Flash Fiction Competition 2016

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The captain had only just turned off the seatbelt sign before Dave dug out the latest edition of the Pub League Quiz Book from his rucksack in the overhead locker. He opened it at the section on nature.

‘You need practice on your weakest subject. What is a group of owls called?’

‘Dave, do we have to do this on the flight?’

‘If we want to have any chance of getting through to the final, then yes we do.’

Same week in July, same hotel, different quiz questions.

Dave insisted I record our scores, I used the sick bag. I got ten questions before we swapped over and I tested him. Dave’s specialisms are sport and music and mine are films and general knowledge. I’d argue that I’m actually quite good at nature too but Dave would disagree. He’s never let me live it down since I lost the tiebreaker at the weekly pub quiz. An ostrich’s eye is bigger than its brain; everyone knows that one said Dave, repeatedly.

I knew the right answer but the pressure got to me. After the results were announced I’d bolted to the car park and smoked my last cigarette. It’s not wise to have any in the packet, fag burns go deep and scar.

The amount of life expectancy lost for each pack of cigarettes smoked is 28 minutes. On average, a long-term smoker’s life expectancy is about 10 years less than a non-smoker.

He did let me take a break when the flight attendant approached with the trolley. I ordered a vodka and coke; I’m not allowed alcohol during a real pub quiz. I sipped the drink and chewed on the edge of the plastic cup, wondering how long I could make it last. But being married to Dave for so many years means that he can read my mind.

‘For Christ’s sake Jenny, how long can you take over one drink? It’s less than a three hour flight; we’ll be landing before you know it.’

I gazed down at the snow covered French alps, and couldn’t stop myself from thinking about the Germanwings co-pilot who’d deliberately crashed the plane and killed everyone on board.

The highest peak in the Alps is Mont Blanc which is 4,810 metres (15,780 feet) high and is on the French and Italian border.

‘Can I go to the toilet, please?’ I asked.

His finger nails dug into my leg.

‘I’m timing you,’ said Dave and side-stepped into the aisle.
I pulled down my jeans in the loo; at the top of my thigh were four crescent moon shaped marks, livid red. I sat until there was a knock on the door.

“How long will you be in there?” asked Dave.

There is a 0.00001% chance your plane will crash. The odds of dying in a car crash are one in 5,000.

We returned to our seats and fastened our belts. I shut my eyes, praying that Spain’s drivers were still as crazy.
It was late when he entered Old Langly Wood. The moon, high and full, his only beacon of hope in the void ahead. Gently pulling on his horse by the reins, he plunged into the gap between two trees whose twisted ragged branches seem to entice him in. The coldness lay on his skin like the morning frost on the bark of a Fir, his tattered and scraggy habiliments no match for the elements. With every step and crackled branch, a hoarse breathe spluttered from his worn out lungs like a second-hand squeeze box on Ne’er’s Day.

Overhead were the raucous sounds of owls fighting over their moonlit prey. They could be courtin’, he mused, but he couldn’t be sure, but they were a comfort to him as he had grown up on a farm and their voices were familiar against the stark clear sky.

The growling wind grew to such stature he almost had to close his eyes as he clutched his cap tight against his bare balding head. The unmistakable whistling wind pulsating through every reaching branch of every ghostly tree.

His eyes broadened as looked around the copse he had entered. The Yews like dancing skeletons around him with outreaching limbs, brown leaves billowing like torn pages of an ancient decaying book. Shadowy creatures cavorted daringly on the periphery of his vision. The horripilation of his skin was increasing, with the trepidation of his surroundings mixing with his angst about meeting old Langly himself. The arch-fiend clothed in his familiar greys, carrying a knobbly hooked stick that he used to pull the innocents to his hungry mouth, full of razor teeth.

As the wood’s brittle broken bones cracked beneath his leather boots, he could see a figure, far off, staring at him, an outstretched arm pointing a knobbly hooked stick toward him.

The owls screeched above him, almost in mirth, as he started to run. Panic flowing youthfulness to his joints like urgent sorcery.

The sound of steadily closing steps pierced the winds tantrum. He clambered up on to his trusty companion, arms around the beasts’ neck like a child to its mother. He gingerly twisted his head around – his eyes were met with the yellow-eyed frown of Old Langly, his curved beak gleaming magnificently under the wary moon, the jagged and barbed glower growing in size.

The hooked stick was almost upon him.
Digging his heels in and yelling, he put his faith and life in his beast. The mare, agitated and nervous, suddenly had the pinpoint focus of a determined cannonball blasting between the clutching hands of the Yews.

He didn’t move until silence caressed his ears like a soothing straw pillow. Raising his head he saw the wood in the distance, and the outline of the encroaching village ahead.

Slipping to the ground, he embraced his gasping friend and watched as two owls – two flecks of flickering shadow – swoop and hover in the moonlight, on the edge of the old Langly Wood.
Two owls met in a tree. They did this every day at the same time. One was called Barney, the other Dexter.

“T-wit, t-woo” called Barney.

“T-wit, t-woo.” Dexter returned.

Barney turned to his brown-feathered friend, “How long is it that we have known each other now?”

“It’s almost three years Barney; I remember the first day we met here at this same tree.” His friend replied.

“Me too,” Barney said, he paused, “Say Dexter why does everyone here always look so sad?”

The tree was located in a small garden that was tended by the inmates of the North Carolina institution for the criminally insane.

“Why, look at that guy.”

Dexter craned his neck to see where his friend was looking.

Sure enough there was a man on his hands and knees with a wooden trowel scraping it slowly back and forth across the soil leaving dark tracks, his mouth fixed in a frown and his eyes echoing his sadness.

There was a young man in white uniform standing a couple of feet away from him watching him like an owner watching their dog do its business; the same level of disgust.

“Well gee I dunno Barney, not everyone here gets to tend the garden. He should consider himself lucky!” Dexter commented.

Sure enough there were some men who whilst outside had several orderlies in white surrounding them preventing them from interaction.

The two owls noticed that some men were beginning to congregate only a short distance away from the garden. The orderlies hadn’t yet noticed.

A thin bald man with deep scars across his face was marching towards a hefty black man and soon there were fists flying and curses being yelled whilst the other men looked on and shouted encouragements.

“Kill him!”

“Come on get him!” They shouted.

The orderlies spotted this and ran to the scene where they quickly broke up the fight.

As the bald man was being dragged away he squirmed and twisted in the grip of the men and woman.
“Gerroff, geroff me!” he cried.
He snapped his head round to look at the two owls, a large vein popping out of each of his temples.
“What are you looking at?!” he yelled.
He was then hastily removed before he could make another jibe.
Barney blew out the breath he had been holding in, as a sigh of relief. Dexter did the same and the two owls laughed.
It was just then that they heard the familiar claxon sounding, indicating that leisure time was over.
“Play time’s over.” Dexter said.
“Guess so.” Said Barney.
More orderlies appeared to restrain the inmates and usher them to their wards. They formed a sea of white against the odd brown uniformed soul.
Barney felt a familiar hand on each shoulder.
“Bye Dexter.”
“Bye Barney, t-wit, t-woo”
And the two men were dragged by the orderlies to opposite wards.
The last time I saw Frank he was lying face down in one of his fields, quite dead.

Instinctively I knew the owls were responsible. I didn’t know how but the ‘why?’ was obvious. Frank’s grumpiness was legendary, as were his aggressive expansion plans. His farms now suffocated a wide area in his gluttonous quest to maximise output. He unleashed gargantuan metallic beasts to gash, slash and tear at the gasping earth, obliterating hedgerows, in order to sterilise his path to ever greater riches.

From a distance the first line of the plough looked like the first cut at an autopsy.

I’m not sure why we were friends or even if we were. I had known him since school days and we grew up as bully and receiver. This unpleasant tension ended when I graduated as a solicitor and set up an office in the village. His demeanour had changed, perhaps due to my evident new confidence, or possibly he was fearful of my new capabilities, or even respectful of my knowledge. Knowledge is power and all that. I don’t know. In the early days he did come to me for advice, but became impatient when I added “but” to the end of my sentences. He said my principles interfered with good business but we agreed to differ on what good business was.

A few weeks previously I became aware of the effect the owls were having. I saw him slumped on his favourite barstool in the village pub. Grey and purple patches lined the sides of his nose and his twitchiness soured the air about him. His stained, torn beer mat acted as a reflection every time he lifted his glass.

At the time I thought his claims of owls rattling his letterbox and tapping on his bedroom window to keep him awake, laughable. But the scars on his head, where he insisted that they dive bombed him daily at his work, were more difficult to explain.

He said they waited for him!

Personally, I think the turning point was when Frank cut down the magnificent old oak that harboured and nurtured so much life. The final straw. The final tree. Finally, the rebellion was born.

It wasn’t Halloween when I found him. It was two days after. The earth where he fell was hard and unyielding. It was slightly raised, as if the ground had pushed back.
The Coroner’s report suggested that he must have fallen from over sixty feet for the injuries sustained. The police were mystified as the field was devoid of trees. They had no option but to record the death as ‘Unexplained’.

The curious thing was not that he was wearing his long, leather trench-coat, buttoned as usual to his chest; it was that the back and shoulders of the coat were covered in tiny incisions as if one hundred claws had grasped it at once.
Jack’s Owl(s)

When I met my friend Jack for an evening pint in the pub, I could tell something was troubling him. He said: just after I’d said goodbye to my friends on the late night train and it had pulled out, I was standing on the station platform when I heard a hissing kind of screech, and I briefly saw a large bird as it flitted on wheaten wing across the tracks and into the penumbra cast by the shade of the platform lamp; it disappeared into the woods beyond. It left me trembling and weak-kneed, because I realised it was a barn owl, and you know what that means. I didn’t comment on the literary allusion – Jack’s a wide reader and likes to show off, but he’s my friend. He also has a morbid streak and I knew he was going to connect the owl to some kind of bizarre superstition, owls attract all kinds of crazy associations. So I said, OK, what does it mean? It means, he replied, that I am going to die. Right, I said, that’s obvious, we’re all going to die sometime. No, no, he said with some agitation, I mean very soon. Well, I said, trying to adopt an emollient tone, you may be correct but there’s not very much you can do about it; if you’re fated to fall under a bus, then you will. You’re a big help, he said morosely, I’ll just be extra-careful when crossing the street, I’m not ready to fall under a bus. Nobody ever is, I replied quietly. That seemed to signal the end of the conversation and we went our separate ways.

