Flash Fiction Competition 2012

Image 4 entries
# List of Stories – image 4

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“What a fine mess you've got us into now!” Beakbraw snapped at the creature behind him. The Thorny-tangle wood swayed around the companions, dusk falling slowly, as tends to in Summer. The evening was marbling into a pinky glory around them, all of nature perfect and harmonious for just one minute. It was, admittedly, somewhat at odds with the shrill argument which rang from beneath the trees. Weaslet frowned. He hadn’t meant to espy Beakbraw and Hoofer conversing together about a secret journey they weren’t supposed to be taking that he wasn’t allowed to know anything about that was really rather forbidden by the grown-ups. Despite this, Weaslet was sad at being excluded, his red clergy-in-training robes wilting slightly. The white collar which stood high and proud around Weaslet’s neck had been chafing since breakfast and he couldn’t wait to get the thing off. His bottom ached and he was half-convinced he’d develop piles sitting on those hard classroom benches before he passed his examination and became a minister of the wood. He’d had a horrible day.

Beakbraw glared at his small friend, sharp talons clutched protectively around Hoofer’s middle. Weaslet hadn’t meant to disturb them, he knew that much, but it was so frustrating! Hoofer had said that she’d something to show him, a map of sorts, which might explain the end of the never-ending Thornytangle wood – what an adventure that would be! The evening dimmed continuously, and the lightpears which illuminated the forest winked themselves into glow. Beakbraw sighed – perhaps today was not the day for his first great escapade.

Hoofer, a nervous type, was peering through the gloom of the forest, convinced the three would be caught by an elder, or a teacher, and then they really would have a fine mess on their hands. Not yet of age and making mischief already? She could hear their harpy-shrieks in her head and it made her stomach do flip-flops. Why, and she’d been so excited by the prospect of adventure! Hoofer had her walking stick picked out already, and if it was a little larger than her, so what? She’d need a big stick for such a big walk. She just knew that Weaslet would have spilled the beans if she’d shown him the dusty map she’d lifted from the library, but faced with her friend, Hoofer felt very bad for not including him, very bad indee.

Just then, a giant raindrop squeezed itself from the sky and landed right on Hoofer’s nose. She honked in fright and stumbled backwards, straight into Beakbraw, who toppled like a domino, onto Weaslet’s head. The three friends whumphed to the ground, all silent in their surprise. The rain began to fall in earnest. Weaslet extricated himself from the group, his collar poking up at queer angles, fur all ruffled. Beakbraw saw it and began to laugh, setting off Hoofer, brightening Weaslet’s woebegone face. They were, in fact, in a rather fine mess - but at least they were in it together.
Three Trees & a Stick by Ray McCormack

Three trees, a raincloud or something like it, a donkey in a dress, a knight with a griffon’s head, and a dog like creature with a big stick.

Gordon studied the picture again. Three trees, a raincloud - he was pretty sure it was a raincloud, although it was like no raincloud he’d ever seen. Maybe whoever drew it was bored and thought stuff it, I’ll stick in a raincloud that looks nothing like one, see if they notice. Probably not, they’ll be too busy trying to work out what that dog creature thing is (Gordon doubted if the artist had known what it was meant to be either. Probably couldn’t draw dogs, unless it was meant to be a hamster. Did they have hamsters back then? Weren’t hamster originally from Russia or something? Could be a Russian drawing, but that didn’t explain the griffin, which was clearly made up, in which case it didn’t have to be Russian, not unless the Russians knew something he didn’t. In any case, not a hamster, so not Russian. Gordon realised he was getting away from his original point).

Distract them from the cloud with a dog (he’d settle for dog for now. Although those paws were remarkably hand like. And it was wearing a dress. Handy though having hands. Would mean the dog could throw its own stick rather than waiting for someone else to do it. Not so handy when it meant it could also help itself to the contents of the fridge, or refused to give you the remote for the TV, despite you using your best dog whisperer voice and having to spend the rest of the evening watching Strictly or something, complete with running commentary- Gordon had decided it was likely that such a dog could talk. After all it wasn’t much of a leap of imagination for a dog that had opposable thumbs and was therefore capable of dressing itself to…)

Why did they do that? People, he meant, not dogs. Would a dog of its own volition opt for a spotted bow in its hair or don a superman suit? Unlikely, since dogs, in general, were too sensible for that, the one in the picture being an obvious exception. Unless the hamster theory still held true. And as for the matter of the cross dressing donkey (had to be cross dressing, there was no other explanation), he wasn’t even going to begin considering that can of worms. Must be a niche market that, donkey dresses. Still, more chance of getting a sale there than griffin armoury.

He snorted, and got a strange look from the guy behind the counter. Well, bloody weird choice of picture for a takeaway anyway, he thought, and left.
The Chicken Factory Outing by

We’d put away a fair bit on the coach – and soon we were in a big barn of a place, knocking back tequila slammers and Christ knows what else. A man came and sat beside me. A well-dressed, Italian-looking man.

“What the fuck you grinning at, Sunshine?” says Meg.

“I was smiling at the young lady’s hat.”

It was a pink Dolly Parton cowgirl.

“The hat? Don’t start. Get the fuck.”

About one o’clock, I was finished. Meg was done too. There was no sign of Jeannie. “Leave her,” said Meg. “She’s man-fucking-mad.”

We got a taxi back to the Travelodge. I fell asleep and woke up in an hour. The light from the bathroom shone on my bed. Violent retching. Jeannie came out, face like a panda. “What happened?” I said.

“Don’t ask. Don’t fucking ask! Fucking men.”

