

The Grassic Gibbon Centre
Literary Lights Prize for Creative Writing

Commended (Fiction) 2017

Faerie Pools

By Lily Greenall

[Author's Note: Since being entered into the Literary Lights competition, 'Faerie Pools' has been developed into a longer work than the original story which is published here.]

Janine perched on the gate, squinting off down the track. In the distance she could see the tractor lumbering across the moor, spilling peats from the load as it rocked over the uneven ground. She watched John Angus's rangy silhouette lolling along behind it. He snatched up the peats that fell and tossed them back onto the trailer. She closed her eyes, feeling the sunlight warm her face. A low summer breeze was moving her fringe and she held down the hem of her skirt with one hand, clutching the gate with the other. From the house she could hear the hum of the radio. The windows were open and the curtains caught the wind and bulged out like drab balloons. She sighed as she glanced over her shoulder, then looked out again at the purple expanse of moor with the haze and the blue sky shimmering overhead. Janine knew she should go back. Neil would have to go down for his nap soon, which wouldn't be easy now since Marianne had spent all morning cooing over him and letting him lick cake mix from the spoon.

"What do you want to give him that for?" Janine had asked irritably, getting down on her knees to scrub stains from Neil's cheeks.

“It won’t hurt him,” Marianne had snapped, turning back to the stove where she was boiling a carcass.

The pungent sweat from the pot filled the room making the air hot and sticky. Janine had nipped through to the bathroom to splash her face and when she returned Neil was chomping through a biscuit amid a gathering ring of crumbs. Janine caught Marianne’s eye and her mother-in-law set her face, two hard lines coming down on either side of her mouth. Janine couldn’t muster the energy to fight. Instead, she’d grabbed a magazine and slumped into a chair. She knew that Marianne was making the stew extra loudly on purpose, clattering pans and fretting over the stove, all a great unspoken nudge in her daughter-in-law’s direction. *Why do you never pull your weight Janine?* Janine had kept her eyes glued to her page. When Neil sent up a cry she had slipped down beside him and tickled his sides until he creased up. Marianne had bustled in, swooping him up and bewailing his fate at having a mother who would leave him sitting on the floor all day. Janine had climbed to her feet and stalked from the house.

She’d stamped down the driveway and out onto the road, storming the final few paces of tarmac with her arms folded. The gate marked the end of the road proper, a few metres passed the house, where it gave way to the peat track and dwindled off across the moor. Here she’d paused, climbing to sit on the gate. Her shoulders relaxed as she took in the perfect peace of the moor. There was no need to return until she absolutely had to. A fly droned close to her ear and she slapped it away. She squinted over her shoulder, dazzled by a glimpse of sunlight flashing on the sea through a break in the hills. She reeled back, momentarily blinded, and rubbed a hand across her eyes, blinking away the blocks of colour that floated on her vision. When her sight cleared she was surprised to see a figure moving towards her up the winding road. He was a long way off at the bottom of the hill and he carried a fishing rod over one shoulder, traipsing slowly under the weight of a large pack. She swung one leg over the gate, straddling it, and held up a hand to shield her eyes as she watched the man approach. He was singing. His voice carried across the wide open space, broken every now and then by a surge in the breeze. He was singing loudly, unashamedly, the way Janine sung in the kitchen

when she knew everyone was out. The way this man sang, it was as though the land was uninhabited. As though he was discovering it for the first time, some adventurer washed ashore in a shipwreck. Janine traced the route of the village in her head, imagined this man strolling through, singing all the time, as the curtains twitched and the local ears pricked up. She'd seen him walking about before and Fiona Murray, who came to gossip with Marianne on Wednesdays, had a story about him walking past the church and interrupting the service. Janine had had to press her lips together and smirk into her tea when she heard that.

He'd have to pass through the gate to get to the river. Janine felt her heart pounding in her throat. She was suddenly aware of the metal rungs clamped between her thighs, the tops of her wellies pinching the hairs on her shins. As he drew closer, he paused, shifting the weight of his pack. When he started moving again his eyes fell on Janine but he didn't stop singing. She could see now that there was a pair of headphones covering his ears. As he drew level he slipped them down about his neck. Janine could hear the staticky drone of his music. He leaned on the gate and smiled up at her.

"Is there a toll?"

Janine shrugged and shook her fringe from her eyes, "Depends what you're offering."

He continued to smile, very calmly. He had an angular face and very cold blue eyes surrounded by creases. She wasn't exactly sure she liked his face but she arched her back and threw out her chest, enjoying the feeling of his eyes on her.

"Do you know me?" she asked.

The tractor was edging nearer. She could hear its low, trundling drone.