We met again for our customary jar a week later. Jack was ebullient. You won’t believe this, he began, but I told my neighbour the farmer who lives up the road about seeing the barn owl, and he said, don’t worry, I’ve got just the thing for you. He returned an hour later with a dead barn owl: all we have to do is nail this above your door and you’ll be fine, the farmer said, it’s been known to work for hundreds of years. So that’s what we did. And here I am, he concluded triumphantly. OK, Jack, I said, so which barn owl prophecy do you believe in now: the prognosis of doom after hearing the owl screech, or the warding off of doom by the dead owl hanging over your door? Jack thought for a minute. Both, he said finally, one counteracts the other. I didn’t feel like pointing out that was simply profoundly illogical; Jack is my friend, after all, and there he was.
The Magpie’s Nest

The old woman must have been dead for at least a week when they broke down the flimsy plank-door to her cottage and found her in her chair, sightless eyes open like cloudy pearls, a mocking half-smile of welcome on her wizened old face. A painter, they’d said in the report, and the house was certainly strewn with examples of her work, grotesquely coloured canvases stacked against every surface; portraits of big-boned ugly women weighing down the crumbling plaster walls; and every piece of woodwork decorated and painted, the mantel piece a morass of intricately hand-carved frogs in ungainly ballet poses, tiny net tutus, stiff with age, bristling insolently around their middles.

“What a shit heap,” the constable muttered under his breath, and Sim agreed, though his keen eye was already cataloguing the room. The paintings were daubs, really, and far too bulky to be slipped out, unnoticed, and the whittled frogs, though curious, didn’t really merit his attention, and he was about to depart the dilapidated Baba Yaga’s cottage empty-handed when he saw it on the wall, incongruous in a woven rustic frame reminiscent of mad Richard Dadd and his crew of half-crazed loons, but no apologetic nude study here, instead a damp-stained lithograph of feral owls; sharp-eyed hunters of a foggy night who’d slit your throat for a shilling and sit pecking at your entrails while you counted the change.

He had to have it.

“Check the other room, would you,” he muttered mater-of-factly to the Uniform, the picture sliding neatly into his case in one fluid movement. An old trick, granted, yet one that worked every time. And he didn’t see it as stealing. He didn’t sell the pieces, after all, just preserved them for posterity and saved them from the skip. Though anyone with an ounce of imagination would have advised him to leave this one where it was and not hang it above the fireplace amidst the cornucopia of appropriated bric-a-brac that made up his lounge, oblivious to the cold yellow eyes which were following him around the room.

Unheeding, he slouched into ancient embroidered slippers and headed up to bed, pausing only to bank down the fire and erect the guard he had taken from under the very feet of a mouldering corpse two years previously, the antique Aubusson rug at his feet still bearing the brooding stains of a forgotten crime scene. *There’s a corker of a storm brewing up out there,* he thought to himself,
checking all the windows as he walked, the stair walls covered in the accusing eyes of dead people’s portraits, branches like wizened claws beating and scratching at the window panes, the wind screaming accusations as he undressed, floorboards creaking under the footfalls of phantoms who paced his halls and rattled their chains, all with the same refrain, *Thief! Thief!* 

Sim, however, slept soundly that night.

He didn’t believe in ghosts.
Madge always was the one who stood with her back to the school railings, waiting for the time to line up. At play-time she circled the playground and ended up against the wall, looking at the others chatting and playing. No-one seemed to be interested in what she had to say or if she would like to join them.

She didn’t know why some girls were more popular or how it came about. Did they have dads who had good jobs? Were they known because their mother worked in a bank? Did their uncles have a sweet shop? Or did their mothers visit each other and their daughters became friends?

Madge didn’t have a clue. She lived on a farm on the outskirts of the town and had never had the opportunity to mix with town children. Her mother was too busy during the day to have friends drop in. Family visited, but not often, so she didn’t see her cousins on a regular basis.

She tended to go for walks in the country-side, where she could daydream and imagine what life could be like if she had a choice. Friends never entered her head.

She sat in the classroom, enjoyed her lessons and subjected herself to listening and learning. If she was asked a question directly, she answered hesitantly and blushed. She remembered one girl who was popular with everybody. She gave her a present of ribbons for her hair and she felt she wanted to be her friend forever. It didn’t work out that way, but there was a connection and sometimes she joined in with some of her friends.

Later in life, she discovered that having children brought mothers together, whether it was because they met at the clinic or at the school sports day or simply going to the park and watching their children play together. Madge found herself talking while sitting next to someone on a bench. And afterwards feeling happy because she had spent some time with adults instead of children all day.

Madge had always felt a loser because she wasn’t popular and never more so than when she became aware that only those in prominent positions in the town were selected for committees.

It came as a shock when the only job she was eligible for was making tea, setting tables and clearing up at the local church young mother’s group meetings. Seemingly she would never reach the status expected to be chosen to join committees.

She resigned from the tea-making and made up her mind to become a professional. They would be the ones begging her to take on a position on a committee. She was going to be a winner in the future, not a loser. Those days were past.
Bait

There’s blood on my hands and I can’t remember how it got there—can’t get rid of it either; I know, I’ve tried—scrubbed till my skin was raw.

Blood will have blood, my da said.

That much I remember.

***

I stood by the door, watched silently as da knelt on the straw.

Come on! He said, holding out his hands. It won’t bite.

It’s still alive then? I said.

Aye, he said, but not for long. Then he smiled—a strange sort of smile.

Take hold of its jaws and pull.

I do as I’m told. But the animal’s jaws are tiny; the slavering mouth slips beneath my tentative fingers.

Jesus Christ! Da shouts. Here!

He tries to show me. But his fingers are too large, too ungainly. The animal’s jaws remain resolutely shut. You’ll have to do it, he says.

I hold my breath, slip my forefinger and thumb beneath the animal’s jaw till there’s enough leverage for its mouth to fall open. Once done, I take hold of its upper jaw and pull.

The smiling mouth hangs open like a puppet’s. My hands shake.

Hold still, boy!

I wait as da tips the contents of a small tin into the tiny mouth. Not too much, he says, we need it alive.

I want to let the animal go but da insists we wait. It’ll be dusk soon, he says. Just one more thing—

He pulls out a pocket knife. You do it he says, nodding towards the creature, it trusts you.

I shake my head. Come on boy! He says. It’s only a nick. You’re not frightened are you?

I say nothing. He presses the knife into my free hand. The blade is cold against my skin, the hilt blood red. I turn it over in the palm of my hand, weighing it up against the weight of the creature. For a few seconds I kneel there, balancing life and death.

Feels good, doesn’t it son?

I force a smile as the blade goes in. A small squeal, barely audible, and the thing, is done.

Now put it on the floor, da says.
I do as I’m told. Watch as the tiny creature tries to run. But the poison has made it sluggish, feeble; its limbs twitch—an involuntary spasm. Its fur is damp where the blood has come through.

We’ll wait awhile, says da. See if they take the bait.

Time passes. The sky changes from blue to black. Shadows creep along the wall. In the distance an owl screeches. I want to go inside—to hear ma’s sweet voice, but da says that I’m too much of a mammy’s boy; that I need to toughen up.

Blood will have blood he says, looking up. There! He whispers. Look to heaven, my son. I look up. Not to heaven but to hell as a host of wings spiral down towards us. The tiny creature stirs for a moment. I rush towards it—too late.
She dangled her feet.
The perfect view. Dark humps of silent hills, topped by the miniature shadows of bristling trees.
The river twisted darkly through the landscape, glittering under the full moon. Off in the distance, a small spiral of smoke billowed up into the air before dissipating into nothing. Smears of dark grey cloud were almost impossible to distinguish against the near-blackness of the sky.
The owl pecked at her head, strands of hair catching in its beak. She didn’t flinch; he was a friend.
He always flew just above the treeline on her nightly walks, watching with dark eyes as she kicked fallen branches out of the way.
The only time he’d ever ventured any closer was the time she tripped in the darkness, stumbling over a loose tree root. She’d somehow managed to knock herself out on a nearby stump, and lay in the rotting leaves for at least an hour. When she woke, she’d blinked open bleary eyes—and found him.
Just underneath the ceiling of intertwining branches, directly above her, he circled.
Only once she moved, groaning at the blood trickling down her temple, did he finally fly away into the close-knitted trees.
In her icy pocket, her phone started to ring. She didn’t bother reaching for it. It would be Calvin, or perhaps her boss—the only two people inconsiderate enough to ring at three a.m. She’d never introduced the two, but they shared one thing in common; their hatred of her midnight strolls.
“You could get murdered,” her husband hissed to her one morning, viciously spreading a slice of toast. “You think I want to come back home to a dead wife?”
Angie preferred the disapproval tactic. Hands on her neat hips, head cocked to the side to allow her perfectly blonde hair to tumble elegantly down her front. “Georgia, honey, you look like a half-shut knife. These nightly jaunts...look, G, they need to stop. And maybe think about getting some real sleep, hm?”
She tried. Really, she tried. But sleep seemed significantly less inviting than her owl that waited in the woods. She liked to think it was because of the fact she couldn’t sleep on her right side; but since the affair, she struggled to sleep facing Calvin.
It had gone on too long for it to irritate her. He would come visit her at work during lunch, and she wouldn’t see him until she was going to bed. He seemed to like the darkness as much as her. The secrecy, the ability to blanket everything in it. But it was in the small things, like the moonlight catching on the long, blonde hairs floating in the threads of his jumper.
The owl pecked deeper. Her throat burned, but she couldn’t feel it. Not really.
In the wind, the rope strained, squealing. The night stroked the hollow of her throat, shadowing the blossoming purple splotches. Others would join her owl. Fight over her. But she wouldn’t fight. Her feet dangled.
Hunter’s Sky

It’s cold. Clear. The stars are present and accounted for, strewn through the night like so many glinting eyes watching in vague disinterest. The wind is evident, pawing through feathers and down as he glides through the sky. It’s quiet, devoid of artificial noises. Wings spread over air currents, naturally lilting and leaning with a sleek grace. There is no moonlight tonight. He continues on, flying smoothly with predator’s eyes searching below.

The neck turns sharply, wings and body following shortly after. A murmur, a rustle, something that doesn’t quite fit with the ambience of sleeping woodland nestled in its patchwork quilt of fields. It is heard again, accompanied by a scuffling, a scratching, a skittering of small paws hidden within the leaves. Feathers spread silently. His tawny crown tilts as he curves into smaller circles around the city of tree trunks. Searching, seeking. Small sounds echoing. Ricocheting, lingering for some time then dissipating into nothingness. His head inclines, calculating.