I didn’t get back to sleep. I listened to Meg and Jeannie snore and belch and fart and mutter and cry out and I thought about myself. This was my future. Meg and Jeannie: that was me in 20 years time. Killing chickens for a living, false teeth, padded bras, drinking too much, dodgy hats, dodgy men. I wept, helpless. As the light came in, I fell asleep.

Half-past eleven, hungover.

“Christ, come on, you. The bus goes at 12.”

I struggled into my clothes, feeling like shit. The coach hadn’t arrived, but there was a massive ghetto blaster in the carpark and it was belting out Country hits, and some of the women were line-dancing to “Stand by your Man”, “I will Survive”, “Jolene”, and then Billy Ray Cyrus started singing “Achy, Breaky Heart”. Now, this is a very stupid song, but it had been a favourite of Joe’s and mine. It was a big hit last New Year. It was belted out in every house we went to. It was a kind of joke. We used to sing a couple of lines and collapse laughing. So, I started crying again.

But there were these women, some of them still wearing their stupid pink hats, dancing in the carpark:

DON’T tell my HEART, my Achy BREAky HEART
I JUST DON’T THINK he’d underSTAND
And IF you tell my HEART, my Achy BREAky HEART

and so on. 4 steps forward, 4 to the side, turn, sway, flick, lift, shake hips to the beat. The other women standing round and clapping in time.
Meg tried to pull me into the dance, but I held back. She was laughing and singing along. And I started laughing too. So I was laughing and crying at the same time. At the Chicken Factory women, line-dancing and singing and clapping in a carpark at 12 o’clock on a Wednesday morning. Singing that stupid, stupid song. And the sun was shining, and then the coach came, and they were still dancing.
An unfamiliar tale by Marka Rifat

You wouldn’t know it. Not for one second. Not to look at him, that’s for sure. All them books, films, TV series, everything, they was all misdirection – Dave taught me that, among other things – ‘cause they made people expect one thing when it was totally the other. By which time, it was usually too late.

Speaking with Dave, you wouldn’t know it. Even if you got that itchy feeling at the back of your mind, you’d just laugh it off, ‘cause he owned a caff and was hardly run off his fat feet with customers. But still, when you clocked him out the corner of your eye sometimes, you got to thinking. Well, that’s what I heard some people say.

Wasn’t news to me, of course. I knocked about with Dave from before we could walk. His mum told my mum he didn’t get on with anyone ‘til he met me. How can a baby not get on? Anyway, he was a picky bugger and he picked me.

That said, he didn’t trust me for years. Everyone thought we was great mates, ‘cause we hung about and he always helped me keep my end up in a fight, but it was years before I knew the real story. Actually, I thought it was one of his jokes, ‘cause he likes a prank does Dave, messing with your head. But the more he showed me, the more I felt, well, privileged that he trusted me enough to tell me all his stuff, and know I wouldn’t blab.

After a bit, he stopped telling me stuff, but I’d hear about incidents and link them to a scrap of paper in his back office, or see a face in the newspaper and recall that same mug, but very much alive, in the caff, a few weeks previous.

But that afternoon, baking hot it was, that was unforgettable. I was the only punter in the caff, just about to get stuck into my egg and chips and this posh bloke bursts in, with his sour-faced missus and kid. They was all shouting, and the dad demanded Dave’s phone, saying they’d been robbed – car, phones, money, the lot, and give us your phone right now. Well, nobody demands nothing of Dave, and you definitely ask extra nice round the solstice.

The air kind of thickened around Dave and a sharp burning smell filled the caff. Next thing, there was dad, same clothes but turned into a cockerel, mum was a donkey in a dress, and the nipper a dog in a frock. Caff door swung open. Out they shot.

It was the shock, I suppose, made me have a go at Dave about transforming an innocent kiddie. Not my best decision.

Look mate, you let go that rolled up newspaper. I’ve hovered, buzzed and crawled a respectful distance from your pint, I’ve told you my life story, and believe me, there’s a sting in this tail.
The Scribe by Jane Swanson

Aldred sat upright at his high easel. He was working on a little scene in the corner of the vellum page depicting a man and a boy leading a blind man to meet Jesus. He painted the outlines of their bodies first as he tried to imagine the expressions on their faces. He eased his clenched brow, let his bottom lip hang loose, widened his eyes and looked dreamily up to heaven; what must it have been like to have been in the presence of Jesus?

Behind him young Bilfrith let out a yelp as Abbot Ealdfrith struck him across the face. Bilfrith had smudged the precious gold leaf on an illuminated page he was decorating. Ealdfrith swore at him. Aldred bowed his head and prayed silently; Lord – wake up! Send a sign that you exist and punish Ealdrith for his cruelty!

Aldred gave thanks he was painting people; there wasn’t much that could go wrong with people. Idly he started to paint a head on the blind man’s body and thought about Ealdfrith; what did he do all day apart from getting drunk? Aldred and Bilfrith did all the donkey work; grinding the minerals to make paint and collecting the soot and pounding sturgeon’s bladders to make stinky glue and cutting the feathers for quills and making the brushes from tiny squirrel hairs!

Aldred wiped his brush on cloth and began to paint the other man. How he hated Ealdrith! He was a bully, always yelling and snarling at them. His filthy hair stood up on end, he had piggy eyes and whenever he spoke he sprayed everyone with spittle like an angry cat. Worst of all Ealdrith’s hooked nose made him look like an ungodly griffin.

He heard a scuffle and the scraping of chair legs over the stone floor as Ealdfrith struck Bilfrith, knocking him to the ground. Bilfrith had made a mistake with an intricate pattern he was painting. Ealdfrith warned Bilfrith if he made any more mistakes he would be banished from the monastery.

