

Zoe Gilbert

EARTH IS NOT FOR EATING

Crouched between the grey bean plants, he watches his mammy drop pinches of earth into her mouth like breadcrumbs. She sits on the ground with her legs stuck out, the soles of her dirty feet showing, and as she drops and chews she rubs her belly.

Mouse has washed the cabbages for his Mammy enough times to know that earth is not for eating. The sight sluices the grumble right out of his belly.

Only this morning he brought his sleeping Mammy a breakfast, the last egg coddled just soft how she taught him, carried up the stairs quick so it were still warm. When the wholesome scent of it under her nose woke her, she took one look and batted Mouse away, her cheeks pulsing and her hand clapped over her mouth as she dashed for the piss-pot. He watched Skipper lap up the orange yolk with one slap of his long doggy tongue.

And now his Mammy is swallowing earth as if it the best of a big catch, the finest of all the fish they've not eaten for so long that Mouse can't remember when it was Dad went out on the boat. It must be full by now, it must be rocking under a mountain of plump silver bodies, slithering in the heave of each wave. There between the drooping beans he thinks out the words his Mammy used to say for every supper, "sea be calm and tide hurry fishermen home." The cold creeps up under his ribs when he can't remember neither the last time he heard her say this in her soft song voice.

Mouse crawls backwards through the bean plants and idles through the dunes to the sheep track that climbs to the Rincepans' whitewashed house. His friend Pud is sprawled on the step, cracking cobnuts and prising the shrivelled hearts from their shells. When Mouse tells him what he's seen, Pud chews and ponders.

"Maybe make her a mud pie for supper then," he says, "or snail stew."

When Pud has stopped his snigger Mouse says, "She won't do a good supper for me neither. I get green leaf mush, never a fish or nothing."

Pud has a good stare at Mouse's bony knees next to his own like fat browned potatoes. He swallows.

“And does she look the same, or has she gone all wrinkled or ugly-faced?”

“Ugly yourself,” says Mouse, and he flicks the nut he can’t crack at Pud’s head. But there is something odd, now he thinks, about how his Mammy looks. She’s getting fat as an ale man on green slime and soil. And she’s not worn a Mam dress like usual, not even when Tommer’s Ma came with the spare catch and she hooted at his Mammy draped in one of Dad’s shirts.

“Remember that tale we got from Ma Oxley up at the shieling once?” Pud starts, “About when the bab gets swapped for a fairy one that’s all grisly and greedy?”

“The changeling,” says Mouse.

Pud stamps his foot and crunches a nut to bits. “You got a changeling mam.” He looks sidelong at Mouse. “Remember how she said you tell? Changeling babs are pretending, but they can’t do it proper. They look dog ugly and act all wrong and they only want changeling food. If you came out of the hill where it’s all mud and roots, then you’d want to eat that too.”

“That were just a story. And anyway it were a bab, not a mam.” Mouse picks up a handful of shells and showers them down over Pud’s brown head.

The waft of Ma Rincepan’s cooking then through the open door is so rich and meatily good that Mouse lingers, finding as many games to play with cobnut shells as will last until she calls Pud in. All the while he thinks over what a changeling might pretend wrong. It’s true that his Mammy won’t play her whistle anymore like she used to of a glowery evening with Dad home off the sea. And her voice isn’t like a song anymore neither. She hardly whispers a word unless to scold. The house is so quiet that all he hears is Skipper whining with his nose in the grate.

He is wondering if changelings play mud whistles when Ma Rincepan reels them in with a yell, but when she spies Mouse she slaps a hand on top of his head and gives him a turn right round.

“Hup to it home with you. And we’ll take your poor mammy a plate. She must be starved, and in her state.”

Ma Rincepan has his hand gripped a bit too tight in her rough red fist as she stamps along just so fast as to make Mouse run every few steps to keep up. The steam from the plate smells so good it hurts his insides and the thought of losing his morsels of meat to Skipper along with that last egg is too much to bear.

“Please, Ma Rincepan,” he says at the last of the dunes. “We can stop here. Mammy doesn’t much like meat for now anyway.”

“Nonsense,” she bellows, and there is no sign of Skipper as she bustles right through the darkened room, past the cold hearth, and creaks up the stair.