There. A chipmunk, looking intently at its own paws, inspecting whatever is held within them. Time stretches, the world intensifies and Narrow. Already large eyes widen imperceptibly. Wings fold, claws extend, form twists and the body becomes sharp and slender. Senses become hyper-focused. Momentum builds with the descent from above. Swoop. Snatch. Snap. A deathly loud crack in the green and black of night time and nature. Wings jerk open again and push, rising upwards towards the gaps in the tops of the foliage.

He didn’t quite make it out. Collision.

Another creature; not unlike himself, abrupt in its appearance. An impact solid as a boar’s chest directly onto his own self. A flurry of feathers leads to a claws through the soft down, raking through the creamy brown fluff as a farmer might plow his fields. Featherlight bones shudder in contact with each blow. A scrabble for a limp lump of a creature in midair, every bit as dangerous as aerial combat could be. A talon scores the chest. A beak strikes to the back of the head. Clawing and grappling and falling and tussling, muffled screeches and shrieks shattering what tranquillity was left.
A flip, a lurch, a slash; the other was gone, careening off down, down into the depths of the trees and god knows what below. If the snap of his wings extending to break his fall had occurred to be heard, he wouldn’t know.

A wingbeat, the same stretch of time for a heartbeat, and he turned to return to where he had come from. One chipmunk heavier, but several feathers lighter. His tail seems less whole than it had been the previous hour. The sky was still dark, cold. The stars were still watching, but of course had made no effort to prove anything of the sort, as stars are wont to do. The sky was clear. The silence rushed back in to engulf the night, to claim it for the hunters to which it belonged.
Owl’s Light

One morning Thea found the black-tipped tail of a stoat floating in the birdbath. She asked Magnus to lift it out but he recoiled at the suggestion, his yellow teeth grinding together as if chewing a lemon. In that moment, she knew she’d made a mistake.

They had clicked on the web, where she typed words through dark nights till she was breathless and the tips of her fingers burned. He sent her love poems in the post written on handmade paper in carnelian coloured ink. They never talked about routine things - the practicalities of painting a fence, or emptying the septic tank. They were night creatures, intoxicated by the buzz and hum of a laptop and the tap of fingernails on a keyboard. Bursting with words he wanted to feel on his lips, Magnus left his treeless island home and travelled south.

At first Thea accepted the tiny, irritating things – his electric-blue mouthwash splattered over the wash basin; the unravelled edge on the toilet roll; his love for brown sauce slicked over everything he ate.

Next day, two pink feet, the mask, and cloak of a garden mole lay abandoned on the edge of the birdbath. Thea stroked the velvety fur, grotesque yet beautiful, the mole’s stubby whiskers beaded with dew. She suspected the hoolet that perched on the sycamore outside their bedroom window. She had first heard it the night Magnus moved in. It hooted to the beat of his noisy love making while she counted the hoots in her head as if counting sheep. When Magnus grunted and rolled-over, she would lie listening to the tom cats fighting by the rubbish bins as rain gurgled in the down-pipe and the wind whipped round the house like a stiff brush.

She wasn’t sure when her thoughts began to fester. She now bristled when he ate with his mouth open and his habit of wearing socks in bed, even in summer, was no longer endearing. She knew she’d become bewitched by the hoolet’s presence - it’s free spirit. She often fought sleep waiting to catch the shadow of its wings suspended in moonlight against the thin curtain.

One morning Thea slipped from her empty bed in the barely light and tip-toed barefoot through the garden, shaking rain from the anemones as she brushed past them on the path. The air was already viscous with fuming wasps gorging on a thick gob of sticky blood that stained the
lip of the birdbath. Something made her breath catch in her throat. A pepper-speckled, cream feather lay on the damp grass at the foot of the pedestal. She picked it up, fingering its silky length.

Somehow she knew in that second that Magnus was gone.

Night after lonely night Thea would stand by her window wringing out a tea-bag. Her head swivelling at every sound; her heart suspended in the darkness; her round amber eyes watching for the hoolet’s shadow.
Once clear of the park he looked over his shoulder. There was definitely someone following him. He swallowed down the nervous lump in his throat as he climbed the stairs up to his apartment. Safe at last.

Or so he thought. Just as he pulled open the door to his apartment a dark gloved hand shot out and slammed it closed. A grin was plastered on the young boy’s face. “Inspector,” he said and the detective’s blood ran cold. There was a chorus of noise from the other boys in the entourage as the main boy pushed him back. He recognised the boy shoving him about instantly, a boy who called himself Miller. The Inspector had just been gathering evidence to prosecute him for arson and manslaughter he was so close to convicting him. “You’ll leave me alone Inspector. Or you’ll be next,” he said, delivering a swift punch to the detective’s stomach then stalking off back into the shadows.

The next day the detective banged on the boy’s door yelling “Police!” No answer. He wasn’t one for losing his temper, but he punched the wall and expressed just how much he hated that little brat.

It took him a while to track Miller, it was dark now. Eventually he found him though. Cautiously, he entered the alleyway. He heard someone call out, “Detective!” and he spun around. There was Miller, standing there with a gun pointed in the detective’s direction. All he registered was a bang and then a burst of pain. He fell backwards onto the cold wet ground. He heard footsteps running away and the clatter of a gun landing on the ground. Then there was silence.

It felt like he was lying there for hours but in reality it had only been minutes until he heard the wailing of sirens in the far off distance. Something caught his eye. It darted passed his line of vision and swooped under another white blur. As his eyes came in and out of focus it dawned on him that it was a snowy owl. In the clutches of the owl was a struggling mouse. It was wiggling about to try and get free. He watched as it fell from the owl’s talons and disappeared into a hole in the wall. He listened as the owl screeched and dived after it. He barely registered through the immense pain in his stomach and his sluggish brain that a fox leapt up from behind the bin, making its presence known before it grabbed the owl right out of the sky and snapped into it with its sharp teeth. The hunter had become the hunted.
Just like the detective.

He’d been the owl once. He’d had Miller right in his clutches. Then he’d been stupid enough to chase the mouse into its hole only to discover the hard way that it had protection. Now he was paying for his mistakes just like the owl had.

Everything went dark...
‘But you mustn’t go,’ said the first owl to the vole, holding him firmly in his clutches. ‘You must stay with us, and not go your own way, for it shan’t end well for you.’

‘But I want my freedom,’ the vole protested to the owl. ‘I want to go and live as I see fit.’

‘But the other voles don’t want to leave,’ crowed the second owl. ‘They don’t want the upset of a departure.’

‘I speak for my fellow voles,’ the vole insisted, struggling to get loose, only for the first owl to hold him even more firmly in place. ‘We all want to get free. You are holding us back. We want to do things our way.’

‘But you can’t,’ the first owl declared, increasing his grip on the vole. ‘You don’t have the resources to go on your own. You need the protection of bigger beasts.’ He smiled. ‘An attachment to something bigger.’

‘But we can be resourceful alone,’ the vole shouted. ‘We can find our own ways of looking after ourselves. It is better to take a leap than remain tethered to something out of fear.’

‘But you still want to remain part of the forest,’ the second owl sneered. ‘You want to stay in this dirty, unpredictable forest when you should be more keen to stay in this tree with us, where we, your primary providers, will look after you.’

‘But the forest offers more opportunities than just staying alone in this tree. We voles want to be part of something bigger that is also outward-looking. We don’t want to be isolated in one stubborn, tiny part of a much bigger wood.’

‘But we owls opted to leave the forest,’ the first owl countered. ‘We decided to go, and you belong to us. So, you must come along with us, and do as we decide.’

‘But that is not fair!’ shrieked the vole, furious now that he would not be released. ‘We voles almost universally wanted to stay, and yet you took us out of the forest against our will. We voles may now insist on leaving this tree.’

‘But you won’t,’ snarled the second owl. ‘Your fellow voles don’t want such a change, and you will be humiliated if you attempt to prove otherwise. The will of your fellow voles will see an end to your foolish quest to leave this tree that has always nourished you.’

‘You are determined foes,’ the vole acknowledged, ceasing his squirming for now. ‘But, in the end, your messages of fear and chaos and doom will not win. We voles will decide what we want. It will be our choice to make.’

The owls ignored the vole’s speech, and smiled with satisfaction, confident they would retain their prey.
The vole, meanwhile, observed his foes, his gaolers, and, rather than hysterically trying to break loose, began to calculate how best to achieve his escape calmly.

*We will be free*, the vole thought to himself. *One day.*
At night

There it was. That horrible sound – the sound of death.
I stood inside my bedroom and looked out into the dark forest. The only source of light was that of the round, big moon. Its illumination was enough for me to witness the crime happening right in front of my eyes.
The two murderers had already approached their victim and stared at him with black, yet shiny, greedy eyes. The killers were revolving their prey, coming closer and then being distant again. At first, the little creature did not notice its hunters but after some time it realised that it was not alone anymore. Even I could see those agitators rushing by and observing their casualty carefully. They were waiting for the perfect moment to attack and get what they most desired that night: the little, innocent chipmunk that had no idea about tonight being his doomsday. I could see the fear and panic creeping up in his eyes as he was hectically jumping from one tree branch to the other to escape the two deadly owls that were still orbiting the small animal.
I felt sorry for the little fellow as it had nowhere to go and could certainly never escape the watchful eyes of its raptors. He was trapped. Still, I wished for a miracle to happen that could save the chipmunk from being killed.
He was still desperately and hopelessly hurrying up and down the tree. The owls started approaching the tree closer once again and began to play their version of tag. There was no possible way to flee now. The chipmunk was surrounded. I could see the panic starting to grow in his little beady eyes. His squeaks were horrible, like those of an innocent convict. The prosecutors answered the chipmunk’s cry for help with a terrifying screech that made a cold chill run down my spine. It sounded like an insane laugh; as if they knew that there was no way of escaping them, ever.
However, it seemed as if the striped creature had suddenly found a way of escaping. He dashed up the tree, round and round. As he reached the top, he stopped and I now realised what his plan was: there was a long, thin branch reaching out so far making it possible for him to jump on one of the other trees and disappear in the small hole the trunk had ready for him to hide in. The chipmunk was about to race down that branch and make a jump for it when the cold hearted murderers saw what he was about to do and caught him with one of their ghastly claws.
I turned around because I did not want to see any more. The chipmunk’s last and agonizing squeak was more than I could take, so I went back to bed and fell into a restless sleep.
Since then, I never heard the two birds again and every other night was as still as it had been before.
Harbinger of Death

I hunt at night, like an owl, finding my prey in the darkness. It is not evil, as some people would like to think, but only a matter of meeting my needs. This is the wisdom of natural, accumulated lore.