Bilfrith was whimpering like a puppy. Aldred daren’t look round and painted a head on the child. It wasn’t right; Bilfrith didn’t deserve to be treated like this. The young whelp was eager to learn, wide-eyed and apple-cheeked with a gentle face. Father God – bring all the plagues of Egypt upon Ealdfrith!

The hairs on the back of his neck pricked; Ealdfrith was standing behind him, he burped loudly and Aldred felt a blast of warm air down his neck.

`Aldred what have you done!` roared Ealdfrith.

Aldred’s eyes widened in horror when he saw the heads he had painted on the three figures; how had it happened? Ealdfrith grunted as he raised his arm to strike him. Aldred ducked; Dear God – save me! Divine inspiration fell on him as he spluttered

`Forgive me my Lord Abbot – my mistakes serve to illustrate that true perfection belongs only to God!`
The mother is a donkey, the farther is a cock and the child is a dog. Of course this is all pretend, this is a game they play. The masks that cover their faces are the kind that the mother and the father have forgotten that they wear. The child however, has not yet learned to forget. He feels the string that ties the mask tightly around his neck.

Every morning, as far back as no one can remember, the masks have been a daily ritual. The mother’s arm fumbles under her pillow and finds the mask. Before she has opened her eyes and consciously become aware that a new day has begun, her hands have pulled the donkey mask over her head and it has fallen into her character. The mother can scream and whine as sad sounding and lonely feeling as a donkey, and sometimes she does. The mother behind the mask screams loudly, her sound however never comes through the fabric of the mask but screams in her own ears. The father on the other hand can be heard from the furthest corner of the village when each morning without a fail, he declares his existence.

One hot day the child that is also a dog cannot get his breathing to relax, it is in a rush, short and quick so not enough air can get to get to his lungs. He tries to tell the father, he pulls his father’s clothes, but the father is busy keeping the mother tied up. The cock yells at the dog, “go back and lie down, go back to your room! Go back to your room and lie down!” The dog tucks his tail between his legs, or if he had had a tail he would have done so. His breathing makes his head light and he cannot let go of the father’s clothes. The mother senses it all, but she does not want to see. How can her child be a dog, how did she never notice how it happened. She wants to get away. You can tell by her eyes, by the way she looks somewhere else, upwards, as if there was something up there other than weather. She wants to be less of a donkey and more of a woman. The donkey is not strong enough, and if you tie her she cannot escape. The father knows this trick. He just has to hold on to her, tie her to a pole that is safely secured in the ground then she will not be able to leave. And the dog knows his place, he will always do as he is told. He walks back to his room and lies down, breathing hurts his throat, but after a while it is not so bad and he thinks he might be able to forget. From then on the dog that once was a boy will never take off his mask.
Turn and Spill by Chelsea Cargill

It was spring but the trees were unnaturally bare and rains covered everything in dirt. The river was dangerously high. My knight the beloved, the one I had been bound to forever, but sadly only in my childish fancies, was fixed on his hare-brained plot. He would not listen.

‘I am not a girl,’ I protested.

‘No, you are a lamb,’ he shouted, his throat squawking like the monstrous bird he had become. ‘A useless, stupid sheep.’ It was true and I loved him all the more as his feathers shone and his eyes pierced further into the distance than any arrow.

The ass had worked out a plot to beat the malevolent spirit at her own game. The detail evaded me as I was young and senseless, but it involved flying to the heavens, above the ceaseless clouds, above the sky, and petitioning that our true forms be restored and revenge be taken on the old harpy. I saw them practice with a wooden stick and each day leave the ground a little more. Still I picked petals from daisies. I washed my face in dew as the sun rose every morning as I had done from my earliest days, though now I was covered in a downy fur that matted and turned into yellow streams. I told them I would rather keep this beastly head for a lifetime that provoke a fate even worse, a plague, or the loss of my knight.

The ass had always been the lowliest of creatures, a monk, fit only to tend vegetables and sit in a cold vestry reciting prayers, no doubt aimed at his own personal gain. He talked the knight into stealing from the old orchard, the one we were forbidden to enter although it was on unconsecrated ground and belonged to no-one. We had never seen the lopsided crone that was said to wander among the trees, or at least the ass had not and the knight scorned such beliefs. But I had heard her, the witch, foraging among last year’s dead leaves, talking with the animals that dig and burrow, putting stones on the wall that crumbled more each winter.

‘A spell fills these branches and no others,’ I said to my knight and the monk, in his true form an ass. ‘We dare not enter!’ But they were to become rich at the fair as all the other fruit was soft and brown and fallen to the ground. In the end I helped them, standing watch so no-one would see our transgression, and filling the crease of my skirt with the endless weight of our folly.

They left when I had fallen asleep and was dreaming of apples. Sometimes my words come out as a narrow bleat that startles even the crows. I sing our childish songs so I will not forget the sound of my own voice.

The ripest fruit will turn and spill
Would that I were but a girl
you with your ass head on, me with my cockerel... It’s summer, so enter, you in your burgundy gown, me wearing my red cockerel head... Enter, you wearing your gown with its folds upon folds, and barefoot, and me, my hands around your waist, feeling... ‘But the child,’ you say. ‘But it’s summer,’ I say. ‘Remember the summer? Remember the ash trees?’ ‘It’s raining,’ you say. ‘Yes rain,’ I answer, ‘why not rain, why not in the rain?’ It’s summer: the rain is summer rain, and summer shadows on the slopes.

Let’s enter the wood, you with your glower, your chin, your strong neck, and me my comb aflame, singing, it’s morning, wake up, here at last, a summer morning, let’s... You in my favourite burgundy gown, my hands making merry in the many merry folds... ‘But the child,’ you say. ‘We’re neglecting the child.’ ‘But it’s summer,’ I say. The raindrops, summer raindrops. The ash leaves, summer leaves. Look at the wood: the ashes shoot. See the sky? Fancy a dip?

