of many invisible things. Hopes and dreams and memories. The brains of horses. The souls of the dead. The imagination. The future. The swallows sleeping snugly at the bottom of the lake.

He talks of the visible, and the traces it leaves. The fountain that sprang up where the saint pressed his thumb into the earth. The rock pierced by the giant's spear. The stony pawprint left by Arthur's hound hunting Twrch Trwyth across the mountain tops.

You see what I'm saying? he says to Martha.

Martha smiles and nods at moments where it seems appropriate.

The drizzle gives way to stumps of rainbow parting a watery sky. The reverends pick their way back and Doctor Clough-Vaughan-Bowen takes his leave, apparently satisfied.

French sauce

Martha has pressed her nose to the windows of Mr Ingram's mansion. The Invisible dine late, she tells us, but they light neither candle nor lamp. There is no fire even, but they seem warm enough in their cambrics and silks. The ladies' throats and wrists are bare. They drink wine as red as rosehips from silver goblets. The china is blue and white, thin as a blade, and the table is laid with many dishes. They eat roast meats with French sauce, fillets and cheeks and sirloins, veal fricassee, veal ragoo, snipe, partridge,

wheatears, lark livers simmered with cloves, blanched lettuce, white milk-bread, parsley and sweet herbs chopped fine, flummery and posset, clary fritters, heaped bowls of gooseberries and mulberries and quinces, sweetmeats coloured with spinach and beet and delicately fashioned into multitudinous shapes.

But who waits at table? we want to know. Who delivers the food? Who cooks it?

Martha has seen no Invisible footmen standing to attention, no butchers or vintners at the kitchen door. The Invisible, she insists, are all wealthy. There are no Invisible maids or carpenters or shopkeepers. The Invisible do no work.

But how can they live without the poor to serve them? we ask.

What about the puddings, says Eliza. Are they spiced? Do they wobble? Are they eaten hot or cold?

There are baked puddings and boiled puddings and set puddings, says Martha. Wonderful domed and turreted puddings, like palaces. Thick with candied cherries and angelica. The custard is yellow as buttercups.

They sit at table for hours, she tells us, but they talk more than they chew. They don't gobble their food or help it to their mouths with their fingers, hunting down any fragments that fall and cramming them back in.

Tell us about the meats, we say. Tell us about the cream. Tell us about the apricots and persimmons, the roast swans and haunches of venison. Tell us.

Englyn

We are enjoying a kind of fame. In other districts the gossip is of Martha. The Ingrams are mentioned in a number of sermons. The Dissenters make it yet another opportunity to talk of ale and tithes. Owen Owen composes an englyn on the subject of the Invisible that is perhaps not up to the standard of his early and most beautiful work but we admire its wisdom and one particularly melodious alliteration and some of us learn it to recite to our families as we sit beside our hearths.

Markets are visibly better attended and at first we are grateful. But many of the newcomers spend only time, which they use to query and argue, cast aspersions, search behind walls and under trestles, inside calf cots and pig sties.

If anyone asks what makes us so interesting, we have no answer. We cannot explain the Invisible's curiosity. Some of us speculate it may be convenience, a matter of location. Some of us wonder if the attention is always kindly meant. Do they wrinkle their noses as they walk past us? Wave their lace handkerchiefs to clear the air? Do they avert their eyes from our misshapen bodies and pocked faces?

Mr Ingram has a gold pocketwatch. He consults it more often than is strictly necessary for someone who has no appointments to keep.

Ribbon

Some of the young people - Naomi Price and Megan Prosser and their tittering friends, plus one or two lads who are sweet on them, and Mot, the Prices' brindled cattle dog - have taken to aping the behaviour of the Invisible. They practise walking in no special direction and raising their eyebrows while others labour. They affect amazement at sickles and stooks and handlooms and potherbs and piglets. The girls have acquired a silk ribbon that they pass about between them so that one or another, usually Naomi, can wear it in her hair every day. They hold their skirts out of the mud, in the manner of Miss Ingram, and fan themselves with sprays of hawthorn.

They have developed a sudden passion for knowledge, pestering Martha with questions. She indulges them until she tires or runs out of observations and then she shooes them away like so many finches. The next day they flock back, nudging and giggling, as at their first day of dame school. Martha tuts fondly and repeats yesterday's lesson.