Slowly I walk down a side street in half-light, my acute sight and hearing alert. It is late but a long time until morning. I know there will be someone who will be leaving a party or taking a shortcut; I have stalked here before.

The click of stilettos on concrete, an unsteady rhythm, is now coming closer. A doorway enfolds me. Soon she makes her way past me and I can make out alternating pale and dark stripes on her top; she is a chipmunk! My laughter is swallowed and bubbles inside me like soda.

Pursuit begins as she stumbles, fumbling her phone from her pocket and speaking. “Jason? Please pick up, Jason. I’m sorry. I’m lost somewhere and I need you to come and pick me up. I’ll look for a street sign. I don’t know how I got here. I drank too much at that party. Jason, where are you? Oh, shit, please don’t break up! Please don’t! Oh, fuck it!” Phone goes back into pocket, on second attempt.

This is the part I like best; I can see what she is feeling and thinking as she hesitates, runs her hands through her hair, darts looks all around at unhelpfully blank buildings, stops, starts back toward me, then changes course again.

She does not realise that it is getting darker and quieter in the direction we are headed but my eyes and ears adjust accordingly. I move closer. She is starting to suspect now, looking back over her shoulder with her steps clicking faster. I do not want to spook her because she might get away at this point if things do not go as I hope. Not every hunt is successful, even if you have chicks at home to provide for.

But she has tripped and fallen over so I am in luck. Quickly I move in for the slaughter, hitting her hard so that she will not scream. Into an alley so no one will see us and try to play hero. That has happened before and it is wasteful to kill more than you need to. My knife does its work and the business is finished: two pairs of earrings for my daughters and the ear is for me.
“The Hunt”

She felt the trees scratching her skirts like claws and heard the fine fabric tear over and over again, but she could not stop. First she had tried to hold her breath to escape unheard, but now her lungs rasped like an old woman’s and every inhale of the freezing air felt like someone stabbing a knife into her chest. It was too dark to see where she was running. Just the pale moon drew some patches of light through the nearly bald trees and when her foot was caught by something hidden in the floor of the woods she fell forward, stifling a cry. Her elbow bumped hard against the bark of a tree but she barely noticed the pain and huddled herself together in a tight bundle. For seconds she heard nothing but the blood rushing in her ears and her heart pounding like the broken bell of a clock. Would they walk past her if she stayed here hidden in the shadows or would they just find her quicker? A voice inside her head told her to stay, that she was lost in this wood, a mouse in a maze and that all her companions were dead. She bit her lip and tasted bitter iron.

A faint rustling in the leaves in front of her made her back away until she was pressed against the trunk of the tree. The moon shimmered on the dark fur of a tiny animal a chipmunk she noticed. The black eyes of the chipmunk looked up at her like shimmering pearls and she leaned forward again, when something rushed down. This time she could not suppress an outcry. A heap of feathers fought in the rustling leaves, dark wings stretched out, with pale feathers illuminated by the moon, but the struggling stopped as suddenly as it had begun and she stared into the eyes of a big screech owl. In its sharp claws dangled the limp body of the chipmunk. The owl looked at her and its beak reflected the moonlight like pure metal. Then it ruffled its feathers and vanished into the crown of the tree with two silent strokes of its wings.

She sat frozen in the dark. The wind made the dead leaves sound like crumpled paper and blew like ice right through her torn dress. She could not hear the approaching footsteps and when she smelled burning wood and lifted her head she saw the flames of torches lighten up the trunks of the trees. The torches circled closer and closer to her hiding spot. Her heart beat seemed to cease. A torch came near to her face and she saw metal reflecting the light. “Now, there you are little mouse. Quite a hunt to find you.” A heavy hand gripped her arm and pulled her to her feet. As she stumbled along, she heard a shrill cry over her head, like she had never heard one before. “Owls, little mouse. Screech-owls.”
The Tempestuous Dance

Heaven feels oh so heavy today. Unbearably so. The sea swells over itself, its waves swallowing the cost line with nonchalant gluttony. The trees are defencelessly swaying where they stand, so tall and so unaware of their own mortality. The rain ties everything to the low-hanging sky above. And I, I am oh so tired.

How long the day has been. How much I have put behind myself. Down the river I went, on my way to where land ends and the air gets colder. I am now so cold, oh so cold. A fresh memory from when the sun was behind the horizon, instead of the clouds, is wedged in my weary head, causing me to see things that are not here.

It was as if a silk ribbon had been teared from the sky, then laid down on the earth to mirror all that happened overhead. The sleepless night was gloomy and darkly grey, therefore the river was the very same way. Nevertheless, there was no rain here to connect the water to the heavens, not yet. Nature, with its great fields of thin grass, and patches of thick, secretive forest, was unnaturally still in anxious anticipation.

The sudden movements of the wings made the rest of the world into an insignificant background. Sharp claws tore the night apart as a life had just been taken. The shell of a squirrel hung from the foot of an owl; the prideful, yellow-bellied creature who was so used to death by now, that she gladly welcomed it as fuel for her own survival. She thought that she had already won.

Yet, there was a second beast, one that at first did not appear as a threat. He was all at once older and more inexperienced, filled with nothing but hunger for what he did not already have, angrily screaming to give him what he saw that he deserved.

A dance broke out. Slow at first. Only heads turning with irritated shrieks. Then there were talons. And then there were wings. The small corpse of the innocent rodent swung helplessly from bird to bird, not able to do a thing. Oh, how could the world be so cruel? What gave these brutes the right to fight over a lost life that did not belong to either of them?

I can recall looking away, disgusted by the sight of this waltz of meaningless death. Is that why the sky now cries its heavy rain over me? Can such a small loss affect something as infinite as the universe above? Since I do not know I cannot say that I care; the only thing I am aware of is that I loathe this water-filled air.

Thus I will quit troubling my mind with what is left behind in the distant night. All that I long for is to lay down and get the rest that I so desperately have desired. For heaven feels so very heavy today, and I am so very tired.
Prey

The swift waters of the river foamed white beneath the rising moon. Even from the hilltop, the children could see no bridge nor way across its broad expanse. On weary feet they stumbled their last few steps and sank down to rest beneath a tree that clung to the rocky summit with roots like gnarled fingers slowly losing their grip. Wind and age had bared its branches, but there was no wind tonight to make them creak. The children whispered in the stillness, huddled close for warmth.

“I’m hungry.”
“There’s no bread left.”
“I’m hungry.”
“You ate the last of it.”
“I’m hungry!”
“We don’t have any food!”

Tears began to form in the creases of the younger child’s eyes. His sister looked away and down towards the river, staring at the trees on the other bank, straining to see through the falling gloom.

“How are we going to cross...that?”

Only sniffles answered her faltering whisper. There was no other reply to give. There was no way across that river. Even before they climbed the hill they had known the height would show them no secret path, no brightly-lit bridge in the distance over which they might cross. Like the gleaming metal lines of an army, the water barred their escape.

“Why can’t we go back?”

The child still didn’t understand.

“Why don’t we go home? I wouldn’t be hungry if we were home.”

“Shut up! We can’t go home.”

“Why?”

Tears glinted in the girl’s eyes. She rubbed them angrily away, and answered her brother only with a shushing sound. The harsh noise echoed against the rocks, and she drew the little boy closer.

“We just can’t,” she said softly, cradling him in her arms. “We can’t go back. Don’t ask anymore.”

His lips still trembling, the little boy finally gave in. After a while, he closed his eyes and drifted into exhausted silence.

The screeches of the owls woke them both abruptly.

Limned against the star-strewn night, the birds were struggling in the leafless branches above the children, great wings beating at the sky and claws scrabbling against wood as they fought. A
ground squirrel dangled by its broken neck from the beak of one, and while the children watched with terrified, white eyes, the other owl snatched at it, screaming when it caught only the fur of the tail. The owl tried again, darting towards its rival, and this time, its sharp, curved beak tore into the flesh of the squirrel. Small flecks of blood disappeared into the space beneath the owls, now locked together over their prey.

They did not see the children trembling below the net of dead branches as they fought.

They did not hear the growing sobs of the frightened boy, as their beaks severed the carcass of the squirrel, ruining it beyond all recognition.

Had the children screamed at them to stop - desperate, pleading screams - even that would not have ended their battle over the remaining scraps of meat.
The Sharp Hook

“Please don’t make me,” the child begged. Charles had already tried this morning but Mrs Tavery forced him to have another attempt.

“It’s not hard,” his Mother reasoned, edging the boy closer to the water.

“I can’t though,” Charles whimpered.

His Mother was infuriated that her son was such a coward. She had not found teaching her other children to swim this difficult. She called Charles’ siblings over to help. Tentatively the boy ambled in to waist height then halted before submerging himself.

“At least it’s progress,” she sighed.

Mrs Tavery ventured into the town on horseback, only passing one small cart. As she dismounted a short man stood outside his shop; polishing a large hook. Once inside the shop she gazed at the Pike which was displayed dangling from a twelve-inch hook. This menacing hook possessed serrated barbs.

“Not as big as Old One Eye,” the shopkeeper pointed out.

“Really?” Mrs Tavery replied.

Days ago, while camped alongside a nearby river, patiently waiting, she had written a letter to her Mother who liked across the border in Devon. Now though the angler was captivated by the ultimate prize of the river: Old One Eye.

The shopkeeper told her of the legendary behemoth. He exclaimed that the largest Pike in all Cornish rivers even had a bounty on its head, as a result of gorging on drowning farm animals as well as rare birds.

Mrs Tavery leaned over the wooden counter and asked for a price for the lethal hook.

“Three shillings.”

The Mother of four shook on it and money exchanged hands.

“I’ll even throw in some decent bait,” the enthusiast bargained.

As she crossed the bridge to the nearby river it was in the knowledge she should have returned directly to her family. The Cornish weather settled in, the sky looked bleak. Through the fog she could just distinguish her small holding.
Old One Eye was more than a fish but a trophy, a trophy she could earn for herself. Flowing rapidly, the river was a perfect place for the pike to be hunting.