The bedroom is dark too. Mouse can just make out the bump of his Mammy asleep in her big high bed, the sheet tucked round her neat as pastry.

He looks across at his own little boat of a bed, under the eave where his wooden gull hangs, turning slowly in the draft. He takes a step closer. The bed clothes twitch and two glowing dog eyes rise up to meet him. Did his Mammy put Skipper to bed in his place?

As Mouse glares back he feels a thought slide, cold and terrible as December sea water. Only a changeling mammy would put a dog to bed instead of a boy. Pud said they pretend wrong. They wouldn’t know the difference. The changeling mammy must have kissed Skipper’s wet nose and made the little boat rock and set sail, just as if it were him in there. Or would this soil and twigs and boiled leaves mammy not even know to do that?

Ma Rincepan lets him take the warm plate and creep back down the stair, and while he devours the juicy meat and spludges fatty potatoes around in his mouth he can hear her murmuring above. It makes him shudder even as he eats, that careless, muddy thing leaving soil all over his mammy’s sheets that should be white as clouds and smelling of rain.

Next day Pud finds him nestled against their favourite dune in the soft morning sun, chewing on raw beans.

“They good?” he asks, eyeing the pods scattered in the sand. Mouse winces as he swallows. Raw beans are not good at all, his throat hurts, but they were the only thing he could find in the garden that looked like food.

“You said I got a changeling mammy,” he says, letting Pud pick the last bean from his palm.

“So?”

“She laid the dog in my bed.”

Pud puffs himself up serious as the school master. “And does she ever talk of your Pa or wish him home to you?”

Mouse shakes his head.

“Then it’s certain as summer. A changeling mammy wouldn’t know you should even have a Pa, would she? If he were already gone when she came.”

Mouse tries to bite the wobble out of his lip.

“Come on. I want a look at her,” Says Pud as he hauls Mouse up from the tuft of dune grass and they shuffle down the path, ducking as they get near the house.

They crouch below the front window, knees in the grit and green staining weeds. Pud slowly raises his head until his eyes are above the sill and squints against the glass.

“Fat as a cow,” he whispers.

Mouse thinks of all those plates of green slime, the earth under her fingernails.

“She’s knitting,” says Pud, “and not even looking at the needles.”

Mouse kneels up and peers into the gloom. It’s true, the needles in her hands are dancing up and down and the changeling mammy is gazing clear out through the opposite window pane towards the sea. The wool that trails over her big moon belly and onto the floor is the fine blue wool his real mammy has been saving, he knows, since he were a bab himself. She said it were only for skin that wants softness, and she left it shut up in the sea chest, not even using it when his Dad wanted a new vest for the worst of winter.

“What’s she making?” Pud asks.

There below the skipping needles dangles a small blue sock, so small it might fit on a big toe.

“For her pixie bab, under the hill where she came from,” breathes Pud, and the glass at his mouth mists up.

Mouse picks a spot on the black harbour rocks. He will watch for his Dad with his silvery mountain on the blue boat and as soon as he’s helped carry in the enormous catch he’ll tell it all and Dad will know how to get his real mammy back.

The wind burns his face through the long white days. At home Skipper stays still as a rug in the hearth, and the sea chest fills up with tiny clothes for the pixie bab. The changeling mammy hardly moves from her grimy bed.

One afternoon a shore fisher sidles along the harbour and sits down beside him. He offers Mouse a catfish. The man’s face is hidden behind a wad of white beard, but his

voice is kind and he shows Mouse how to cook the fish on a stick over a fire he starts up with dry dune grass. When they scrape the hot flesh from the bones it tastes of smoke.

“Out to see the boats?” he asks.

Mouse nods.

“And which one counts for you?”

Mouse knows the name because it is the same as his own, the name he’ll grow into when he is old enough to stop being Mouse and becomes a man.

“Marlin,” he says.

The shore fisher pauses a moment. “You sure of that?” His voice has lost its cosiness.

“It’s my Dad’s boat. He named it for me – I’m Marlin too.” Mouse feels sturdier just for saying it.

The shore fisher stays silent a while. He turns a thin spool of line between hands as cragged as the rock they sit on. The wind doesn’t seem to touch them.

“I’m sorry, son,” he says, in a crackle. “Your Ma all fine up there?” He nods back through the dunes.

