

The seventh annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2019

‘Corvidae’

by Elisabeth Ingram Wallace

The judges for 2019...
Julian Barnes & Tim Hayward



‘Corvidae’

We have a big chestnut tree outside our house, and the crows swoop through it, dropping chestnuts in the road. All morning I've been watching them. The cars drive past and smash the shells open, the nuts spew white on the tarmac. The crows don't eat the nuts when they get crushed, instead they wait for a squirrel gathering up chestnuts to get hit by a car, and eat them instead.

I have one nut in my hand, I went out this morning, and picked it out of the road, severed snap through the brittle skin centre; a perfect cranium, two lobes, glossy pale brown, still moist inside.

I've been thinking about collecting the nuts, bagging some up for the Honesty Box table.

Twenty-three years in this house beside this tree, I've never bothered, no-one roasts anything on an open fire these days, surely? But then people started turning up on the Island to wild

swim and do mindfulness and yoga retreats. Hipsters. That's what the journalists call them, in the paper. There's even a coffee shop at the ferry port now.

Suddenly, I'm fashionable. I'm organic, I'm forest foraged.

We are the only house on this stretch of road, the only house for twenty-seven miles, on the Nish peninsula.

Anyone who makes it up here, must pass by my Honesty Box, because my house is next to the only bus stop in the North of the Island, from where it is a two-mile hike through the forest to the Fairy Pools, one of the few reasons the intrepid come this far north, apart from Whisky.

There's nothing hobgoblin-y and unicorn dust about living here. Yes, there are waterfalls and deep turquoise pools paved with emerald moss rocks, but there's also asbestos in the roof so I don't go upstairs anymore. It's so cold this winter my bones crack like pipes and if I don't use my legs my knees freeze up and swell at the joints till bursting, so every day, I walk. I gather. I dig, garden, and forage.

I can't leave though, go live in Inverness or Glasgow. I'm a green woman through and through, you sleep next to a fairy knoll long enough, the fair folk put a spell on you.

Every Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, and twice on Saturday in Summer, the bus will pass through, and tourists will hike to pools, and on their way back to the bus stop, some of them have to wait a few hours - so they pick up jars of jam, and heather honey with a tartan bow, or bags of biscuits, or carrots, potatoes and runner beans when the season allows,

whatever the sun and soil provides. I put prices on things, and people always pay it, or more.

I built a little shed roof for the produce table, to keep everything dry.

Some of the tourists leave foreign notes and thick copper-gold coins, with hexagon edges or holes in the middle. I don't mind. I leave towers of kings and queens by the pools, for the fair folk. The notes I chuck in the compost.

I'm not romantic. I'm practical. Out here, you've got to be. I make what I can from what the earth provides.

When I find a wild goat tangled in the barbed wire, up near the high cliffs where they live and hide, I cut them out if they willing to comply. if they are dead I cut them out anyway, and I skin them.

This time of year, it's so cold they move down looking for food and shelter from the hail and wind, and so, they get stuck and trapped a fair bit. I've got three skins this year, so far.

The skins stink for four years. It kicks the lungs right out of you, musty, so sour it cuts your eyes to water.

I leave the pelts hanging in the far shed where the wind wraths through, and put them out on the Honesty box table, when the smell has gone.

The hipsters love the honesty box. The pelts go fast, they want a bit of Highland flavour to chuck on their Danish Modern. I put £10 or £15 on the label, and people pay it.

Every coat colour and hair length is different, a fluff of pure white, or silky gold smudged with black.

I sell the horns too. When I stop to chat, tourists tell me they are going to mount them on their walls back in London or Manchester. The horns have growth rings, you can count the years the goat lived, like a tree.

I just have what nature gives me. I watch, for predators, and prey, and accidents of nature, but I don't take from nature, kill for my benefit. I wouldn't even eat a chicken egg.

I love birds. Clever creatures.

Last week, I'd spotted the Bird Watcher driving in and parking up his huge car, and I walked down to meet him and take out some extra jars of jam. The ones with the cars usually spend big.

"Go quietly past the fairy bridge" I told the man as he walked past my honesty box, "there's a golden eagle nesting in the pools, I've seen it five times this month".

The man had a tent bag on his bag, plus binoculars around his neck, and a camera bag big enough for telephoto lenses, and a massive long backpack for tripods. He had a compass round his neck, and an ordinance survey map in a clear plastic pouch. He was Mr Classic Obsessive Birdwatcher. He was the Type, an outdoor man. Stout, waterproofed and camouflaged, lensed and microchipped, spare batteries, a man who always wanted more.

I'd seen him here before. Or men exactly like him.

"Take one," I said, pointing at the goat fur. The ground was frosty underfoot, I stamped a bit to crunch my point home, "you're going to be lying around in a hide for hours, lurking

behind a bush, sleeping in a tent, you'll freeze your bollocks off out there."

He laughed, a big English live-TV laugh. Like one of those breakfast news men.

"We're not young anymore, we've got to look after our bones," I said.

He might have been my age, but he looked younger, pinker, and fatter.

He reached into his pocket for his wallet.

"Ach I don't want any money," I said "I got it for free from the electric fence myself," I said, which was true. The goats' eyes had been cooked white into clouds.

I picked up the biggest skin, and shawled it over his backpack and shoulders, into a superhero cape, fur side touching the bare skin of his hot neck. I tied the goat legs into a bow tie, around his throat.

"You'll make the fairies angry if you die of cold out there, they don't like litter."

He walked off in a fast jaunt down the white rock path, veering high where it puddles into ice.