Normally her children would be just downstream at this time practising, she should have taken them, should be supervising. The rod felt heavy in her hands, the hook’s weight and price would be worth the trouble if she landed her desired catch. Shoulders broad, hands clenched she could feel an awkward jerk forward. Digging her heals into the saturated ground she heaved backwards and began to reel in. Old One Eye put up a good, strong fight though her might eventually prevailed.

Relishing her prize she wrenched back eyes firmly shut. Something gave. She had landed it. Relief washed over her, she peeked...

Gargling on his own blood was Charles. The hook was deep in his throat. His face an image of agony. Rushing in Mrs Tavery clutched her youngest child as he drowned in thick, red blood. His innocent life in her guilty arms.
The Darkness Came Crawling

The darkness came crawling. Slowly it stole over rocks towards me, smothering the last of the light as it passed over retreating flowers. Silently it moved, my eyes fixed on the front between light and shade, the boundary between all I could see, and all I could imagine. I peered through the hole of my bivvy bag as I pulled the cords tighter and slowly watched the world disappear. Silence. Far below I knew there was a river flowing but its gentle trickle was now silent to me, the sound of blood rushing instead, my heart forcing it faster around my body, the sounds of my life betraying its presence as though amplified a thousand times within this echo chamber, this terrible choice for a place to sleep, this dark and foreboding canopy of trees.

A noise. A scuttling scurrying right past my head I’m imaging it I must be. I’m sweating now but the bivvy bag tiny hole is pulled tighter. I can hardly breathe and the pinhole breathing gap only serves to make me gasp for every inch of life.

In the distance, moans, as though the ghouls have awoken, approach, dragging their feet as they come through the dead leaves and bark of the tangled forest floor, rising up from the dank, hidden swamps of the deep forest core. I have chosen the very spot where they dance at night and they walk now around my entombed body. Will they prod me to see if I am alive? Will they just grab me now and feast on my mortal soul? Or do they mistake me for some fallen log and I will go unnoticed as they perform their dark rituals around my motionless, petrified form?

Who is this heavier one now? Gasping it comes! Four legged if I’m not mistaken I can’t bear it as it slowly parades around my body. The scattering all around the chamber must be the start of the dance and he leads, but why the sudden, single, piercing, painful screech of a second? What was the screech? Am I hearing the undead signify the peak of the revelries or was some other poor soul the sacrifice and I’ve just listened to the agony of his final moment on God’s forsaken Earth?

Something passed by the pinhole. And again, a fluttering in silence but my vision was definitely disturbed. Do I turn, no I don’t move I daren’t move as the pinhole flickers its silent movie onto a screen I can’t see. There’s a coming and going, a to and fro, a push and pull, a sickening tear and rendering of flesh I can hear it so close I can smell the death.

Then of a sudden, as silent wings rise, the stillness descends. And now the darkness cowers in fear for the gates of nightmares are about to open, as I slowly, inevitably, succumb to sleep.
The Hollow

He took flight, a mouse clasped between his claws. The river snaked through the land beneath him, trees on either side, mountains looming over the landscape, sheltering the him from the harsh winds. Mist reached across the fields, the night’s hand closing around the landscape beneath him, the cold darkness draining the world of life.

As his feathered wings lifted him above the icy ground, one of his brethren dived down onto him, looking to steal the hunted prize. Hen banked to the left, landing on a dry, brittle branch which leaned over the land beneath, framing it in a perfect picture.

The other winged creature landed on a branch beneath, taking a quick grab at the mouse with his sharp beak. He pulled away from the tawny, securing his prize with a quick slash across it's throat.

With the limp body hanging in his talons, he took flight, soaring over the landscape once more. He glided up and over a mountain, feeling the wind buffet him from the unsheltered height.

And there. A small tree in a dip of the mountain, an indent in the landscape, a natural shelter. He beat his wings faster as he descended into the comfort of home, slowing almost to a standstill as he landed, swaying the branch he perched on a little. Looking up, he saw a cluster of twigs and sticks sitting on the fork of a branch. He heard a little cry of a baby sparrow emanating from the nest. He dropped his forgotten meal, seeing an opportunity to claim something better. Silently, with only the rush of air battered by his wings, he ascended to the nest. He saw three small babies, eyes closed, blind, staring into the night, awaiting their mother’s return. As they sensed his presence, they started to squeal, a murmur first, then a screech as he extended his bony claw toward one of the sparrows. He struck out, swiftly and deadly, hooking his bloody talons around the babies' head, squeezing it until the squealing stopped and the satisfying crunch of bone breaking reached his ears. Another deadly swipe of a claw, another squealing ceased, and he held two juicy meals, one in his dry, hungry beak, another in his lethal grip. Quickly beating his wings, he descended one more, to the lower branches. He ripped into his juicy meal, tearing out the throat of his succulent prize, devouring it to satisfy his hunger. And once nothing was left but bone, he moved on to the second, savagely and crudely ripping it to pieces, sating his appetite but also fuelling his journey home.

Once more he took flight, soaring over the lip of the mountain, diving back into the valley, returning to the comforting hollow in the branch of the tree, the sunrise creating a shadow in the hollow in which he nocturnally sleeps.
"The Hunter, the Owl and the Wiseman"

Crack of a gun. The stale powder smoke hung heavily in the air, the echo and a lazy twist of smoke reached up through the trees to those blue tinged hills. The Forest paused, frozen by the shot.

The handsome hunter lowered his gun, he had sufficient prey to eat that night. His hands nimble on the guns mechanism, his delicate tipped fingers poured the trickle of powder from the horn, nonchalant with practice and easy with needed precision. Another rodent bolted, a crack violated the quiet forest.

Two loose furs slung across his shoulder he reached the cobbled outbuildings, a jaunty swing to his downhill step.

By the roadside sat a scruffy Wise man, legs crossed, his soles bare to the world through worn out shoes.

"Spare one of those rabbits for a tired traveler and I will reward you with knowledge of the trials ahead of you."

The hunter pondered his offer as he looked to the village, he knew all he needed. He noticed a young maid kneeling at the village washing trough.

Soap splashed as she scrubbed, the curve of her rump swaddled by linen apron over her heels. A trickle of perspiration across her bosom under her loose collar as she looked up, dark eyes and white blond hair.

"I will wash your shirt for one of those rabbits"

Just past the hunters camp, a set of walls in the village not claimed by man nor beast, the Wise man stood.

"What will your answer be?"

The girl looked over her shoulder giving that hurried dark eyed glance again.

The man looked from the young woman to his white clean chest between the lapels of his richly embroidered jacket. His shirt was clean but he gave the rabbit to her anyway, because she pleased him.
Her black eyes followed him keenly to where his saddle and pack rested, her breasts swinging under her damp blouse as she turned. The night would see her claws sink into him, casting her unearthly spell.

Lights shone from the windows of the village that night, laughter rang out onto the cobbled street, a blanket of warm air covered the shadowy corners. Later the man crossed his knee high boots by the fire and slept, unaware it was his last night in the circle of its warmth.

The next evening his tall horse followed the path out of the village black ebony legs in the darker woods. A snort and skitter from the steed as an owl swooped across the path, white fleshy underside alluring in the night, the Wise man rested a hand on the horses velvet neck as he paused to watch the bird.

Mouse in beak, claws on branch, the eyes of the Hunter followed him. Accusing eyes, as if he had interrupted a private moment, another Owl joined the first reaching to take the prey. The Wise man chuckled as he rode away. “Betterment differs for each of us.”
Softly It Persuades

She leaves me in a dim corridor that smells like old newspaper and boot polish
“I expect an answer when I come back, young man.” I wish the machine would sign itself.
Mrs Sinclair comes back with a smirk at the corner of her lips, and asks me again what I think. I
look again at the picture, and my uniform feels a size smaller.
I sense that she has always been here on the wooded bluff above the river. She was here before
the house and before the trees. Her eyes are dead monitor black. Full dark at a million pixels.
I am sure her question is a test. I respond in the only way I have ever known, and answer in the
manner I believe I am expected to respond. The corridor walls compress and impose. Mrs Sinclair
tilts her head to one side. She appraises my authenticity.

*

Media asks the Upper to raise her wing higher.

“Make it like a sail,” enthuses the young officer. “And you – tilt your head back further. A little
more. A little more…”

Both subjects know full well they would never be caught in this pose in the wild. We do not share,
they think. We do not pair. They stare darkly at Media who pauses, snaps, then tells them the
story of the Big Lie.

The Big Lie is bigger than anyone might believe, and thus the more plausible. Media describes
young men in the future, filled with a murderous glee, adoring of the horde. Hints at swathes of
the dead like the stars that flank this very shoot.

Both birds, taller than most, deathless and white, understand what it means to lend plausible
motivation. They measure a mortal’s authenticity. The lower subject opens a beak and rasps.

Media shudders.

*
Years later, I would remember the drive back at the end of the shift. The window open and the blackness streaming past outside. Hot, sullen, moist air at Summer’s tail. The van’s meagre illumination.

The depot was empty. What do I think, she asked, so slowly.

I gave myself over unto the most abhorrent acts. Mrs Sinclair’s genteel mockery, needling me across the years. Two owls, and I bent my will further and further to become that which I thought I ought to be.

There are photos of me, with the other boys. The things we did with knives. Only ever posed.
Beak, Bone, Blood.

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.
The Hunters

It was a cold stormy night beside the River Don. The water was rapidly going downstream. The wind was howling like a wolf. Eventually after 4 long hours the rain stopped. It was about midnight so it was pitch black, so there were no people to be seen. The first thing to come out was a little fragile mouse. The mouse was scurrying around in the long wet grass. He was looking for food, any little scraps he could possible find. After the mouse was out all the animals started to come out. There were badgers, rabbits and all the little beasties came out. To hunt!

It was all trouble until all of a sudden a fox appeared the fox ran after the animals. The mouse had fallen behind as his little legs couldn’t keep up. The fox was closing in, He was just away to snap when all of a sudden a brave barn owl swooped down and scooped the mouse up in his talons and flew away to a nearby branch. As the owl was flying away the fox was screaming at him. The owl put the mouse down beside him on the branch. The fox was under the high hanging branch to wait for him. The owl flew away and left the mouse at least that what he thought.