"Is that the fee? Guess your name?"

Janine laughed, "Like an old yarn. I don't have a local name. I'm not a Mhairi or a Catriona. You'll never guess."

"How many chances do I get?"

“Three of course.”

“Of course,” the man grinned.

It made his jaw look long, teeth standing out, large and wolfish.

“Janine.” She heard Marianne shout from the driveway, “Washing’s done.”

Janine whipped round. Marianne was watching from the lip of the road. Janine rolled her eyes and clambered down, brushing flakes of rust from her skirt. The man watched her, smiling.

“Where’s the best place to fish round here?” he asked as Janine glared back towards the house, watching Marianne waddle back up the drive.

“Follow the river east from here,” she said, “There’s some good deep pools up there. You can’t miss them.”

With that she turned and began to tramp back towards the house, hands shoved deep in her skirt pockets. She looked back once. The man was leaning on the gate grinning after her. The tractor was looming behind him, juddering its way up the path. Marianne was waiting in the doorway but Janine shoved past her and slammed her way into the back porch where the washing machine was thundering to a climax. Janine gave it a sharp kick. Her mood felt black and hopeless suddenly. The tiny room, hot and ripe with the smell of laundry, felt like a cage. A pile of wooden pallets were stacked up against the wall. Janine scrambled up so that she could kneel on them, wood splintering against her legs. The little window was thick with grime and cobwebs. Janine raked them away and peered out. She could see nothing but the hills with the river twinkling between. From somewhere in the distance she heard the man singing.

Isaac Rivers. John Angus said it with a playful scoff in his throat around a mouthful of stew and bread.

“Not been up here long. Always singing. Cove’s daft.”

“Didn’t look daft to me,” Janine sifted her spoon through her gravy.

If it was up to her she’d just pick up her plate and drink but Marianne always threw a fit.

After all they weren’t *savages*.

“I don’t think he’s daft,” Marianne spoke with a bitter pursing of her lips, “I know his type. Too clever by half.”

She rose abruptly and began clearing the table.

“I’m not finished,” Janine began.

Marianne pulled Janine’s plate out from under her and carried it into the kitchen. She returned and set a dish of crumble down in the middle of the table.

“His da’s off his head and all,” John Angus was saying, leaning back in his chair and picking his teeth, “Roddy Dodd’s missus cleans the place. Full of old bits of shite. Fishing nets dragged up from the beach and animal bones. He’s got these weird paintings hung about. Says it gives her the creeps.”

“Heathens,” Marianne muttered, shaking her head.

Janine stood amid clouds of steam in the kitchen, nudging the iron into the corners of John Angus’s shirt, and thinking about the sea. She imagined a vast expanse of blue green, glittering under a fall of sunlight. She thought about the gentle swell of the waves, the swirl of froth, and the sky overhead, white and empty. As she folded the clothes she thought about what a romantic name Isaac Rivers really was.

A man with a name like Isaac Rivers might come from anywhere. He wasn’t an Angus or a John Neil. He could move anywhere he liked and people would be interested in where he got a name like that. It was a name that could take you places; that could help you glide through the world

unhindered by all the stupidity, all the downright stupid prudery that seemed to go with everything here.

“Would you watch what you’re doing Janine?”

Marianne was snapping off a pair of rubber gloves. She dropped them in the sink and bustled over, taking the half folded shirt from Janine’s hands.

“Honestly,” she shook her head, “How can mothers’ let their girls into the world not knowing how to *fold* things properly?”

“I’m taking Neil to the beach,” Janine said.

Janine marched along the strand, breathing hard and feeling a dull ache in her legs where the sand covered her boots and weighed her down. The sun was warm but the wind had a sharp edge. It whipped her hair off her face and tugged at the edges of her thin summer coat. Pausing at the base of a sand dune, Janine turned and squinted back along the shore. Marianne and Neil were doddering along some distance behind, following the shiny line of the tide. Marianne clutched Neil’s hand, pausing whenever he bent over to prod things in the sand, awkward in his padded coat. He didn’t really need that extra layer, Janine thought, but Marianne had snatched him from his car seat seconds after Janine had strapped him in, and ushered him back into the house making dramatic use of the phrase ‘*catch his death!*’ Janine didn’t see why Marianne needed to come at all. If she wanted to coddle Neil she could have kept him at home. Marianne, it seemed, had been *watching* her daughter-in-law recently. Janine could feel the eyes prickling across her back as she moved about the house. John Angus was working long days on a new construction site, scrambling out of bed in the chill dawn and returning late at night, with beer and smoke on his breath.