We think it harmless enough until they neglect their work. Three times, John Protheroe has to fetch his boy back to the forge. There is a great deal of shouting and a coultter is spoiled. Megan judges herself too good to dip rushes, while Naomi protests that stitching or churning will roughen her hands. The Prices are accustomed to their daughter's airs, but she has corrupted the once-faithful Mot, who now slinks away from his duties at every opportunity to bury his head in Naomi's knees and sigh as she folds his pretty ears into a bow.

The Ingrams should know better than to encourage such foolishness, we say to Martha. You should know better.

And when some of us point out that young folk rarely need encouragement, no one listens.

We must keep them close to home, we say.

The dog can be tied up, but our children need another solution. We give them more chores, more responsibilities, make sure they are too tired for mischief.

For a time, we think things back to normal. But the Protheroe boy wears a look of discontent as he works the bellows, and young Preece leans daydreaming on a shovel, next to the lime he should be spreading. As for Naomi, she has declared she will never marry. She would rather stay a spinster, she says, than grow red-cheeked and loose-waisted with a man whose favourite subject is the pigs he smells of. She can be seen rehearsing for her preferred future, strolling alone through marble halls or colonnades of pleached limes, her nose in the air and a frayed gold ribbon trailing behind.

Unnavigable

It is July and there has been no rain for five weeks. The summer pastures have scorched yellow, then black, as if they have combusted from within, and we bring the herds down early. The lake shrinks. Insects clump and die in its rotting margins. Springs that have never before failed run dry. When the cows complain of their multiple empty stomachs, we offer them leaves and twigs. Harvests are poor all about the district.

The Invisible are enjoying the sun, Martha tells us. They walk out at full midday to admire unclimbable heights and horrible precipices. Their hats are large. They spread cloths on the ground before they sit. They picnic on assorted meats, potted and pastried and aspiced. They do a kind of dancing, the figures intricate and indecipherable.

What is the music? we want to know. Who plays?

Martha shakes her head. There are no musicians. It is in the air perhaps. They take it with them.

Rain falls every day of September. The drops gather and hang in fleecy clouds until the commons resemble the floor of a shearing shed. The earth, muddled by these disorderly seasons, squanders her energies on green shoots that will not last the winter.

It turns hot again. Haf bach Mihangel. The sunsets are bronze, the dawns like unripe strawberries. The new quarry drops its prices. There is an accident in which two men die and one loses the use of his arm.

The Invisible are busy at their sports and pastimes. Not throwing or sparring or chasing a leather ball. Games with mysterious rules and objectives. Mr Ingram covers his eyes and the others circle around him, calling and pointing. Miss Ingram gestures like a bird, or an old woman, and they all laugh. They tilt and balance and yaw and hop and fall. There is no winner. Or they are all winners. It is hard to tell.

November. The storms beat at our walls, howling accusations. When the winds drop, the bone chill starts. We count the jars, measure what's left in barrels and sacks. Every creak is a stranger creeping through the darkness with intent. December. We muffle our noses, warm our hands in our armpits. At night we hug our husbands and children close to steal their heat. The salted meat is used, the pickles and dried fruit gone. We boil hide to make broth. January. February. Those with a cow are drinking milk and praying the hay will last. Those without are living on husks and air. The Prossers have sold their bedding and only a blanket donated by the Reverend keeps their youngest from perishing.

The Ingrams must look across the lake, see our cottages dimly lit, some without smoke even. Do they imagine us huddled inside, stupid with cold, our fingers white?

In the second half of March, there is a run of dewy bright mornings. The milfyw flowers, and we put the cattle out to graze. They skip and buck like the ogre's darling children,

dip their heads to the celandines to admire their bristled chins. A soft breeze strokes our hair and we hold our faces to the sun. The frogs croak all night. The sparrows get busy in our roofs and we in our beds.

But one afternoon the sky is spotted with peewits and golden plovers, fieldfares and redwings. They wheel above us, calling their alarm, then the snow they are fleeing arrives. It is the heaviest fall in ten years, heaping against walls, holding our doors closed. By morning, earth and air are so white that half a mile from us a new shore seems to have formed, before a strange, unnavigable sea. It is days before we can drive our animals to pasture, and when we do, bird corpses litter the ground, too many even for the foxes, and the grass is stewed.

