

7-15-2002

The Stolen Child

John Adcox

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle>

Recommended Citation

Adcox, John (2002) "*The Stolen Child*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2002 : Iss. 25 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2002/iss25/13>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Mythic Circle by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



Abstract

Prelude to *Blackthorne Faire*

[The piece you're about to read is the prelude to a new novel, *Blackthorne Faire*. Most of the story takes place at a modern-day Renaissance Festival just north of Atlanta. The prelude opens on the same site, decades earlier....]

The Stolen Child:

Prelude to *Blackthorne Faire*
by John Adcox

All Hallows Eve, 1936

In later years, the vast suburban sprawl of Atlanta will bleed outwards like kudzu to cover the hills and hollows that surround the O'Brien farm with subdivisions and mini-malls. But not yet. Now the city is still too much in the future to be a part of life here. It is distant, a dream, like New York or Paris, or the Pyramids in Egypt.

Look around you. The hills burn with rich color, like cinnamon, and fire, and rust. Look, see a thousand million shades of orange, yellow, and apple red set against a deep and enduring background of evergreen, and the sky is the brilliant, sapphire blue of an autumn long past. Breathe! The air is crisp and heavy with the scents of pumpkin, sweet wood smoke, dying leaves, and the last wild blackberries. Breathe it in, and autumn fills you like spiced wine. The old year has dressed in its finery for one last hurrah before the winter frosts come to soothe it away to memory.

Come, human child, come, come closer. Fear not, I am your handsome good neighbor, the merry wanderer of the night, and I shall be your guide. Hush! Hush now, hush and listen. From below, hear the sounds of a

young girl singing and a child's laughter. There! There comes the youngest O'Brien girl, pretty Betty, dancing up the pathway as she pulls her young charge behind her. Betty O'Brien, with her long, thin legs, her freckled nose, and her air the color of yellow hay. Oh, I know all about her. The path she follows leads to the meadow at the top of the hill, where the woods give way to rocky bluff. On a day as clear as this, you can see all the way to town from the top of these cliffs. See? There, where the top of the white church steeple rises above the gentle slopes of tree-covered hills. Come, let the wind carry you to the meadow above the bluffs. The view is breathtaking, no? This is a spot where lovers meet.

Normally on Halloween, Betty O'Brien would be at the harvest festival in town with her family. Not tonight, though. No, not tonight. Tonight the freedom of an evening without parents and siblings seems sweeter than all the caramel apples and spiced cider in all the autumn festivals in all the world. But that's not all, is it? No, of course not. Tonight, she knows the thrilling anticipation of a forbidden rendezvous, and the delicious

danger makes her heart beat faster than a thousand masked ghouls and witches ever could, even if they leapt out at her all at once from behind every hay bale and shop porch in the county.

Betty has arranged everything carefully, like a daring spy planning a caper. She started by telling her parents the truth—she doesn't like to lie. And if she doesn't tell the whole truth, well, that's not the same as lying, is it? No, my sweetling, it's not the same thing at all.

Betty is babysitting four-year-old . That's the child you heard before, the one in the worn overalls and dirty t-shirt. See how she pulls him along? She should stop to wipe his nose. Betty's parents don't think highly of the Winklers—her father, farmer Job O'Brien, has denounced the whole lot of them as shiftless no-accounts on more than one occasion. Everyone's heard him, yours truly no less than any of the others. But Betty likes having money of her own to spend as she likes, at least when the Winklers remember to pay her. Job O'Brien scowled and muttered, but agreed, in the end, to grant his permission. He blustered and frowned, but he's secretly proud of his daughter's ambition and self-reliance. Besides, he reasoned, the time spent among a better class of people might do the poor child some good. Lord knows it can't hurt him any.

Betty's doing exactly what she told her father. She's not lying, not even the least little bit.