But the child has a hold of my doublet. It’s summer, I’m trying to say to you. Do you remember the wood? Where I lost you and found you and lost you? Remember the pageantry? All through the night, you remember? Remember, I’m trying to say, but Lizzie has hold of my doublet. A shrewd one, Lizzie. It’s your chin. It’s your neck. It’s your look on her face.

Remember the ash trees? We’re young. We were young. You were skittish and glowering, tossing your head like a foal, a strong neck, and me like a fledgling flung from the rafters, both of us fools and both of us mortals, a couple of kids! But she could always grip like this, from the moment we met her, holding on for dear life with the both of her hands, always had a hold on us, hurrying after us in one of the gowns she’ll grow into, the pink, an old one of yours, growing and growing...

But summer, I say, in the grass, in the rain, years ago, and you in your gown, a new gown, a pink, under the ash trees, the fluttering shadows and leaves, where we fell, where I fell for your beautiful glowering eyes... And summer again, and you with your burgundy gown, and you with your ass head on, me with my cockerel. Summer, and let’s run away, you and I, with my love, with your look, with only a look, like it’s new, like it’s all of a sudden about to begin. But the child has a hold of my doublet, and she’s hurrying after us now, and she’s barefooted, surefooted, wearing your gown, and we’re caught, and she’s looking at me with your glowering eyes.
And she wept and she cried and I knew there was no stopping her, but lord I tried. How to tell those wide brown eyes, shining like shattered glass, that I was doing this for her? He was waiting for me, his neck snapping from watch to window, and I knew now was not the time to keep him waiting. I stooped to cup her face in both hands and my eyes did all they could to remember her beauty: the scattering of freckles which dusted her nose; her padded cheeks; her smile. When I saw her face again she would be grown up, but now was not the time to think such thoughts. I could see her mind searching for an answer but her innocent world did not comprehend the evil of mine. If only I could hold her forever...

Her hands which cupped my face were soothing and I felt my body thaw. How warm it would have felt to fall into her arms as I had so many times before. Something about it made me feel so safe. I saw her eyes once more flash to the window; she was looking for him. The man who dappled her body with purple flowers. Why had she chosen him over me? I knew if I accepted her embrace she would smile but I wanted to cause her the pain she caused me. To do anything else would be to agree with her decision. I threw her hands off and ran across the bare floor to the place I would hide at night and listen to her hushed sobbing. Though I could not see her I recognised the familiar creaks of our beloved home and I knew she was moving towards the door. My feet would not move though my heart ached to run. My shaking body collapsed on the floor and I curled myself in a ball. She told me this was the only way, that he would give our family what we needed. She told me everything would be all right...

I left the house without looking back, I wasn’t strong enough. I met him on the cobbled street, what a handsome man he could have been were it not for his steely stare. I bowed my head and entered the carriage which would take me to my new life. And as he walked round the carriage I stole a final glance at the window. My heart skipped as I saw her lost eyes staring back at me and in that last moment I whispered into the air ‘I love you’ and hoped that the dust and smoke would carry my words to her precious ears and she would one day understand why...

‘I love you too,’ I breathed and let my stinging eyes close.
My Strange Birth by Eilidh Prise

When I was three seconds old, I was pulled clear tropical waters of the Caribbean.

My first breath was delayed due to a rather inconvenient tidal wave which spoilt the first second of my life.

Discovering I could surf, I leapt at the chance to ride the world’s most extensive wave. It was there I met Bob – a liobird. His wings were prodigious; nearly as large as the wave we were cruising. He is the almighty and it is he who will decide my fate.

I felt the glare from his left eye and knew instantly he wanted more. Scared. Alone. Helpless. The fear that overcame me was excruciating; it was lightning fast and burned my stomach. And then it was over…

Now, here I am – flying. Surrounded by hundreds of seagulls in a violent storm, my mouth is dry and my hands are damp with perspiration. The wind swirls around my face. My mind is lost between broken dreams and an uncertain future. I cannot see Bob; but I know he is here… somewhere. He is everywhere.

My new body shape is interesting – different. A fire of desire – that escaped just minutes ago – burns deep inside my longing body. But what is this? It is an unusual feeling that I cannot describe; I cannot comprehend. Something is pulling me to the ground. It is holding me to the earth. Cold. Freezing. Frozen… blackness.

Tethered to the soil, I can no longer fly. His control is greater than I first anticipated. He knows I am here – even now. The dry land is multi-coloured. It is different shades of blue and purple, like the coral reef I emerged from. But it is changing all the time. Now it is green; now it is pink.

I break the chains around my overgrown leg as I step forward. My feet are as big as my head and I loose my balance, falling instantly. As I fall, I feel my body splitting… breaking. Broken. Splash!

I am completely submerged in a cloudy liquid. Am I drowning? I have no arms; I have no legs. Miniature in mass but mighty in mind, the liquid fills my lungs. I swallow heavily and feel revitalized. It is purer than oxygen.

I am conscious that I am moving but I do not know where. Still aware that Bob is watching me, I use my ears to increase my speed. Swift. Rapid. Electric. A bolt of lightning hits the surface and encourages the volcano below to erupt without
warning.

Explosive and reckless, I am pulled from the head of a seahorse in the tropical waters of the Caribbean. I hope my life is not as strange as the images that overcame my first two seconds but I know who he is now... The Devil.
**Never Mind** by Veronica Whittaker

Hello. May I introduce myself? I know this is a slightly unusual way of doing things but this really is important. Well, let's say it is for me. I'll let you decide for yourself after. Right, first things first: let me tell you a little about myself. My name is Winston Armstrong. I live just down the street from you.