When Martha limps into view we forget to ask how she is managing and instead inquire after the Invisible. How do they like the winter? Do they startle when the wind jeers from their chimneys? Do their slates seal out the thaw?

They play cards. They enjoy jugged hare and buttered peas, sugar cakes enrobed in sugar. Miss Ingram's frock is lilac, lit from within like a spring sky.

We look at each other. We frown.

Some propose going to the Ingrams' door to beg for work or failing that last night's bones or a measure of barley. We should get up a committee, perhaps, to remind the Ingrams of their duty to their neighbours. Some even mutter of going in force. We will don dresses and bonnets for disguise, paint our faces white, light torches.

But some object. We don't need violence. Martha will help us. Let us be there when they visit, we say, as we have said before. Let us talk to them.

Tell me your demands, she says. I will represent you.

But it is not enough. We want to make our own case. We want to hear how they respond. Many of us are wiser than Martha. Many of us know more English. We will not be denied.

The Ingrams abhor questions, she says, or importuning.

We will be quiet. We will only speak when spoken to.

They cannot bear any light but that of the sun and the moon.

We are accustomed to darkness, we say.

Creaks and ventings

In the twilight borrowed from a clear night sky, we recognize our neighbours' heads and shoulders, their creaks and ventings, familiar from vigils and services. That is Widow

Johns, that is Eliza, that is young Jenkin Jenkins, taking advantage of the situation to slide up close to Mary Probert. That is mice hurrying in the thatch. That is Pluen at the other end of the room, grumbling about a greasy trough or spiders in her hay. We yawn and sigh and stretch and fidget. We listen.

And finally we hear something. We think we hear something. A padding that is the approach of feet softer than a cat's, feet that make no mark on the ground. A noise as of leaves or water, gradually increasing.

Then a figure rises before us. A figure that is quite obviously, even in this dusk, Jacob, with a shawl draped over his head. He starts speaking, or piping rather, in a high-pitched voice, words that are not words in any language we know. We aren't sure what to do. Beneath his trill, an undercurrent of confusion and dismay begins.

Come along now, that's enough of that, says Old Mr Jenkins.

Jacob keeps on babbling and chirping. He totters in a circle, flaps a lunatic hand. Almost falls over Martha stepping forward to protest, almost saves himself, staggers again, knocks her to the floor.

Then we are all up, talking at once, cheering and booing and baying, like a crowd at a hanging. Some help Martha, others pull the cover from Jacob's head. He is laughing. In a minute a rushlight is burning. Our faces glow red and orange, outraged, amused, disgusted, disappointed.

So much for your Invisible, says Jacob, cackling. And some of us cackle with him. So much for lies and nonsense. So much for anyone who thinks themselves better than us.

Martha has her face in her hands and Eliza is comforting her, turning every now and then to berate Jacob. Look what you've done, says Eliza. And some of us join in. Look what you've done. They will never come now.

Pullet

We scold Jacob until he agrees to apologise. He presents himself at Martha's cottage with a speckled pullet under his arm. She shuts the door in their faces.

Although, in the matter of Jacob's behaviour, our sympathies lie with Martha, the incident is not unwelcome to everyone. His method was crude, we admit, but he has expressed our own misgivings.

Others are confident that Jacob's stunt has only delayed our meeting with the Invisible. Next time, we say, we will be more particular with our invitations.

Martha herself seems to have aged years overnight, as elderly people sometimes do, in a sudden haste to know their end. She will not discuss the abortive visit, nor will she

deliver fresh news. Tell us what the Ingrams are up to, we say. Have there been parties or excursions? A masked ball perhaps? But she will say nothing.

For a time, we make do with other topics. White peas reach double the price of wheat. Sucking pigs are 15s a head. John Johns and Ruth Prosser break their engagement and a month later mend it. Rachel Protheroe gives birth to twins. The hay is affected by mildew. In the next parish, we hear, a cow is struck by lightning and her calf bleaches white, not a shred of colour left in it. That, we think, is something Miss Ingram might wish to see. But when we say this to Martha, she turns her back.

Some point to Martha's silence as evidence of deceit. Others defend her.

It is shameful, we say, to treat an old woman with so little respect.