Of course, Job O'Brien doesn't know that Betty has secrets, two of them, in fact. First, he doesn't know that she's taking the straight path that leads from the back gate of her family's farm to the meadow above the rocky cliffs. If he did, he would howl with rage, wouldn't he just! Betty isn't allowed to play in the ancient forest or even to wander on the path, even though she's now sixteen and practically a grownup. It's whispered that a girl vanished in these woods once. That was

ages and ages ago, but folks around here have long memories. Mine is longer still, and I remember that the Indians shunned the forest and the meadow long before the white people came. But then, people also say that the meadow is supposed to hide a secret, a secret that's the source of the O'Brien family's luck. Who will say? Not me, no no!

For Betty, the whispers and rumors add spice, like cinnamon and cloves in mulled wine, and make the autumn adventure delicious. She hums and sings a little as she pulls little Keith along behind her. His hand-me-down clothes are torn and his nose is runny, but he giggles with joy.

But if Betty's jaunt to the meadow in the forest would make her father's jowly cheeks shake and blaze red with blustering rage, it is nothing next to how he'd howl if he knew her other secret. But I know all secrets, don't I? I am the master of tricks and secrets. Come closer, and I will whisper in your ear. Betty is meeting her love, the oldest Winkler boy, nineteen-year-old Seamus. There he is now! See how he waits for her, chewing the end of a straw of yellow hay? Watch him push a curl of his dark hair away from his dull brown eyes. See him leaning against the trunk of that twisted, knotted old oak tree? See how smugly he smiles? The girls like that smile.

Shhh, watch. It is nearly twilight when they finally come together in the meadow. Their hands touch. Let the wind blow you closer as you listen. Fear not! They can't see us. We flit like ghosts, unheard and unfelt, we two spying spirits of the future. "Hey there, Seamus," says Betty. She blushes and looks away as she speaks.

Seamus laughs, and puts his hand gently beneath her chin. He is sly and at ease. Why shouldn't he be? He doesn't know that danger is coming. He lifts her face until her gaze meets his. Her mouth is open, like she almost spoke but stopped herself. Look at her eyes:

she is nervous. She wonders if he is going to kiss her.

Little Keith, forgotten for the moment, tugs on Betty's skirt. "Miss Betty?" he whines. He misses her attention. He tugs again, harder. "Miss Betty!"

Seamus laughs again. He pulls a candy bar from his jacket pocket and tosses it to his younger brother. "Here you go, squirt!" From another pocket, he produces a tin fire cart, complete with horses, and a second chocolate bar. Keith squeals with delight. "Now you just go on over there and play by those trees for a few minutes, okay? Me and Miss Betty here are goin' to go over to the other side of those rocks there and have us a little talk. If you're good, I might just have another surprise for you, okay?"

"Yay!" Keith settles down on the soft, browning autumn grass and pushes his toy around. When he isn't smearing the chocolate on his tongue, lips, chin, and cheeks, he makes noises for the horses and firemen. He doesn't look up when Betty and Seamus steal away. He doesn't notice when they slip out of sight. But we do, though. Ho!

For a long moment, neither Betty nor Seamus speaks. Look at the way Seamus slides his arm around her with practiced ease, and shifts just slightly so that it seems only natural for Betty to rest her head on his shoulder. Watch how he grins when he knows she can't see. He shifts again, as though the rock presses uncomfortably into his back, and suddenly Betty finds herself in the perfect position for a kiss. But Betty, suddenly shy, turns away. "Look at the sunset," she says, her voice low. The brilliant blue has faded, but in the west, the clouds near the horizon blaze with golden-red light.

"Ain't it pretty," Seamus agrees with a lazy nod. He tries to maneuver so that Betty's face is close to his again, but she looks away, back towards the path.

"I can't stay out here too much longer. My daddy..."

"Won't be back for ages."

"No, they won't stay in town too late."

"Yes they will," Seamus says. Look at the rascal, how he grins again! "One of your daddy's horses done come up lame. You know that old man won't risk one of his prizes till he knows what's what!"

"Oh! What happened?"

"It ain't nothing," Seamus assures as his sly smile widens. "Just a pebble under a shoe."

"However could you know that?"

"How could I not?" Seamus laughs again. "I ought to, sure enough. I put it there myself!"

"Oh Seamus!" Betty raises her hand to cover the round O of her open mouth.