Perhaps you might recall the gentleman that lives in the white bungalow opposite the phone box.

Yes, I thought you might. You do like to try to destroy that poor old phone box, and at all hours of the day and night. It really annoys me when you decide to kick it in when I'm trying to sleep.

Anyway, that's another thing. Blame it on my age; I just don't have the patience to deal with you young folk any more.

Oh dear, I'm digressing, let me get back to what this is all about. Can you see the card that's stuck to the edge of this bit of paper? It's called a tarot card. Have you heard about tarot cards? No.

Well, they can predict the future. This card's called The Fool. Very apt. You know I was just like you, inquisitive, thought I knew it all. Then this card found me. In an old book belonging to my Great Aunt, never liked her, and surprise surprise when she died she was kind enough to leave a book in her will to me. Stupid batty old woman. Book was worth precisely nothing. But, you see, it
wasn’t the book that was important, but the card. It fell out and got me.

You see, my young friend, it has powers. Look at it closely, don’t be like the Fool and ignore what’s happening right under your nose. Look very closely. Ah, I know what you’re thinking. Silly old man. But humour this silly old man. Now, go look in a mirror at yourself. What’s that I hear you saying? You can’t see yourself. Good, welcome to my wonderful world. Perhaps I should have warned you; the card takes your soul from you, leaves you empty. Interesting, isn’t it. But at least I’m not alone anymore. Now, is there anyone you really don’t like? Just pop the card in an envelope with instructions, just like I did, and get them to find it by accident. By the way, if anyone else is by chance reading this, go have a look in a mirror and check yourself. Come back and tell me what you can see. Or perhaps can’t. I really would be so interested to know.
Jim Davis part time archaeologist finally received the letter he had been waiting on from the Church of Scotland Council granting him the permission required to carry out an archaeological dig within the bounds of the remote Millington Abbey on the uninhabited island of Skaen.

It had taken thirteen years of applications and amendments to finally gain access to the last known worshiping place of the fallen angel Imphagon. The Church Council had thrown every obstacle possible to prevent Jim carrying out the dig, and this frustrated Jim as he could not fathom what there was to hide as he was researching an era long gone, well before the birth of Christ.

Six weeks later and Jim stands beside the ruins of Millington Abbey, and from information collected from a human skin manuscript, written around 650 AD. Jim knew the area he was interested in was one hundred yards south of the Abbey where a large flat natural rock stood, some eighty yards round and standing ten feet high. Approaching the rock he noted that there was a clear twenty yard area all around the rock devoid of plant life, yet everywhere else was a thick dense scrubland.

It took Jim a week to set up camp and prepare the site laying out where the trenches would be dug, and all through that week Jim could not put his finger on it but he felt he was not alone. The ropes marking the dig sites mysteriously moved, and tools he stored away were lying scattered around the site. The temperature within the dig site was 3 degrees lower than the ambient temperature outside. Undeterred Jim pressed on opening up the first trench, with no success. Two days later and six feet down in trench two he found it, an ancient bronze artefact two inches long and rectangular in shape, with some sort of design on it. Jim returned to the camp to clean up the find and see what he had found.

A horse. Bird and a dog riding a stick was not an image he had seen before, but he knew he could access the extensive archaeology archives of Strathmyre University via his laptop. The result surprised him; the images were of three fallen dark angels Gamgyn who appears as a small horse, Malpas who appears as a bird and Pygoran who appears like a dog. That night Jim was awakened by a sense of foreboding and a feeling of impending doom which only someone about to die can experience. Jim suddenly felt cold, he was sweating profusely, then suddenly rising from the ground before him were the three fallen angels, speaking in an unknown tongue casting a spell which in an instant buried Jim alive in the trench where he had found the bronze artefact. Imphagon’s guardian angels had done the job well removing all trace of the dig before returning to their lair to torment the soul of the unfortunate Jim.
The Goat, The Crow, The Lamb and the Witch by Julianne Jessett

It was a grey, dull morning and Melissa, Gabe and Annabel were in a lousy mood. Ever since they had been turned into animals by an old witch they had been miserable. They were outside playing in a grassy meadow. Melissa was once a beautiful girl with long blond hair but had been turned into a goat, her brother Gabe, who used to be short and freckly with black hair, had been turned into a crow and their younger sister Annabel, who had pale skin and curly blond hair had been turned into a white lamb. However, now they had magical powers and they were planning to defeat the wicked witch. In the meadow Melissa had found a long stick and because she had powers she tried to do a magic spell on it to make it into a flying stick.

Melissa, Gabe and Annabel sat on the stick as it started to fly. At first Melissa couldn’t fly the stick very well but after a while she got the hang of it. Gabe, being a crow, had a good instinct of direction, “travel north for 45 miles and we will find the wicked witch” he told Melissa. Melissa flew as fast as an arrow from a bow, whilst Annabel gripped onto her brother in fright. They circled above a dark forest and all of a sudden the stick stopped and fell to the ground with a thud. Luckily they weren’t hurt but they couldn’t work out why the stick had suddenly stopped. “Maybe it ran out of power,” suggested Melissa. “Maybe we hit the witch’s barrier,” Gabe explained. “I know why the stick stopped, because the witch’s house is behind that tree,” Annabel said, sounding very proud of herself.

Behind a tall, old beech tree that looked like it had a face watching you as you walked by there stood a small, patchwork cottage. On a huge, black door there was a sign that said “Enter if you Dare” pinned on a rusty nail. “Well, we can’t knock on the door, we’ll be eaten alive in there!” said Gabe. “I’ve got an idea,” remarked Annabel. “What is it?” the others said in excitement. “Well, we need to climb through that window whilst being quiet,” whispered Annabel. “Let’s go for it,” replied the others. They boosted each other through the window and Melissa, being the tallest, pulled herself through.

