The boy’s breath faded into the damp mist sitting above the field. He clapped his hands together then moved them to his sides, trying to regain some feeling. Every frozen pothole jarred his ankles.

It wasn’t the first time he had made this journey, but without his sister he felt absolutely alone. Before she’d disappeared she had taught him all the best places so of course it was natural he’d take her place. He knew the tall conifers where the Tawny’s liked to roost, the Littles’ old oak, the remnants of Farmer Peterson’s farmhouse where the Barns resided. You just had to know where to look, she’d told him, and she was right.

The farmhouse stank of smoke from the fire the summer before and the boy blinked into the darkness. He expected to see a flash of a heart-shaped face, to be startled by a barking cry but all he could hear was his own breath. There were two castings; smooth, rounded and as long as his finger. He added them to the basket next to Little pellets he’d found on his way.

The Tawnys meant a longer trek into the woodland. His sister had told him that they were the fiercest hunters and once they were tracking a mouse, they were unlikely to be distracted, which meant the pellets were not always at the roosting spot. The sun rose above the canopy but was snuffed out before it could reach him. In the distance he heard the eerie baby-like cry of the Long Ears amongst the dawn chorus – an invitation. A warning.

When he arrived home at around 7am, he knew the Doctor would be up, fully dressed, clean shaven and at work. The boy was usually dismissed with a penny and a nod, but occasionally he was allowed to watch him carefully unwrap each pellet and soak the freshest in water, giving a satisfied ‘ah,‘ or ‘hmm’ as a particular specimen pleased him – or crumbled to dust in his delicate hands. The older ones could often be picked apart with tweezers; teasing the fur of the matrix from the tiny skulls, vertebrae, beaks and insect husks. The remains would be documented in columns in heavy backed books, then stuck with glue to card or discarded in numbered boxes at the backs of cupboards. The boy thought of his sister at the Doctor’s side, absorbed in her task. He wondered whether the man still felt guilty about what had happened.

The boy sank to the base of an ash tree and rolled a pellet between his fingers. It still amazed him that a bird could swallow a mouse whole in the first place. How a little creature could be scampering along the hedgerow one moment and be gone from existence the next. The casting was light, pointed at one end and without thinking he crushed it. It came apart easily, softly, until all that was left in his palm were fragile bones.