"Don't worry, darlin'. It won't hurt nothin'. But it'll slow your old man down sure enough!"

"You shouldn't have!"

"But Betty," he says. Mab's teeth and garters, child, listen to the scoundrell! "I just wanted to spend a little time with you, that's all! It's not like I get a chance too often, right? Not with your old man around. Is that so bad? I told you it wouldn't hurt nothin'. You're just... you're just so pretty and all." He smiles again, and winks.

"Seamus, you're a devil." Betty smiles, tucking her hair back away from her face and looking up at him through her lashes. Ha! Look at her. She feels deliciously wicked.

"You know it, darlin'," Seamus says with a grin. He pulls her close and kisses her, long and deep. The second kiss is even longer, and the third is longer still. The day fades to twilight, but neither of them notices. The wind changes, now it comes from the west. Just then, there is a sound.

Betty and Seamus spin around, startled. Seamus pulls Betty closer. Perhaps it is her father; if so, he doesn't want to miss his final chance (for such it shall surely be) for

gratuitous contact. The sounds grow louder, and closer. Do you hear it? Betty must know, now, that this is not her father approaching. He would never tie bells to the harnesses of his horses—how gauche, he'd declare with a disapproving frown, how ostentatious. And he would never make such a commotion when traveling. He couldn't if he tried!

Look at Betty's eyes as they dart hither and yon, skipping like water bugs with something that may be fear, or may be wonder. Or perhaps something of both. Watch her; see how she trembles. The sounds come closer, and now there is something else rising above the din, something like music but beyond it, courtly and ethereal, beautiful and terrible. Perhaps Betty thinks of church, but this music is both merrier and wilder than what choir and organ can produce to fill the whitewashed sanctuary. Mayhap she thinks of the noise of a parade, or the circus. But no. This music is more solemn—joyous and sudden, but stately. Besides, these things aren't a part of a farm girl's experience. Parades and circuses are things from storybooks, not the wood at dusk.

The sounds are closer. The strange, unearthly music swells, and now our Betty and Seamus can distinguish other noises as well. Listen! What do you hear? Beasts, certainly, hoofs and brays, and other sounds you can't begin to identify, I dare say. Forgive my jolly laughter, mortal, I don't mean to mock you. And voices. Yes, mortal child, voices, many of them. Hear them! Men and women, laughing and singing, ageless, merry and grave, young and old all at the same time. Our Seamus hears them too. See? His smile is gone, and his face is pale, like a stump touched with winter frost.

The wind lifts us higher now, even as the day fades to dusk, and we watch from above. There, there is the child, little Keith, all but forgotten by sitter and brother. The sounds have distracted him from his toy and he gazes

into the wood, searching for the source of the strange tumult in the shadows beneath the trees. His eyes are wide with wonder and his mouth is open, frozen in the shape of a smile half-formed.

The commotion comes closer, closer. Look! It is near—no, it is here! The uproar comes at last! As sudden as a wink, the twilight is filled with a galaxy of brilliant lights, streaking hither and yon, like the brightest fireflies ever born, or like shooting stars that have escaped the bondage of their patterns in the skies.

Little Keith giggles and reaches out, trying to catch the darting lights with his clumsy toddler's hands. They are too fast for him, but he squeals with delight. On the other side of the rocks by the bluff, Seamus holds Betty closer. They are dazzled, but afraid. As the lights swirl closer, they see tiny shapes inside — not insects, but figures that seem almost human, naked, tiny, and perfect.

Now other shapes follow the lights into the meadow. Look at the little manikin there, the one with the tall black top hat and tails, the one with the brass watch chain shining against his silken blue paisley vest. Defying the logic of perspective, he seems to grow smaller as he comes closer.

There—see the wee knight in the polished armor of shining brass and silver? Look at his banner of cobwebs and summer leaves; see how proudly he carries it tied to the end of his tall spear. See how straight and tall he sits in his saddle. His noble mount is a hedgehog with bright tattered ribbons and perfect gait. There! His squire rides a mouse.