Inside, the house it was dark, lit by candles and the wallpaper was ripped. Cobwebs covered the walls. They heard the croaking of a witchy voice chanting a spell in a nearby room. They walked through the long hallway then peeked through the door into the room the witch was in. They ran into the room and using their powers together they defeated the witch by turning her into a beautiful, kind lady. As this happened the children turned back into their human form and found themselves back in the meadow where it all began. “What an adventure!” they all said.
A Tale of Caution by Sally Jaspars

“You say this happened upon the last full moon?”
“Yes, sir.”
“Don’t mumble girl! What form did she take?”
“A donkey, sir!”
“Silence in court! A donkey?”
“Yes, sir!”
“Pray, what was this donkey doing?”
“Wearing a red dress, holding a besom.”
“Holding onto a besom? Had she not hooves?”
“Oh no sir, she had her hands -”
“Do you know a woman with such garb?”
“ ‘Twas Mistress Jennet. Heeing and hawing!”
“Who or what was she with?”
“A large bird. With feathers and a large beak, sir. In a green jacket and breeches.”
“Know you a man with such garb?”
“My master.”
“From whom were they fleeing?”
“I don’t -”
“Who were they running away from, or should I say, “flying” away from?”
“Well sir , ‘twas -“
“Addressing this room, I will not have laughter in my court! I cannot hear the girl! Carry on girl, don’t mince words. We are agog!”
“ ‘Twas my mistress, sir.”
“Indeed?”
“ ‘Twas her voice! Her dress with the fine lace collar!”
“How fared thy mistress?”
“She were crying. “No, sir! Stay, Sir! Please do not go with that hussy! She is nothing but a donkey!” I wanted to help her, but I was much afraid.”
“And then what occurred upon that night?”
“O what sir…?”
“What happened next?”
“ She brayed with laughter, Mistress Jennet, cursing my mistress!”
“How?”
“Called her “Bitch!”
“And then?”
“My mistress, sir, she took on the look of my master’s hound. Howling. “Beloved! Don’t leave me!”
“And then?”
“He shouted “Be gone! I have no need of you this night nor any! Be damned, woman! Let go of this besom!”
“Did she go?”
“She fled. My master was not himself at all. He loved my mistress but he was very angry with her. His big arms were flapping up and down like a giant bird. I have never seen him take such a form!”
“Damned his own wife?”
“Yes, sir.”
“You say that he was changed?”
“She charmed him.”
“Are you saying that your master was a victim of magik?”
“Oh, yes sir.”
“When did this magiking occur?”
“When she was sweeping the rooms, sir with the besom, she would lean over and smile at the master. She would whisper in his ear. She would laugh to me in the kitchen “I'll have that one!” She bewitched him. Of that I am certain!”
“When they left that night, what else did you observe upon the horizon?”
“Upon the what?”
“What did you see up on the hill?”
“The moon beams came. They were very fast away.”
“Then?”
“Sir, my mistress’s heart broke. It broke that night. The night the witch took my master.”

Mistress Jennet was hanged for witchcraft in 1612.
It is said that on moonlit nights, braying may be heard upon that hill.
Fred sniffed at a rusty old can. The slip of a dog looked up at her with searching brown eyes. She said his name quietly and that was enough. He peed on the can and left it at that.

When Fred was a pup he chewed everything. And anything and everything was what people dumped by the canal, including rusty old cans that sent him whining home dribbling blood.

Fred had learned. But the people had not. They kept dumping things.

The hard breeze cut through her jacket. A drizzle fell. She wiped snot from her nose with threads of tissue paper she would twist and fray in her pocket as she walked.

Fred froze. There were some boys. They had a pit bull. One of the lads struggled to keep hold while the others playfully kicked the animal.

With worried eyes Fred looked up at her. She pulled him close to her side and they walked along the far edge of the path.

When she was a young girl she dreaded that one night in the year when men cast dogs off the cliff. The broken and useless things strewn across the rocks howled in horror until the tide claimed them.

Just then she slipped and Fred groaned and the pit bull yelped with delight and the boys laughed and she did not fall altogether but broke into a trot and pulled Fred after her and that made the pit bull madder and the boys wilder.

And run, Fred, run! Run away from those boys and their beast and God don't let them let it loose and Fred dragged behind the collar pulled up over his ears. I've fed you too much sausage and cheese and maybe myself too and the boys laughed and the pit bull growled and strained and she ran and ran because if the boys let go or
just could not hold him, if, if…

The path turned and still she ran because that poor tortured creature could come charging any second. But she ran too because her legs had taken on a life of their own and running was not as hard as she had thought.

Fred dragged tripped and groaned and she let go his leash and took shorter steps and stopped altogether and leaned over the arm of a bench wheezing, head faint, scalp itching, glasses fogged.

And Fred staggered to her, his leash trailing, pink tongue panting, heart beating so hard and fast she could see it, his brown eyes wider than ever with fear and panic beseeching her.

“It’s okay, Fred,” she said, gasping and laughing between breaths. “We can still run! We can still run!”

THE END.
How Macaw Lost his Wings by Philippa Okeke

Macaw flew through the big blue-as-a-dream sky. “Caw! Caw! I’m a lucky macaw. I fly and I fly, I see what’s what and what’s not” he cried.

Until one day when Macaw spotted something that took even him by surprise. “A wingless bird? Surely not! And my, what a mighty marvellous strut!” he said.

And so he watched this wingless bird strut through his day, and marvelled at all the books he read and all the thoughts in his head. But every time he marvelled, his very own fine-feathered wings shrivelled a little. By evening he had only wing stumps which fell off when a sudden breeze knocked him from the big blue-as-a-dream sky to the oh-so-solid ground.