Mouse feels the cold sluice again through his belly. He can hardly tell about the changeling mammy, silently fattening on soil.

“Might I pay a visit then, Marlin? I got more in my basket today than’ll do for me and your Ma might want to share.”

“No,” Mouse says quickly, “No. She’s sleeping. She’ll want leaving alone.”

“Well you take these two then,” and the shore fisher opens up the basket at his feet and scoops out two silver slithers smeared with red.

Mouse forgets his look out plan, with the fish cold in his palms. One for him, one for Skipper, and the sooner he’s home the sooner he can have them hot on the grate and crisping up.

“And luck to you,” he hears the fisher call as he hurries over the black rocks and into the dunes.

**“Skipper!” he shouts on the path, and again at the door. There’s not even a whine.
“Skipper!” he tries again when he sees the room empty.**

There is a long, high shriek from up the stair. As Mouse steps forward he feels the slabs slippery under his feet. The thin trail of blue wool from the chair is turned pinky red where it lies across the rug and all around and daubed up the stairs is more red. Something scrapes across the floor above his head. Something whimpers. Mouse runs then, away from line of wool, away from the sounds and the certainty of something more dreadful than he’s ever thought before.

His sticky hands are empty by the time he is at the Rincepans’ step and he leaves a red print as he pushes at the door. They are all round the table, their big arms lifting bowls and bread but it is Pud that Mouse looks for, hardly noticing the frowns of his Ma and Pa.

“She’s got Skipper,” he pants, “She’s got him,” but he’s lost the words like he’s lost the two fish, somewhere on his way.

“What’s this mess?” Ma Rincepan has hold of his wrist in her huge red hand and is poking at his palms. “Has it come now?”

He stares into her frowning face.

“Mercy, what do you do with a boy?” she huffs and Mouse watches her turn and root around in the cupboard, pulling out sheets and flannels. “Go on then!” Mouse is swept out of the door in the billow of Ma Rincepan’s enormous skirt and they are almost down the path, stomping and stumbling the pair of them, when Mouse hears another long shriek from his house. He yanks his hand from Ma Rincepan’s grip and dodges into the dunes, scrambling against sliding sand, tearing up the whipping fingers of dunegrass. His Dad will help, the boat might be in right now, if he can get to the harbour quick enough, and he skids down the next dune right into the shore fisher’s legs. He feels the rocky hands on his shoulders and sees the wad of white beard as the fisher crouches to look at him.

“Marlin,” says the cosy voice. “Stop here a moment.”

Mouse’s legs wobble as he lets the hands hold him steady.

They sit right there in the sand. The wind still brings howls from the house. Mouse wants to tell the shore fisher that it is not his real Mammy, that there’s a monster in there, but his throat is trapped shut and his lips only shake.

“What a din a fishwife can make, eh?” the man says. “We’ll wait for a bit of peace before we go.” He is so calm that Mouse finds he can breathe it in and his judders calm

too. He looks and looks at the lines on the shore fisher's face, the places where there's rust in the white of his beard, the hands still as rocks.

The wind drops away and so do the sounds from the house. Still they wait.

"Nothing to fear," the shore fisher says when Mouse finally turns his head to look towards home. A thin whining starts up and Mouse jumps as Skipper leaps in his head. He stays a few steps behind the shore fisher as they make their way up and down the sinking hills of sand, and hangs back at the bean patch while the fisher knocks. Ma Rincepan hollers them in.

There in the bed, swathed in Ma Rincepan's sheets, is his Mammy. Mouse knows it is her because she is humming in that soft, song voice, and when she looks up at him a small smile curls. His eyes follow hers to the bundle in her lap that is making the whining sounds. It has a small crumpled face like a squashed red flower, its open mouth is the reddest part, and Mouse can see tiny feet like curled red leaves poking out from under the blanket. He thinks of the tiny blue sock. Was it meant for this ugly thing? Where has it come from, and where has the changeling gone? Mouse feels the surge of tears coming back behind his eyes, only this time his real Mammy is ready to catch him against her shoulder.

"A brother for you, Mouse," she says, and strokes the wrinkled red face with one finger.

Nobody seems at all baffled. Ma Rincepan and the shore fisher talk and grin as if everything is just as it should be.

"A brother." He tries it out. Everything is not as it should be at all.