He thought I was flirting, that's why he ran away. I scare people with my hair thick and curled long and grey, and my solitary breeze block house. That's why I've got to put a tartan ribbon on shit, on myself, say Och an Ach, burl my accent with a bit more heather and spice. Show people I'm not weird, I'm just old and furious with sky and frost, part of the Scottish landscape. I'm what they fly in from Minnesota for.

His kit was heavy, he stooped as he climbed the hill, and when he got to the ridge of the first big knoll, he turned around and waved. I hadn't meant to watch him so long. I went inside, and crushed wrinkled winter apples into the pot, to boil.

I made a dozen jam jars full of apple curd, then tied a tartan ribbon round them and priced them up for the bus loads of tourists in a few days' time. Weekends bring in the foreign tourists, the buses, even in the winter. But the weekdays are quiet, it was only Tuesday. I had a few more days of peace, plenty of time to be alone with the fairies.

Not even five am the next day, I saw the lights of a car, heading over the bridge towards the pools, towards me. Too early for me to be out.

I watched a woman get out, and gear up with layers and boots, under the street light by the bus stop. She was slight, with fluffy blond hair and a frothy hooded coat, tight trousers, giant boots, and a rifle. I don't go out that early to meet people, the Honesty box is there if anyone wants anything. But she didn't look like she was here to eat apple curd.

Up and awake now, I busied away with ten batches of oat biscuits, and I'd bottled all the autumn thistle vinegar by midday, when I heard the sirens.

It's a long way away here, from the Police Station and Hospital in Aardmacie. Will have taken them two hours to get here. I turned the oven off, and heard the helicopter coming in. It must be bad, I thought. Last time the helicopter came out it was because a wee boy had fallen in the pool and broken both

his legs. He was fine in the end, but he was something to do with Royal family, and so the reporters all used my kitchen to file reports from, over the land line telephone, saying things like "I love that there's no Wi-Fi out here, it's like the 80's," and "it's so peaceful, it's so retro." They bought all my honey, all of my jam, and one of them sent me a Christmas card for two years straight.

Couldn't count on that kind of luck again though. I had to put a bit of effort in. Once the police car parked up, I walked down to the road to meet the lads with a flask of tea and the biscuit barrel. It was Johnny and Connell.

"Alright, Esme?" Jonny said. They drank the tea, the oat biscuits went down fast.

"Bit of drama, then?" I asked.

"Americans," said Jonny, like that explained it, and I suppose it did.

Connell explained an American girl - it could only be the thin blond one with a rifle - had got into trouble, but had a new fancy kind of satellite phone, and called the emergency services from the fairy bridge.

"Some YouTube person, here to shoot the wild goats and Twitter about it," said Jonny.

"Twitter?" I said.

"Twitter," Jonny replied, and drank his tea

"She's ok?" I asked

"She's great, but she killed some numpty birdwatcher, all new shoes and binoculars, you know the type."

I knew exactly the type.

We had lots of clueless tourists, climbing mountains in flip-flops, Glasgow kids going swimming in December and coming out corpses, and recently the cliffs were getting known for these tourist trophy hunters too, who came at dawn in the dark, to bag themselves a wild goat, a notoriously difficult kill.

It's not illegal to kill wild goats, that's the thing, but there are not many of them left. And we respect them here, they are descendants of the livestock abandoned after the Highland Clearances. I wouldn't go shooting one in sight of the fairy pools.

It took an hour till six men with head-torches and a stretcher carried out the Birdwatcher. He still had the goat hide tied around him.

"Dead," said Connell.

"Shame" I said.

"Unlucky" said Jonny, "going bird-watching dressed like a goat the same day Shotgun Barbie turns up."

The girl was put in the police car, and I shut Jonny in with a tub of biscuits and waved him off.

Today is Friday, the day the Ardnish paper is delivered, with all the local news.

The Bird Watcher found dead at the fairy knoll was Stephen Udderton, 48, once gamekeeper at the North Grouse Moor, and until recently employed by a commercial fishery. He was shot by accident, by Instagram celebrity, "Cavewoman Diet" inventor, you tube cooking channel presenter and

chef Emma Sykes, from New York state, who is facing no charges for going goat hunting, but is facing charges for accidental homicide of a man she mistook for a goat, due to his camouflage, underneath a large goat skin. Miss Sykes will remain in Inverness facing trial. Her family are with her.

Mr Udderton was found near the dead body of a Golden eagle, with an empty shotgun and a tripod bag full of ammunition and weapons. Nearly one-third of Scotland's tagged golden eagles have been killed in suspicious circumstances over the past four years, the grouse and fish shooting industry are being investigated for their involvement, and Mr Udderton's ex-employers are cooperating with police enquiries.

There was a beautiful illustration of a golden eagle, plus the white-tailed eagles, red kites, goshawks, peregrines, hen harriers, cormorants, grey herons, red-breasted mergansers and goosanders, all the birds which had been found shot in the area over the last year.

I think about the goat hunter girl. I wonder if I should send her some jam, parcel it up with a box of biscuits and wine and a note, saying I had heard of the tragedy, and wanted to send my regards.

I'd been following CAVEWOMAN @WyldeSykes for 11 months, ever since I'd got internet in the house a year ago, via my first satellite phone. I was going to miss seeing what she'd cooked out of the rare birds she killed in Iceland, or which waterproof boots she recommended to stalk bears in

California, plotting out where she going to hunt next through her Instagram photographs, guessing what she was planning on shooting next. Following her on Twitter was the closest I've ever got to hunting.

I make blackberry jam, melt the sugar into jelly blobs on a saucer. I feel the chalky brain of the chestnut in my pocket, crumbling, and decide not to gather any more nuts from the garden. The corvidae can have them. Mother nature knows best.

It is night now. The squirrels are snaps and twitches in the trees, and the cars are red lights bleeding down the road.