When he looked back he didn’t see the mouse or the fox. So he turned around and flew back. Then he saw them the men standing with a bloody fox over one shoulder and a rifle in hand. There were no live animals in sight. Then he saw the mouse crawl away into the long grass. The over man had a rifle on his back and holding their bloodhound back so he couldn’t just run away. They were thumping around in their wellies as the water splashed up from below their feet. The hunters kept going on a fast pace so the owl slowly but surely kept going along behind them. The dog was pulling away from them now so the lead was getting tight and then all of a sudden snapped and the dog went rushing of ahead. The 2 hunters were fighting now shouting at each other and every time they spoke their voices got louder. They weren’t paying attention to the dog that came out the long grass and then came out with an injured leg the 2 men were still yelling at each other. The dog came over winging and the two men stopped and looked down and one got a bandage out and started to wrap it round the dogs leg as the other pulled his gun and pointed it towards the grass he had just came from. Then he started to walk in he heard growling so went back out and tripped over his own feet.

He had fear trembling on down his face he ran away and to this day he didn’t know what was in the grass and hasn’t returned.
Robert was looking at himself in the mirror, white to greying polo shirt, bulging stomach and blue jeans that barely fit. He still had his hair though. He was 40, this was not what he thought life would be.

Sarah entered the room, “Where are you going tonight, Robert”? She said his name. They used to have cute couple names for each other but for the last two years it was first name basis only. Every time she said Robert there was hardness in her voice, that wasn’t there when they had married. ‘What does she know? I’ve been very careful. She knows something’. “Just drinking with Sean and some other workmates. What are...”. She had already left the room. She had changed and it was his fault and for that he felt the most guilt.

He looked at himself in the mirror again and into those eyes. ‘I’ll end it tonight, one way or another’. He knew himself well enough not to make any grand promises, like an addict, for that is what he was, he knew the power it had over him. For the brief moments during copulation all the world was grey except for it, his dreams, his fancy car, his wife and their decade of marriage. The beast was always there in the back of his skull, roaming its territory awaiting to take control of him. Then once it had killed it would flee back and it would just be Robert and another problem, another debt and a lie to make. ‘It will end tonight’. The beast laughed, it had heard it before.

He looked down at his hand, the god of the cards had blessed him. Even as the last player around the table folded he could sense the way out. The game for the first time had given him an out. This was money to clear the slate and maybe a new beginning for him and Sarah. But the beast would not let go. He could hear it speak; ‘You don’t want a new beginning, you want more, this isn’t and will not be enough. I am you and you are me, cut me off, you cut yourself off. Sure, go home, clear your debts, make peace with Sarah – but then what? Wash the car? Do the shopping? Go to work? Then do it over and over again until you die’.

‘What is my answer to this? I have none’. As Robert drove home an owl swooped overhead. He remembered learning how the Romans feared owls as they were omens of defeat and a sign of death. ‘The beast is my defeat’. He stopped at some lights when something clicked within him. ‘It’s all a bluff, the beast is a bluff. It has nothing. Time to fold’.

Robert got out of the car and as he walked through the door he saw an envelope on the table:

It was from Sarah: I am at my sisters, I’ve had enough. Goodbye....
Flash Fiction

It was 1884, in Brazil, next to the Amazon River.

Lewis the owl saw a car hit a tasty bit of squirrel. He swooped his wings and flew through the night sky.
He picked the scrumptious bit of road kill up and flew to his favourite tree to have his snack. He decided to put his squirrel down in his tree hidden away. He then flew down to the river to have a swig of water.

He met his buddy pal Reese at the river while having a drink. They talked about the squirrel that got hit by the car and Reese said that he hasn’t eaten in 3 days and he would love a bit of squirrel. Lewis said ‘Not pal, that’s my road kill.’ Reese then said ‘mate I’ll give you 10 sticks for it.’ Lewis said ‘do I look cheap mate? 100 sticks and it’s yours.’ Reese startled Lewis by saying ‘Lewis I saw you hid the squirrel in the tree next to mine, I will just go and get it for myself.’ Lewis said ‘that’s next to you tree?’ Reese then said ‘aye, and I’m going to nibble on that squirrel.’ Lewis had a final swig of water and when Reese wasn’t looking he started to run. Surprisingly Lewis ran fast for an owl who hasn’t eaten in 3 days. He then took off flight and darted towards the beefy, buff and meaty squirrel which his feathered foe was after. Lewis continued on his journey to his dinner, which his buddy Reese, who was no longer his friend, was after as well. Reese arrived at the tree and started a rumble, a fight, a war. After 5 minutes of pointless fighting Lewis had picked up the squirrel with is claws and tried to fly away.

Reese didn’t like this so before Lewis got away, Reese grabbed his leg and fought him for the squirrel.

Down on the forest floor a hunter called Hamish was hunting for food. He saw two owls fighting. The hunter decided to get to higher ground as him and his family has not had a proper meal in weeks. He ran up a hill to get closer and get a much better angle on the shot.

Lewis and Reese were still fighting. Lewis lost a toe and an eye and multiple feathers. Reese started to strangle Lewis.

Amish jumped of a tree and shot and got a collateral on the owls.
Lewis was about to die then BANG! They had been no scoped by hamish.

The hunter collected the owls took them home and cooked them for him and his family.
Unlikely Heroes

I’m John. I live in a small woodland area surrounded by fields, farm cottages and streams. My house is a huge old oak tree that gently sways in the wind. Yes, I am a squirrel and it was a cold spring morning when my relaxing lifestyle changed.

I was foraging for acorns, my favourite snack, when I heard a loud disturbance in the bushes behind me. I decided to go back to my oak tree just to be safe. Anyway, I had plenty of acorns to last me the day. I sat in my house nibbling at my stash of acorns for what felt like hours. Once I had filled up on acorns I peeked my head out of my house to see if any predators were watching me, there didn’t seem to be anyone. As I edged down my tree my ears twitched with every sound. Once I reached the bottom of my tree I became more confident that I wasn’t in any danger.

I started foraging for more food when I heard a twig snap behind me. I spun around to see what had made the noise when another twig snapped to my right. Convinced there was something there, I started to make my way back to my tree. Just as I reached its trunk I turned and saw a massive grey dog bounding towards me. Its big feet the size of my small face. I was frozen to the spot with fear. The dog was three seconds away, then two. I closed my eyes, waiting for the impact, but it never came. I opened my eyes and I was shocked to see that I was no longer on the ground! I looked up to see that I was in the claws of an enormous white owl. As the owl flew higher and higher my tree grew smaller and smaller. I was going to get eaten, I just knew it. In a few minutes I would be this owl’s lunch.

It placed me down on a high up branch just as another owl landed next to it. I started thinking about how I had had a good life when the owls did something that truly shocked me. Instead of pecking my eyeballs out they both moved their heads nearer me and started to gently nudge my side. I was so confused but then I realised something. The owl had saved me from the dog. I got to my feet and looked at them; they seemed to understand that I was extremely thankful for what they had done. I pointed to my tree which was a lot lower than the branch we were on. They seemed to understand that I needed to get home. So they picked me up gently and dropped me off in my house, after waving to them as they flew away, we became unlikely friends.
The Fight for the Squirrel

The owl swept quietly over the night sky, he was a soft white with golden-brown patches and speckles all over his head, back and wings, he swept over the ground, just below the branches of the trees above. It was light near where he was but in the horizon he could tell the black skies were closing in. He scanned the ground searching for his prey, listening closely for any sound rustling or squeaking. A small squirrel was scurrying around on the ground desperately searching for food before he was snatched up. The squirrel’s fast movements caught the owl’s eyes and without a second thought he dived down. He shot his talons out towards the squirrel without making a noise. By the squirrel had noticed it was prey it was too late, the squirrel was stuck with the talons, the owl pushed his weight onto the squirrel, killing it.

The owl carried off the squirrel and was about to head back into his tree when suddenly another owl shot up at him, trying to get an easy meal. This owl had darks brow covering the top of his wings and light brow around his head. The darker owl started to fly at the lighter owl, chasing him away from his home in the tree and forcing him up into the branches, the now dead squirrel still dangling from his claws.

The lighter owl flew through the branches until he was at the top of the tree, he hovered around for a while looking for the other owl waiting for him the shoot up and attack him. When he couldn’t see him he landed knowing that the darker owl would be waiting for him outside his tree and that he would have to eat the squirrel p at the top of the tree. As he loosened his grip the darker owl shot up at him out of the darkness, the lighter owl quickly tightened his grip on the squirrel the darker owl landed on the branch below. The owl fought constantly jumping from branch to branch. The darker owl was getting tired, as the lighter owl saw his foe was getting slower he devised a plan. With one quick swift movement the lighter owl flew up and dived into the branches. The then dived into his home before the darker owl could catch up and enjoyed his well deserved meal.
The Class

Jocelyn tilted her head in a kindly manner and said, “Come on Algy, you really can do this.”

There was a pause before her words filtered through to him.

“Algernon, my dear, if you please,” he drawled. “Ah, do what?”

Jocelyn hunched and then relaxed her wings before she resumed cajoling. “The skip, Algernon, the skip, or strathpey if that helps you. It can mean the diff—Eric!”

The screech, a fine crow’s screech, stopped Eric from shooting his burnished pheasant head into the path of an HGV. Eric padded around and away from the alluring traffic. “Yah. Thanks. Again. Dunno what I was thinking … it’s just so …”

“Well, let’s set aside that… that thought, shall we? Before we try the skip once more, let’s all focus on loosening up.”

Clarice rolled her beautiful eyes at yet another example of pheasant doziness and drummed her talons.

Today’s class – a capercaillie (Algernon), Eric and Clarice – were hard work, reflected Jocelyn as she swayed. No, to be fair, Clarice was good at the basics, as you would expect from an owl, but her weakness was the habit of setting her horizontal trajectory height on tree tops, no matter how low, and forgetting that tall lorries would fatally interrupt said trajectory. She would give Clarice an extra-curricular, paid upfront by her doting husband Charlie. Again.

“And let’s reprise the skip.”

To her surprise – a delicious sensation for crows – the ungainly crew hopped and shuffled in the same direction. “And once more, for confidence,” called Jocelyn, thinking, “Bless my beak, the poppets are finally taking this seriously.”

While the pupils diligently continued sideways, Jocelyn deftly retrieved her crisp packet of assorted rewards from a hedgerow. Recently, she had spent hours observing a human – a woman dressed in black, Jocelyn noted with approval – apparently training a small dog. At first, the technique involved leaking liquid from her eyes and moaning at the dog, but this approach was replaced by a small piece of food in one hand and a shiny, beetle-black metal pebble in the other.