“How I’m a wingless wonder!” he cried.

The wingless creatures called him Mr McCorr, and thought him an odd-feathered-fellow but taught him to read and think like them. But as the days went by, the big blue-as-a-dream sky turned dull-dreary, and the oh-so-solid ground became hard and unyielding under Macaw’s claws.

“These wingless creatures walk but see so little they read to understand more. How dull and dreary! And I was such a lucky macaw. I flew and I flew, I saw what’s what and what’s not. And all things I knew” said Macaw.

“Oh how sad, and how true!” said a nearby Kangaroo. “I once bounced like a ball, but I wished it away for a dainty shuffle like those tailless creatures. Now I drag my legs along, and long for the up and the down of a good bounce around.”

Macaw went to put a protective wing around the snivelling kangaroo but could not. “Oh what a purposeless pair we are” he said sadly.

“I used to chase and catch but I wished it away to be like a sleeping cat” said Little Dog.

“Caw! Caw! Come with us, my friend” said Macaw.

And so they settled by three trees rooted deep in the oh-so-solid ground, hoping for a time when they could fly and bounce and chase.

One day, a violent wind ripped open the dull-dreary sky, wrenching a tree from the oh-so-solid ground. What a thunderous sound! Stripped of leaves, the tree was dropped at the claws of Macaw.

“If this tree is uprooted from the oh-so-solid ground, then so can we! The winds of change are behind us, we’ll become who we were made to be. Hop on, Kangaroo!” And so she did.

“Don’t leave me here, all alone” begged Little Dog, grabbing at Macaw’s tail feathers.

“But this is your chance too, to chase and catch us. Good luck to you!” shouted
Macaw. And so Little Dog chased and caught Kangaroo who bounced down to the ground. Macaw flew higher and higher until the clouds cleared, his wings sprouted and he was free again.

“Caw! Caw! I’m a lucky macaw. I fly and I fly, I see what’s what and what’s not” he cried. And all was well beneath the big blue-as-a-dream sky.
An Absurd Tale by Elizabeth Coyle

Ass slowly prised an eye open, struggling to focus on blurry shapes and colours around him. His mouth was dehydrated and puckered, like an elephant’s scrotum. And his head…well it was possible that someone was trepanning him without anaesthetic. “I shouldn’t have had that last round of shots”, he thought to himself, just like he always thought to himself after he had had that last round of shots. His long sensitive ears, the bane of any hangover, were picking up familiar voices – Falcon and Pup – and unfamiliar sounds, shuffling and scraping. Grudgingly, he opened his other eye. “What are you doing with that stick?” he moaned, then more stridently exclaimed “Why am I wearing a dress?”

“Well, it’s the only thing big enough to fit you”, replied Falcon. “We’re going to the Celestial City, we’re going to the Celestial City”, yapped Pup, scampering around as Pups are inclined to when they’re excited. “What are you talking about?” said Ass slowly. “Don’t you remember the stranger?” asked Falcon eagerly. “Vaguely”, replied Ass. “You fell asleep!” squealed Pup gleefully. Falcon glared at Pup. “Let me tell him!”, he screeched. Ass winced, and Falcon lowered his voice by an octave or two. “Well”, he began, “the stranger told us about a Celestial City, high up in the sky, where everybody’s immortal. We’re going to live forever!”

“Eternal life sounds unlikely, what’s the catch?” sighed Ass. “No catch” declared Falcon, “He told us how to get there. All we have to do is wear these robes, travel on this Staff of Starlight, while chanting this verse which will invoke the powers of the Celestial Governor”. Ass groaned loudly, “How much did he want for these rags and that stick?”

“Nothing, I gave him a donation”, Falcon sniffed. “But Falcon, you can fly…well you can fly when you haven’t stuffed your wings into a ridiculous jacket. Why haven’t you seen this so – called Celestial city yourself? Why do you need a stick to fly on? In fact, how can you fly on a stick?” “It is not a stick”, Falcon was screeching again “there are things which are beyond the ken of normal minds…”

Knowing that there was no way he’d get any peace until they went through this
ridiculous ritual, Ass positioned himself at the front of the ‘Staff of Starlight’ and listened as Falcon and Pup started chanting.

They leapt off the banking with gusto. The stick shattered and a splinter pierced Ass’s jugular, spraying blood over his screaming companions. He rolled onto Falcon, crushing him, who in turn squeezed the life out of Pup. The corpses drew a crowd, among them the mysterious stranger, who successfully blamed the carnage on Ass’s evil influence, and proclaimed Falcon and Pup as martyrs, who, for a donation from the crowd, he would tell the whole world about.
**Fairytale Romance** by Paul Fleetwood

His sword defeated the ogre’s giant cat but with one vicious, dying swipe it clawed at his eyes.

“I’m blind!” he cried, but she heeded him not. Grabbing his hand she pulled him along behind her.

“This way,” she panted, “He has a room of magical things. A stick that can take the skies! We’ll find it and then we can fly, get out of here!”

The ogre’s cries resounded through the castle, echoed from the stony walls. Heavy, dangerous footsteps boomed as it approached.

As the blood was washed away by sweat, the knight found his vision returned. Skewed. Crazy shadows crawled around them. His beloved, as she ran ahead, appeared to shimmer and adopt a new form. Still the lithe, beguiling body but her features grew canine, then equine, never quite settling.

“I think…” he began, and lost his thoughts as they passed a mirror and he saw himself, his features predatory and avian, a hawk or maybe a buzzard. “I think I may be poisoned…”

“It’s the claws of the cat, they cause visions… this way!”

She took him through a door. Up a long spiral staircase. The angry bellows of the ogre grew nearer.