Look at those three there, the small naked ones with gossamer butterfly wings. For a moment, they seem young, barely pubescent, don't they? Even innocent, ho! But then they turn, revealing a more mature curve of hip, a generous swell of breast. Which is it, then? Don't be fooled. See the gleam in their eyes?

They were ancient when your race first crawled out of the caves.

Ha! Notice the dandy there — the one with the green doublet and the peacock's feather in his red cap! His face is like a fox's, isn't it just? Look at how his pointed teeth sparkle when he smiles, see how his marble-black eyes shift and flit, look at how he spins and prances as he marches. He wears that shape often.

The fair folk, the good neighbors, arrive one by one and three by three; their straight path of shining twilight silver has led them all to this place, this meadow above the rocky cliffs. This is where the Ride ends and the revels begin.

See those three there? The ones with dresses of leaves and moss and acorns, and wings like those of tiny hummingbirds? The feathers of their wings and the hues of their skins are as different from one another as night from day, or winter from summer. But they are sisters, the three of them, born on a single midwinter night. You can catch the resemblance in the way their long hair swirls and twists as they dance, in the wide smiles on their pointed faces, and in the way their eyes sparkle with merriness and mischief. Ho there! Two of them have taken little Keith by the hand—they are no taller than he is. The third wild sister joins them; they all clasp hands and dance in a circle, now stepping, now floating when their wings lift them briefly aloft. Look! Red-capped toadstools spring up where their feet touch the soil. Keith laughs and squeals with happy vertigo.

By the bluffs, our Betty buries her face in Seamus's jacket and sobs. As for Seamus, his eyes narrow as the terror fades to anger. When confronted with the unknown, our simple Seamus knows only two options. He sees nothing here that he can't fight, so the instinct to flee is slowly replaced with a darker urge. Alas for him. How does the saying go? What fools these mortals be! His fists clench.

The meadow is filled now with more shapes than can be named or described—the tall and dust-small, Seelie and Unseelie alike, Goblin and Pouka, Pixie and Sidhe. Some are naked with skin baby pink, forest green, or acorn brown. Others are draped in wool or silk or dewy cobwebs, or foppishly adorned in fur-lined cloaks and gleaming silver armor, or gowns woven from moonbeams and starlight. Some are lovely and bright, others are strange and terrible. They laugh, they sing, they fly, they dance. The field in the wood has become a city of miracles, a festival place alive with color and dashing light. Behold the climax of the Ride of the Court of Faery!

Now the air is pierced by a new sound, haunting and deep, a noise that echoes through the twilight and the ancient wood and resonates in the very bones of the earth itself. That call is answered by another, and another after that. Hear them, human child, and feel them stir the heart, for no one can hear the Horns of Elfland and remain unchanged.

Now come the riders, the tall and shining Sidhe folk, the oldest and the brightest, like earth-locked angels. Look upon them all in their finery, silk and gossamer, and see how they leave trails of rainbows as they ride. This is the high court, the favored attendants of the Lord and Lady themselves. Ah, you've noticed me among them, have you? Yes, that is me indeed, yours truly, my handsome and dashing younger self, wearing jeweled rings and feather in cap, there upon my own gray donkey, as proud and true as any faery mount.

Now the last ones arrive, the highest of the high, and the field becomes brighter, as though the sun and moon deigned to descend for the revelry. See them, clad in star-white samite, their golden hair bound with circlets of bright gold. These are the Lord and Lady of the High Court of Faerie, stately and grim, wild and merry. With their arrival, the revels begin in earnest. Beware them, O mortal, for they are beautiful and perilous. The horns call

again, and the mighty sound reverberates through the autumn-draped mountains and hollows.

The child Keith tries to catch the golden lights, each one no bigger than his tiny thumb. He laughs and grabs, but they are too fast and clever for him. The Lord and Lady dismount as the carousing reaches the rocky bluffs where Betty and Seamus cling to one another, trembling. A figure approaches our friends, a lady with long pointed ears and flowing hair the silver hue of a river lit by moonlight. She laughs and blows sparkling dust at them. Their countenances change at once. A look of dreamlike wonder crosses Betty's face. Poor Seamus, he just looks rather dazed and confused, doesn't he? Ah well, we mustn't expect too much of him, I suppose.