From her ridge tile vantage point, Jocelyn studied every stage, and replicated it in the field with a bag of bird treats and her beak as the clicker.

Other corvids, magpies certainly, of a didactic bent would have trained these birds to fly into traffic, thereby producing easy roadside dining, but nature provided quite enough mortal hazards in Jocelyn’s beady view and she could not abide rubber and diesel lacing her meals.
By the end of the second day, they had all learned to sense the warning thrum and smells of approaching vehicles. They positively danced to safety and Clarice earned a fresh mouse (anonymously donated by Charlie) for successfully imagining mature Caledonian pines each time she flew over a road. They all pledged to keep practising and to recommend Jocelyn to at least three friends. Jocelyn was not convinced they understood the concept of three but there was always the next class.
PREY

My name is Hootbraé. I am a seasoned owl, wouldn’t give you my age though - wouldn’t do. Suffice to say the nights I’ve been hunting you couldn’t count. Of late though the squaw says I’m loosing my pounce, don’t seem so good on the old pinions. “Hootbraé,” she wooed the tree hollows bare, go glide and catch a mouse, a fat one at that. Silently now.” I muster myself I am not up to it, a dung beetle perhaps but not a fat mouse.

“Move it,” the squaw hissed. It seared my brain. I tried to hide under an eave, but could only perch and look menacing. No use, I had to try a glide. I was running out of options. I’ll try the usual route through the woods to the water. I’ll take a break in one of the oaks. Off I sail. Leaves of the woods beneath me rippling like black lace, the old bell tower below. Clock striking twelve – Bong! Whooosh - a jet stream of black confetti jerking bats encircle me, scattering from the bells. Whack - the clock face smacks me in the beak, grinning, “time you old bastard and yours is running out!” Damn no chance of a bat now. My craw is crackling with hunger.

I do an airborne somersault, and I soldier on. I’ve reached the river now, a silver shiny ribbon under a waning moon. I can hear the natter toads calling for their future mates. Don’t want to go there, too much venom in their warts for an old digestive system like mine. Here comes the old oak copse, time for a break. Hell – no chance – there’s the squaw at my tail, a wind’s waft away. “Hootbraé”, she twitted, “perk up! This is no way to fill an empty tree hole.” I circle exhausted.

Hey what’s this I see beneath with my tunnel vision eyes? Can it be real? A fat yellow mouse right down under, tied with a piece of twine, looking edible and divine. But hey Hootbraé my boy something’s not quite right. The undergrowth is faintly groaning for the first time in my life I’m deathly afraid. It’s a trap.

“Swoop” said the squaw. Hover longer I choked, there’s a human down there, lurking in the undergrowth, wearing a funny hat. There’s something under his armpit. The dark limb cocks sharply, an earth shattering bang. Three tail feathers split the air. The man flies backwards with the impact. That’s a leech on the trigger not a thumb I’ll pierce it with the hook of my beak. “Go for it”, screeched the squaw. He yelped with pain, dropping his weapon as he toppled the squaw swooped talons gripping our prey – the golden mouse. Silently and swiftly we vanished into the night, side by side.

I gave the prey to the squaw – a well-earned meal she said “open your beak Hootbraé and take first bite, old and out of puff your still the bird for me.”
Inside, we are wild things. All of us, you, me – our undersides patterned with colourful danger markings. It might be deep down, but it’s there, feathered or furred or squirming with scales. It slinks through our instincts and pecks at our urges. It longs to prowl or roam or soar but instead it’s trapped, clawing and gnashing at our neatly ironed skin.

You can feel it sometimes in the subway, on the trains full of people cold and damp from dead snow. When a grizzly bear with careless shoulders stumbles into a dozing lioness, and they glare and growl and flex their claws, and vulture eyes watch darkly, while a pack of young hyenas heckle, and all their wild things itch inside, as they tumble on in the depths, down the tunnel.

Alcohol stirs the wild things. It lures us into the night, to howl at the moon, to let wings stretch and monkey hands clamber. The wild things fill the streets, to prowl in packs in search of a mate, and prey on the weak ones who stagger and stumble. It makes us hungry. Hungry enough to grab a catch already grasped between bigger claws.

They were circling, when I found you, with leaves in your hair and scratches on your arm. You were sat on the kerb, ignoring their jeers and hands, focused instead on your takeaway. I watched you peck and pull at the last sinewy strings of chicken, as they closed in.

Then you noticed me. You looked up and at me and into me and you knew. You flew to my arm, and we walked off, silent, towards the subway, and left the hungry pack to the takeaway box full of empty bones.

It was later, once you’d moved in, that I realised you’re an owl. Sometimes it flits across your eyes. You sleep through the day but in the dark I can feel the scrape of your talons, sharp enough to pierce mousy-soft sides. Sometimes I wake in the night, and from my burrow in the duvet, I watch you perch, moon drenched, on the open window, and wonder if you’ll suddenly take flight. I wonder if I want you to. You’re still there when I fall asleep, and in the morning I can smell the rot of prey between your teeth.

But not all our wild things are owls or bears or wolves. Some of us are squirrels, hares, even door mice, who cower beneath the subway seats and watch from the city’s tiny nooks, and who’s whiskers twitch when they hear you coming.
**Goodbye Arthur**

Planetary eyes stare with a delicious coldness holding back the secrets of each day, hour, minute. They don’t dare blink to let time run. Their feathers the fur coats of a thousand well to do women, their beaks a sharp compass to the south. Arthur Sands an old man who never knew his place is standing in their gaze, paralysed by the human need to know. Barely balanced on the branch which hangs over the edge of the Galaxy. The Owls, Athene and Iris Gods of the sky. He has followed their screeches enchanted and weary, his eyes orbit theirs.

The old man lifts his foot fitted with a brown tatty slipper, he slams it down edging closer. His skin which hangs from its frame begins to tighten. The glimmer of a beating heart returns to his eyes. His body is flooded with blood as his veins run like a river in spring. The tuft of white wire is replaced by a sprout of burning red hair. More steps are taken, now youthful practically a skip. Before the birds stands a young man with strong features. Allowing gravity to pull him to his knees he raises his hands towards Athene. Stars dotted like sailing boats in a sapphire blue ocean begin to brighten, light connecting to light. Athene and Iris outstretch their wings spanning light years across. Two voices echo, a song that strikes like electricity through Arthur’s body plays. The song is familiar, it is the sound of trees breathing, of the planets spinning, of a tide coming in.

"Weary traveller the dust has settled in the hour glass. Hands only stop for men that make swift time."

Athene lifts her claw clutching Arthur Sands body in a gentle grip. Arthur feels his body lift; the shapes move as his pupils struggle to focus. He gives into the darkness allowing his eyes to drift shut.

Iris soars behind calling out to Athene, their wings spread and Arthur opens his eyes catching a glimpse of his destination. A large cloud so black it is barely visible to the human eye.

Athene slowly lifts a sharp claw and pierces Arthur’s body right in the center, a whirling feeling of euphoria ignites pulsing throughout every inch of his body. He can see every smile, kiss, tear that has ever been. Athene releases him from her grip, he is pulled into the cloud with magnetic force as he reaches the center his heart expands and with a smile Arthur Sands dies. His atoms scatter and become a light so pure it swallows the cloud whole.
Arthur Rustington was, by all means, an agreeable man who held most people’s favour. An expert surgeon, he was renowned for his kind soul and determined perseverance and this aided him in the creation of new friends and preservation of old ones. This is why it came as an awful shock when he lost his mind and brutally ended his own life.

It had begun with a letter he found, written in his own hand, discarded on his breakfast table one morning. Addressed to his fiancé, Margaret, the letter had crudely told her that their proposed marriage was to be cancelled, before ending in a scrawl of curses. He was not inclined towards alcohol, and though perhaps a pre-marital night out with his closest friends had caused some blank part of his memory, he couldn’t recall being intoxicated. Perhaps it was a joke at his expense. Trying to mask his panic, he called upon his friends, who swore he was his usual self, only partaking lightly before leaving early. He then tried contacting Margaret but she called him a coward and then refused to speak to him, having evidently read the letter at his home.

Troubled and confused, Arthur went to his surgery, to find it burnt down. His panic rising, he went to check on the nurse, Gladys, at her residence, only for her to scream in terror and faint at the sight of him. Gladys’s husband removed him from the property and Arthur lost his job and honours later that day.

Perplexed and alone, it seemed a dark shadow followed him and haunted his own reflection. He became resentful of those who went about their days unobtrusively. As if they thought they could hide behind the polished veneer of their loosely woven health. As if their souls weren’t tarnished.

Weeks went by in this manner. Arthur Rustington became hunched, the once shining curls on his head began to dull, whilst his unwashed hands became gnarled, his teeth yellowed and a feral look began to gleam from his eyes. Soon, after an attack on a passer-by whom it was said bore a striking resemblance to himself, he was taken for treatment at the nearest sanatorium.

He had lost his love, his career and his sanity. He managed to get a mirror from a fellow patient, hoping to see some visible improvement to his condition, by promising the man free medical...
attention. He lifted the hand-mirror to his face where it exploded, the shards piercing his face. He screamed, feeling his cheeks and tongue slice open by the unforgiving splinters. He could no longer speak and instead let out a muffled groan. As he fell to the floor, clutching his wounds, it found its voice through the lack of his own. “You are mine, Robert Rustington, and I am yours, forever”. His eyes flickered to the broken shards of mirror, where the last thing he saw was his broken self, manically laughing back at him.
A Court for Owls

And thorns shall come up in her palaces, nettles and brambles in the fortress:

and it shall be an habitation of dragons, and a court for owls

Isaiah 34:13

They broke from the treeline, stumbling over roots and ferns, into the open spaces of the ruined city. Arm around his back, she led him between vine-covered walls and cobblesprung thornbushes to a building grand and tall, its domed roof still intact, its walls adorned with the signs and symbols of justice. They passed through the oaken doors without opening, the rotted wood half gone. The courtroom was vast and dim and she sat him against the wall on a stone ledge, the furnishings long pilfered, and raised his leg to an inset where the marbled ornamentation had been hacked away and carried off. He groaned and cursed. She brushed crumbling bird droppings from the ledge and lay down their bag. He looked up.