“Your husband,” he began, and she silenced him.

“No husband of mine! A captor! A thief! You are my beloved, brave knight! Rescue me! Save me and we will have paradise together!”

Strange thoughts suffused him. Old warnings confused him.

Was it right, this flight they took? The ogre had housed him for the night. A decent sort, he’d thought, but the woman who held his hand had convinced him otherwise. An unhappy marriage. A bond made of lies. Wasn’t it always the way? A miserable wife and her brutish mate? Bad choices annulled through good knights?
Rapunzel letting down her hair: romance or adultery?

They arrived in a room full of treasures. A mirror that answered all questions.
A goose that laid golden eggs. She threw these aside and triumphantly said, “Here it is!” and held up a stick.

“With this we can flee! Quick! To the window.”

Nearer the ogre, “I’ll kill you!” it cried and then, “Alice, don’t leave me, think of the kids!”

“Kids?”

At which a figure detached from the shadows of treasures. A dog-faced child that carried her eyes.

“Mommy? Mom, where are you going? Who is that man? Mommy?”

“Kids?”

Attention torn between her and the boy, he numbly allowed her to position his hands.

“No child of mine,” she spat, “His brat, a curse upon me. Come, my lover, come, we are free!”

She held the stick and he held her waist. A strange word she intoned and the stick took flight.

“Mommy don’t leave me!”

The brave knight looked back and he felt his hands slide. At her exultant yell, some part of him died and as he released his grip on the stick he knew: they were not meant to be.

She could not be free.

She would always flee.
Samhain Flight by Karen Milek

Donkey had said he would fetch young Rooster on the fourth full moon after midsummer, so that night She-Dog woke him after sunset to help him get ready. "Don’t forget your new comb", she said softly, giving his left wing a light lick to straighten a wayward feather. "And you should have a peck of corn before you go. It will be a long flight".

Rooster stretched his wings, flapped once (quietly), and strutted up and down the henhouse to wake himself up. This was not a natural time to be up. The hens could not be trusted to keep quiet, especially his mother, so he was careful not to wake them. He looked sidelong at Mother-Hen for a moment, sorry for the pain she would feel in the morning. It was a matter of life and death, though. He left.

She-Dog knew where to go. She herded Rooster with wet, gentle nudges away from the farmhouse, down slope towards the stream that marked the end of the farmyard and the start of the forest. Rooster had never crossed the stream before, but he would tonight. They waited there in the shadows of ash trees that swayed and creaked in the autumn breeze. She-Dog sat quietly, looking up over the forest with her ears pricked.

Rooster was too restless to stand still. He remembered the day his older brother had left, and, amidst the panic of the henhouse, how She-Dog had nosed him aside and whispered that his turn would come next year. Farmer liked to roast a young cockerel for Christmas, she had said, so they would move him to a safe place deep in the woods. His brothers were there, and would teach him how to forage and fend for himself. He would have to fly over the trees with Donkey, though, and he had never flown higher than a fencepost before, so he scratched the ground nervously as he waited.

As the full moon breached the treetops, Rooster saw a silhouette of Donkey flying on a forked tree branch. Heart pounding, he watched Donkey land beside the stream and heard him growl deep in his throat as he made impact.

"It's time", She-Dog said, nudging him onto the branch behind Donkey.

Donkey did not turn or speak, but began to run. As they left the ground, She-Dog jumped up and grabbed a mouthful of tail feathers, leaving them scattered among the leaves.

"Ow!" cried Rooster.

"Farmer will find these and will think foxes have eaten you," she called after them, as they rose over the trees.

Rooster dug his claws into the branch and clamped his wings around Donkey. Soon he felt them descend in a downward spiral, and, peering through Donkey's mane, he saw a moonlit clearing below. By the time they landed he was dizzy and confused. He just had time to register that there were many dogs ringing the clearing, but no cockerels, when they began to close in.
A Summary of Child Ballad number 409 by Kevin Cameron

Had I not anticipated the plumage to have risen from her brow as she melted behind her beak, I would not have had the time to force my form to shift. The instructions had been, for once, moderately simple, but again we found ourselves bound to earth by the form of a dog.

We pushed and strained but the space between ourselves and the ground would not open. The dog dripped tendrils of saliva from its locked jaws whilst I did my best to kick back my foot which all the time was becoming more hoof like and uncontrollable, yet I knew once changed it could strike at the skull and render the dog dead and ourselves free. Our magic could do nothing with the dogs, they were always ever there, alert and attentive, their owners held tight by a few mealy words whispered from beyond the throw of a candle. Bird squawked with her customary useless noise under the incessant bark of the dogs mate tethered outside the black hut. And then silence, the hoof had engaged and the dog suddenly was still and with it the bitch whimpering as we cleared the ground. When they found the dog dead there was the a chance that they may begin to look more closely at their child. Even the young ones and the beasts had been found guilty and destroyed.

We had done our master’s bidding and hidden in the fold of bird’s tabard was a six week baby snuffling amongst the downy feathers. It was often like this - once taken the baby would cry out, but as we gained height and the fields and enclosures of the ground below drew further from us, the baby would fall silent, becalmed by the motion of flight nestled in a bedding of a softness no earthly mother could provide. I felt no pity for the mothers. Indeed I wondered if they satisfy themselves that they would no longer have to be drained by the crying mewing maw whose appetites know of no bounds. The child we left, all would say was serene and contented, with a face as impassive as the moon itself, it would present nothing to its parents but a model of routine and orderliness.

Bird crowed. The baby was fat and strong and full of life and would become fatter and stronger still in the nursery, seen to by our mistress, a figure so bountiful it was said that she could suckle a hundred bairns and all of them would lie with the same beatific glow, their mouths sticky with the sweetness of her.