A dandy, one of the Lady's attendants, leaps nimbly atop a tall stone, one that stands alone and juts out above the bluffs like a sentry. He claps his hands sharply thrice. "The Lady Mab commands dances!" he cries, and at once the meadow is filled with the strings and horns and rhythm of riotous, unearthly noise, music that mortal ears were never meant to hear. Close your ears, human child! Close them tight! Ah, it is too late already, alas for you. You've heard the wild music echoing from the long past. It will haunt you.

In the meadow, the fey court bows and moves, touches and leaps. To Seamus, their steps seem sudden and chaotic, but we can see the dance from above, and Behold! To us its wild precision is revealed in all its complex perfection. Betty is swept away from her Seamus, but she doesn't seem to notice. A tall man with a green cap and a fox's tail bows to her, and takes her by the hand. She spins, and now there is another man waiting to guide her into the dance. Seamus tries to follow, but the dance pulls him away. "Betty! Betty!" His cries are lost in the din of shouts and strange music.

Two ladies of the Faerie court grab him by the hands and turn him roughly around. Before he can recover, two more are waiting for him. One of them curtsies, but Seamus doesn't see the sly gleam in her eye. The fool is distracted; see how his gaze wanders downward, to where the motion of her stoop reveals the slope of her breast in her gown? Now he is caught.

The leaping and spiraling faeries surround little Keith, coming now close, now pulling away. The dance turns, and brings to the child a spindly figure in a tall stovepipe hat and a black suit like a chimney sweep's. The man grins and flips, then bends down to stick out his tongue. Keith giggles and claps his hands. Then, sudden as a bang of thunder, the man's features change, becoming a snarling wolf's face. The eyes flash with cruel hunger, and the jaws with their dagger-sharp teeth gnash and snap. Keith recoils and screams. He falls, but rough hands catch and toss him.

For a brief moment, Seamus sees Betty and remembers, suddenly, that he was struggling to reach her. She seems far away, and then she is lost in the turning throng of dance. The fey women laugh and push him along.

A tall Sidhe man takes Betty by the hand. The dance has caught her. She steps and spins. The man bows, and spins her into the waiting arms of her next partner — the Lord himself. He takes her left hand in his right and slips his left arm around her waist. He smiles and Betty blushes, but she doesn't look away. They twirl and step as the dance becomes faster and wilder still.

Keith's cheeks are wet with tears, but his shrieks are lost. The faeries laugh at this new game, and each finds a new form, a terrible shape with which to frighten the child anew. They growl and snap and shout, then lift him as their dance forms a circle. Keith screams.

Seamus cries out for Betty, but still the dance pulls her away from him. He tries to

force his way to her, but there are too many twirling bodies, and the steps of the dance are too frenetic. It is like fighting a tide; his efforts pull him farther away. Four fey ladies pull him this way and that, spinning and twirling him like the winds teasing an autumn leaf.

“Betty! Betty!” She does not hear him. Already she is too far away. Desperate to reach her, Seamus fights. It does no good; he is helpless. His eyes are wide and his skin is ashen, but I confess I am disappointed in his performance. He is too great a fool for true terror, more’s the pity. His fright would be so much richer, so much more delicious, had he the wit to comprehend even a little of what transpires around him. There is drool on his chin. Ah! He is crying.

The golden Lord’s steps are strong and sure. He spins Betty faster and faster as the dance reaches its culmination. Look at her face, see the ecstasy there! Betty feels that she is dancing on air—and now she is! The pattern of the dance carries Betty and the Seelie Lord off the edge of the bluff and beyond; in his strong grasp, she twirls but does not fall. The dance continues.

Keith’s horrible screams grow louder and more pitiful. The monsters draw closer; the nightmare doesn’t end. He screams, but no help comes. The faeries lift the child as they glide above the meadow in their spiraling dance, but they forget him as the music changes. They clap and spin as the new pattern takes them, and the child falls hard to the stony ground. Do you see how his tiny legs are bent at such a terrible angle? They will never heal properly, I fear. Poor creature. How he wails! His tears smear the chocolate on his dirty cheeks.