The dome above and the carven ceiling were crowded with owls. Flat, pale, heartshaped faces stared back. A few shuffled and folded their wings, turned to face, settled their snowy feathers. Owlets jostled anxiously in fours and fives and stilled. A crack in the great dome, from tip to ceiling, permitted a knifeshaft of light in which downy feathers and motes of dust swirled and descended.

In the gloom around, the white hearts watched.

There was movement in the shadows at the far side of the hall. He touched her arm. Balcony, he said, nodded to it. She looked. A man, bearded grey, leaned upon a stone balustrade, making no attempt to conceal himself but no gesture. Wait here, she said, drink. She pushed the waterpouch to his chest and set off across the court.

The old man made no show of concern at her talk of violence and flight, cared not for her trouble and loss. In a towerroom he spoke only of his owls, directed her with awe to a ledge of nested hatchlings, turned to her with eyes of desperate wonder as he fed them scraplets, delighted in their bob and chatter, mimicked their snaps and swallowings, little hums of joy escaping him. After the feeding, he offered her the remaining morsels, gestured towards his small fire and sleeping hole.

They slept there through the night, her companion struggling with the long, spiralling climb but grateful for the sheltered safety at its top, the room untouched by chill and the owlets bobbing and calling quietly.

They left before dawn, robbing the old man of his stores, the corpses of the owlets strung over their shoulders. From the tower he watched them go, the woman walking with poise and purpose, the injured man bobbing like the slack birds. The old man lay that day on the courtroom floor, curled,
cut in two by the knifeshift. From the dark and lofty recesses of the dome the unblinking hearts paid him no heed.
With my hands cupped around my eyes, I press my face against the cool windowpane. My eyes settle on an owl perched in the sycamore. I sit up on the sill and cradle my knees to my chest, trying my best to imitate its pose. The owl’s head swivels and finds my eyes. Its steady gaze brings me comfort and I do not look away. The bird turns its head.

The night’s calm is pierced by a screech as a second owl lands in the tree, sharing the branch. The two sit close though each appears in a world of its own. Both are still; never have I seen animals so intimate yet solitary. What do they see that I do not? Perhaps they are deep in thought, of each other, their next meal, or maybe nothing at all.

Another shriek disturbs the air, this time from inside. The birds fly off as Mommy continues to yell. I look desperately for my owls. Daddy yells back, struggling to connect his thoughts. There! On the closest limb to the ground, the birds once again sit calmly, quietly. Something beneath them has seized their attention and I follow their blazing eyes to a creature scurrying below. Rustling through the leaves is a delicately striped chipmunk small enough to hold in one hand.

My name cuts sharply through the endless noise behind me, yet I know neither of them are addressing me. I watch as the chipmunk pauses every few paces, searching for food or taking a breath; his little mind seeming only to care about what is right in front of him. A fallen nut presents itself, diverting the small creature from his scuttle through the darkness.

Glass shatters against a wall and I throw my hands over my ears. Their shouts are muffled, but never fully repressed. My eyes remain on the owls; the owls’ on the chipmunk. One bird swoops down and scoops up the tiny rodent. Released on the branch, the chipmunk tries to escape, only to be met by the second bird. The owls begin a game, one trapping the helpless little animal, then releasing it, allowing it to flee but only towards the talons of the other.

The house falls quiet again, broken now and then by a gentle laugh. I draw my knees closer to my body, my eyes not leaving the window. Defenseless, the chipmunk continues to dart frantically. Boredom settles over the owls until one grasps the chipmunk and does not let him go. I wait for the owl to set the poor creature free; the bird sits still, not loosening its grip. The chipmunk squirms,
unable to break away. The owls exchange glances, as if really acknowledging each other for the first time. The owl moves at last, lifting up its claw, and snaps the chipmunk’s neck.

I promise myself never to come out from beneath the leaves.
The Young Owl

The young owl had been chased out of the oak wood by his father, bullied along the riverbank, harried across the water to this barren rocky outcrop. The first day he sheltered in a damp crevice, high up where he could scan the wide vista, look out towards the earth’s curvature. At dusk he tried stretching, but his wing feathers bent against the sandstone. He launched himself off the narrow shelf, silently circled down towards the flood plain, the meadows rich with seed heads and vermin feasting.

He'd drop, catch, gorge – bolt shrews and mice whole.

A young buck rabbit he carried to the water’s edge and tugged at its flesh leisurely, strands of its soft fur catching the breeze like thistledown. He left his claw prints on the shingle and a pulp of pellet he’d boaked up: little feet and teeth visible amidst the grey felted mass.

Sated he sat listening to the night: its breath and ripple, murmurings and chitter from upstream drifted along the surfaces. He swivelled, homing in to the chattering and picked out a single high pitched voice up near the ridge above Corriechoille. He suddenly lifted as if a puppet string had hoisted him, a zip wire, but he moved as free as ether escaping its jar.

The screech came again and he answered her. His keen voice cutting through the air like a dart. She called again and so it went on.

On the third night the moon turned the river silver and he sang out towards the woods as he skimmed by - wings outstretched, drifting. She chattered back, close by, on his left.

A rustle, and a red squirrel reversed clockwise down a tree. The young owl hovered, suspended.

Drop.

Snatch.
Lift.

She called from a field away, a soft hoot. Her voice echoed, bouncing softly along the trees. He clasped the catch in his claws, encircled it in yellow and carried it to the dry branch where she waited, her heart-shaped face upturned, expectant. He landed on the branch above and gently held the offering above her opened beak. She purred, and he waited, head tilted to one side. She hopped impatiently along the lower branch and he released his gift down to her.

She ate then regurgitated the fur and the bones. Some of the squirrel's tiny claws caught the light and shone like miniature crescents amidst the disgorged bracken-brown fur which dropped to the woodland floor.

She rose and shimmered across the sky, and he followed: two ghosts sailing on the star blotched galaxy.

They came to the barley field and the Hazel march where ancient coppicing had sculpted the trees into wizards, goblins, and gnarled wart studded dwarves. She lived in a bole hole in the biggest tree, its arched shaped entrance a doorway into the moss-lined hollow.

Often, on nights such as these, they can be seen quartering the lower leas quarrying for voles, or down on the river bank, in the shallows, fishing for toads.
In Between

In between feeds the house moves forward. In her light, restless sleep it sways, mimics her rocking of the baby. The house edges through the door to the night opened by the shriek of the barn owl. Occupies the same liminal spaces where the barn owl thrives. Half in half out. Between daylight and twilight. Between field and forest.

In her dreams he watches her from outside the window pane, pushes his feathered foreheads into the glass. When she opens the window and he puts the freshly killed rodents he’s brought on the sill. Barn owls with their heart formed mask-faces may look like the exaggerated drawing of an infant in a comic-book, but hunting owls are old within the life-span of their kind, like moons.

He looks at her with black-set eyes and puts her a question. *Why are you so still?*

She mustn’t anthropomorphise, he says to her, her husband. The barn owl, the ghost owl is a signifier of habitat health. Recently, with the coming of the darker evenings he has warmed steadily more to this topic. Nature exists for itself, and not something to be utilised or interpreted to fulfil human needs or fears.

She nods as in agreement as the barn owls shrieks outside, doesn’t want to dismiss his urban logic. She understands his need for it in this remote house, watched over by a line of distant trees. She can’t tell him of when in her dreams she sits on the edge of the basket and touches the baby’s forehead with her feathered fingertips. Feeds it bits of raw meat she tears off fine-boned rodents. Cleans the cot for bits of pelt, droppings and bones. Owls are devourers and keepers.

He sits in the window inside the moon disc of his outstretched wings. She lifts the baby from the basket and holds it out to him. Feels its downy head resting in the palm of her hand. Downstairs she hears the front door bang shut and from far away she sees the rapid, scuttling shadow of her husband move backwards and forwards across the field. With her sharp ears she hears the creak of his shoes.
She feels the different parts fit together—like in a child’s drawing of an owl. The different circles, the face disc, the sound-trap, the black-set eyes, the moon, the thin layer of snow, the subcutaneous itch of feathers.
The Owls

Do you like the vantage point?’ the Owl asks.

‘We were so generous to bring you up here, at night when you are supposed to be sleeping.’

‘Awfully grateful’, because you must say that to owls, ‘but there isn’t much to see.’

‘Not much to see?’ A great whooping screech that tears the air. ‘The river! The bats in the birches!’

They swivel toward him expectantly.

‘The wind is very cruel tonight.’

Their eyes mock at him. ‘It is a good night for updrafts; a good night for grass stems to separate so that we can see small scuttling things.’

He looks down into the mess of branches beneath.

‘I’ll make you a deal’, he begins.

The owls roll their eyes. ‘The last one said that, too.’

The moon comes up, guilty as sin.

‘Let me tell you a story’, the Chipmunk says, ‘about the nature of the divine.’

Both owls are still.

‘And then you can claw out my eyes and eat me.’

The owls whooo softly.
'If you could just...' he gestures, and the Upper Owl alters the position of his claws on the Chipmunk’s neck, giving him a little more room to breathe.

The Chipmunk clears his throat.

‘In our busy, forest lives, it can be difficult to see the face of God.’

The tree creaks like a gibbet in the wind.

‘God is not reflected in the river. He does not speak to us when the wheat moves in the fields, or when the wind rattles the leaves.’

The Owls are impassive, their beaks glinting, but they listen.

‘When the farmer bellows in the fields, that is not the voice of God either. So where is he?’

The Chipmunk pauses. His mouth is dry, and his muscles ache from hanging for so long, but he is warming to his tale.

‘God, if he is absent from our material surroundings, must be present in our actions. He dwells within moments of kindness, partnership. In the laying of eggs and the digging of burrows. We each contain a sliver of the divine.’

The water lies still as a railway line.

Upper Owl and Lower Owl eye one another for a moment. Upper Owl lunges, shrieks, twists the head of the chipmunk once, twice, and off.

They take it in turns to rip wet flesh from the delicate bones. The chipmunk is delicious. They let the bones fall.

The night returns to quiet.
‘Do you think’, asks Lower Owl, picking over a final morsel, ‘that we have eaten the God that was inside him?’

‘Surely’, replies Upper Owl. ‘And each time we eat, we will absorb a little more, until we become Gods ourselves.’

‘I am glad’, says Lower Owl, looking out to the far bend of the river. ‘Perhaps the next one will tell us how many we must eat before that happens.’

‘Perhaps’, replies Upper Owl, who thinks that he already knows.

Then, silent as dew, they leave their perch, and glide out over the river.