There must be respect on both sides, we respond.

We'd sooner listen to Martha than to mischief-makers, we say.

Fools are the best audience for foolery, we reply.

Rancour and rebuke creep among us like fleas. Friends fall out. Families almost come to blows. Some of us declare ourselves fed up with the whole business and ready to agree with anyone who will leave us in peace.

We start gathering fuel for next winter. We will stack it high this year, make a wall we cannot see over. As harvest arrives, we watch our neighbours at their crops and do not offer to help. When it is our turn, they reciprocate.

Martha has become increasingly solitary. She is gaining a reputation for rudeness. She tells the Reverend's wife to keep her baked goods to herself. She shouts at two of the smallest Prossers until they run home crying. She rarely comes to market. When we do see her, we observe that her limp is more pronounced. She stops to rest often.

Eliza brings us reports. Martha has a cough that will not mend. She is several times confined to her bed. We bring her the treats invalids are thought to enjoy, borage tea and calves' feet. She has no appetite. We keep her fire burning, milk Pluen, feed the chickens. When she dies (But that won't be now, will it? she asks, waking from troubled sleep), we will only need tell the bees.

Shadow

There is a new prime minister in London. Laws are repealed, laws are passed. Perhaps moths will benefit from the candle tax and robbers from improvements in the highways. Nobody asks our opinion. Like grass, we are meant to thrive unattended, underfoot.

We watch the road and the bridge. We look especially hard at visitors on marketdays. In

early winter, when a light snow falls, we walk around the lake. We see prints of fox, polecat, badger. Nothing else. As we turn for home, the powder squeaks, curling our spines.

If we were rich as the Ingrams, we say, we would put up a stone drinking fountain and have our name carved on it for all to read. We would build clocktowers and almshouses and schools. They would all bear our name.

Winter closes around us again. We have no heart for the seasonal festivities. We leave the wren in the hedge, the mistletoe in the trees, the mare's skull in the barn. We burn through our ramparts of fuel.

To no one's astonishment, the Prossers lose their cow. Fecklessness, we whisper. We should take them some of our own milk, a little oatmeal too. Perhaps tomorrow, we say, moving our feet closer to the fire.

When spring comes we are still alive. The day comes up a glistening mist briefly suffused with rose. We dig and trench, plant peas and early cabbages, blister our hands and break our backs. We inspect the walls and ditches we repaired this time last year, this time the year before. Some of us patch a gap here or there, some of us shrug and stare into the distance. The sun falls through the haze like a scarlet millstone.

The Protheroe boy and Naomi Price run off in the night, gone to Liverpool, we learn, to seek their fortune in the Americas. John Preece gets an apprenticeship in Bristol. He will be his own master one day, he boasts, master of others. He will be an alderman, a mayor, with glass windows in his house and a gold chain around his neck.

We give the pigs extra barley, thinking this year we will feed them until they are too fat to walk. They will have to sit down, like little gentlemen, to take their last meal. We will kill them early, have a feast whose memory will warm us through the cold months. Chops and ribs and belly and brisket, liver and lights and blood pudding. We will eat from one breakfast to the next, saving nothing. If we need a rest, we will lay our heads right there on the table.

Sometimes, as we go about our day, a shadow falls. A blackbird clatters in unprovoked alarm. Sometimes we think we see figures on the stone bridge. They have no occupation other than leaning and an ease, leaning, that none of our visible neighbours could achieve. They are looking in our direction. We almost think they are looking at us. We lower our eyes and walk the other way.

But at night we cannot sleep for thinking of them, across the lake, drifting on pallets of down and feather. And we wonder if they ever dream of us, or only of morning, when they will come stepping through the rushes, pocketwatches in their pale hands, passing through us like a breeze through leaves, a wave through water.

Notes

Tylwyth Teg - not fair and not people

Twrch Trwyth - the cursed but well-coiffed prince boar

Englyn - a short and obedient verse

Haf bach Mihangel - the little summer that we enjoy about Michaelmas time, as rents fall due

Milfyw - called by Linnaeus *Luzula campestris*; when it appears, we read poetry to the cows

Jo Lloyd is the winner of the 2019 BBC national short story award with Cambridge University. The BBC NSSA anthology is published by Comma Press (£7.99)

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