Janine looked back and saw that Marianne was craning around, scanning the beach for her daughter-in-law. Janine scampered away from the dune and slipped behind a heap of rocks that had tumbled down from the cliff. She clambered over a craggy peak and wriggled down the other side.

The backs of her legs scratched against mussel beds clinging to the rocks. She landed on a flat plane of Gneiss that fanned out towards the sea, studded with glittering pools. On the edge of one of these pools a figure was moving. Her heart leapt to her throat. Isaac was crouching down. There was a tin of paint at his side and he was sweeping long white patterns onto the rocks with a thick brush. Janine took a deep breath, straightening up, and began to pad softly towards him. He kept his eyes on his task, apparently unaware of her. Janine slipped off her jacket and looped it about her waist. She swept a hand through her hair, hoping it looked thick and not too windswept. Isaac still didn't look up. Janine stopped opposite him on the other side of the pool. She cocked her head and looked down at the strange white shapes.

“What are you doing?” she said.

Isaac glanced up, very calmly, not in the least surprised by her appearance. He sank back on his heels, paintbrush dripping in his hand.

Janine looked at him for a moment then sat down on the edge of the pool. She pulled her boots off and sank her feet into the water. The sun was warm here out of the wind. Janine felt a blush creep over her chest as Isaac looked her up and down. He stood up, pulled a tobacco tin from his back pocket then sat down cross legged, facing her across the water.

“They're for the faeries,” he said, rolling a cigarette and touching it to his tongue to close the paper sheath, “These pools, they called them Faerie Pools back when, and if you give them things, they give you things. Or take things away.”

Janine frowned, “What are you giving them?”

He stashed the cigarette in the tin and set it down on the rock then leaned to one side and touched the lines of wet paint gently with his fingertips, “It's their own language. Show them you've not forgotten.”

“Forgotten what?”

“That they were here first. That this land used to be theirs.”

Janine turned her face up and squinted at the sky. He was clearly mad. There was a fierce intensity in his eyes when he spoke. Janine knew she should have felt disappointed but she didn't. She felt giddy and free. She swung her legs in the water, stirring its cool, heavy weight.

"And what are you after in return?" she asked.

He grinned, "Can't tell a thing like that."

He rose. She closed her eyes and heard the rustle of his clothing, felt the friction of his presence as he rounded the pool and sat down beside her. She could smell paint on his skin.

"Would you give me a drink from your water bottle?" he asked.

Janine felt dizzy. She handed it across and the plastic cracked in her hand.

He drank for a long time then tipped the bottle up and poured water over his face and neck.

"Keep it," Janine said as he offered it back to her.

"Would you like to make a wish?" he asked.

Janine snorted "What would I wish for?" but as she spoke she felt her heart began to race.

Isaac shrugged one shoulder, squinting out to sea, "Anything you like."

"Show me," Janine said.

She pulled her legs out of the pool and heard the water slosh closed behind her. She clambered to her feet and peered up at Isaac who smirked. He led her around the pool and crouched beside the open tin of paint.

"Write something," he said.

"I don't know the language," Janine scoffed.

"Doesn't matter. They'll know what you want."

His blue eyes glittered as he smiled. Janine wondered if he was making fun of her. She flicked her hair over her shoulders and reached down to take the brush. The symbols Isaac had painted on the

rocks made runic patterns. She pushed the tip of the brush into the paint then dropped to her knees and made a few daubs on the ground beside the tin. She turned to grin at Isaac but he looked at her seriously and said, "Think about your wish."

She knelt for a moment with the sun beating down on her back. The fun had gone out of the afternoon suddenly and she pictured Marianne and Neil, heading for the rocky inlet, tottering after her in endless pursuit. She took a long breath through her nose, scrawled a pattern onto the rock and climbed slowly to her feet. She wrinkled her nose at what she'd drawn. It looked like a wonky peace sign. Isaac walked around the pool to stand behind her. She could feel his breath on her neck.

"Does it work?" she asked him.

"Of course," he replied.

Not looking back, she hopped over her design and began walking back towards the cliff. She hauled herself onto the rocks, pricking her feet on the mussels, and stood on top of the fallen debris, squinting along the beach. She scanned the line of the shore and followed the footpath up through the crofts where Marianne's car was perched on the edge of the cliff. Her mouth felt dry and her pulse sped up a little. Everything on the beach looked still, deserted and peaceful. She knew that they must be hidden in the dunes or by a curve in the cliffside - perhaps Neil had strayed into one of the caves that tunneled along the coast - but, for a second, she felt a flicker of guilt. Her face flushed and her vision blurred. Sunlight flashed on the water and she heard Isaac's footsteps behind her. She looked once more along the empty beach, turned her face towards the sky, and saw nothing but white overhead.