Look there! The dance brings our Seamus to the Lady herself, Queen Mab of Faery, fairest in creation, her terrible beauty shining and vast beyond mortal ken. He stands transfixed, unable to move. A smile crosses

her haughty face as she reaches out to take his hand. He shivers at her touch; her light is cold. Gently, irresistibly, inevitably, she pulls him deeper into the dance.

All of this happens at twilight, in the moment that is neither day nor night. But lo, the first bright star of evening appears in the dusk-gray sky. Slowly and solemnly, the circles of dance straighten to lines and the faeries begin to resume their march, passing at last beyond the fields you know to return to those beyond. One by one, the fey dancers start to fade.

The steps of the dance hold Seamus like chains of cold iron. He turns again, and for the most fleeting of moments, he sees Betty in the distance. Foolishly, he struggles again to reach her. The Lady’s smile becomes a frown and her gaze grows colder. She is displeased.

The first of the riders remount their beasts. As twilight dims to darkness, their time is past. Betty still dances, held fast in the arms of her Lord. The last light fades, and the dance carries her away.

Seamus fights and struggles, desperate to reach Betty. He can no longer see her. For a second, the way seems clear, but then the dance turns again, and the Lady’s gaze holds him once more. He tries to turn and look away, but others are there to block his way.

The revels are ending. My handsome younger self bows and mounts his gray donkey.

Keith screams and cries.

Queen Mab allows Seamus to turn away, but two more dancers with pointed ears protruding from fine, pale-green hair are there to block his way. Skipping like schoolgirls, they take him by the elbows and pull him back.

“Betty! Oh Jesus holy shit! Betty!”

At last the Lady allows her plaything to turn, and he sees Betty clearly. He is close to her, so very close! The dancers between them are fading away from the mortal world.

Seamus lunges, but the Lady is there, blocking his way. He panics. She smiles, a cold and cruel smile, and steps aside.

Seamus leaps forward, rushing towards his Betty.

But he doesn't know that the Sidhe lord carries her away from the world of dust and mortals. He doesn't realize where the Lady's dance has led him; he doesn't see that Betty dances on air.

He races forward, and when he reaches the edge of the bluff, he falls.

Once again, our Seamus disappoints, alas. There is no flash of comprehension in his last expression, no moment of understanding in his final second of life. He never realizes what has happened. He doesn't know he falls.

There is only mindless terror and hapless confusion, and then he is gone.

Years later, when young Keith hears the awful noise again in nightmares, he will recognize the sounds of tearing flesh and shattering bones. And then Seamus's final scream is abruptly silenced.

The Lady smiles again. "Accept our tithe," she says. Then she mounts her white steed and vanishes.

Night falls. The Faerie Courts pass from this world to theirs. Now the meadow is still. Betty O'Brien is gone. She is a stolen child, lost. The Lord of the Sidhe himself has taken her.

Alone and forgotten in the meadow above the cliffs, poor Keith wails in the darkness. His cries echo unheard.

The Twelve

by Joey Madia

January, fabled prophet,
come westward in your hour.
Waiting in the catacombs,
fearing death in your impotence,
you worship torn tapestries in the halls of remorse.
February, child, hold onto dimension
shocked as His mother in an ether-fog stuck.
March, born in splinters,
to change is your gift.
To dwell in the mind rift
and dance in the sand shift.
You are the Keeper of Rhymes.
April, brave fellow
who loves fallow meadows
do not fall despondent
seeking new fruit too soon.
May or may not
while June plays to Jupiter,
whose priests are in session, preparing for war.
July, be a jewel,

a dark gem enticement,
a crown made of roses
and remnants of Spring.
August, draped palladium,
Golgotha stadium
where geishas dance for coin of the realm.
Where are the gospels
and basins for handwashing
as soldiers succumb to their spells?
September's golden silence
and October's revolutions
are lost in the warmth
of November's vast blues.
December's the dreamer,
our fine Father planter,
whose seeds are accepted when Satan's are not.
Come all, bless the Lady, who dresses in mourning,
for a son sadly sacrificed
and abandoned to time.