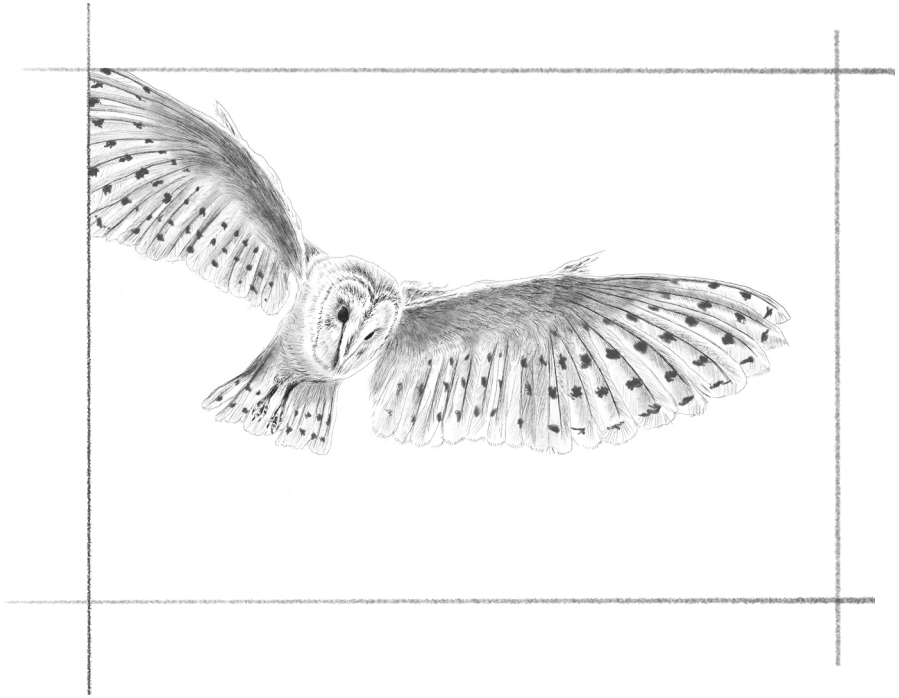


Alfie barks with glee, barking for both of us, and I have to stop climbing, catch my breath, as I turn in the dusky sunlight to gaze down the hill.

Everything stretches beneath me. Our village, with its houses tucked among trees that line the fields, and far away I spy people, little ants on the landscape. Mary, our neighbour, leading her grandchild through her garden. Kids in the playground, laughing down the slide. The park football pitch where a man sits on a bench, a dog by his side. Lads parked up under puffs of smoke.

Alfie barks. There's a stick at my feet.

'All right, then…'

I fling it, high up the hill, towards a tree stump that rears from the gorse, a solitary sentinel.

It's Odin, Sam. King of the gods, waiting to lead the dead.

The stories Dad would tell me and Beth as we walked. How Odin called fallen warriors to join his hunt. And

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full of his tales, we would head to that stump to play. It was our camp, where we pretended to be Saxon chiefs, and spread our picnic banquet, eating sandwiches and crisps, watching the world that couldn't see us.

A bird swoops.

I shade my eyes. A hawk. No, an owl. It turns its wings, surfing the wind. That sharp curve of its beak as it surveys the earth. Is this what it feels like to be prey? Not daring to move as Death passes over. I glance back at our house. Death's there too, never far away.

Alfie barks, loud and fast. I can't see him.

'Here, boy!'

I whistle.

The sun is falling, bright yellow through the bushes. Again Alfie barks. Sheep shelter in this gorse. If he's trapped one…

'Alfie, come!'

But he doesn't, just barks and barks. I start to run.

'Alf!' He's in the gorse for sure. I crouch and peer in. His scrawny legs scrabble among the shadows.

I stoop under the branches, and a memory flits past, of me and Beth hauling our backpack, gasping and jubilant at our find. The bestest camp ever.

Alfie whines, eyes glinting. He refuses to move

'You're really making me do this…'

The gorse is thick, branches tug like little hands. The wind hums. I push through – Alf's in front of me. He's trembling all over.

'What is it?'

I pull on his collar, but he won't budge.

'Alf… Come… On…'

I squeeze against him, fur one side, brambles the other.

'For flip's sake!' He licks my cheek. 'Let me…' Whining as I push past, and peer into that dark corner.

There's nothing there…

No. There is something. A ball. A white ball.

'What? Scared of a ball now?'

Sunlight dapples, catches its little sparkles, grains of silver.

I reach forward. Alfie barks, leaping into my arm.

'Hey!'

I haul on his collar, but he yelps and jumps like mad, and I see red.

'Alfie! Leave it, will you!'

He stops, panting, his head cocked.

Because it's Dad's voice shouting, and that doesn't make sense because Dad's dead. I don't smell like Dad. It's as if Dad is here in the camp that me and Bethy made, and he's holding Alfie and I can't help it, tears are in my eyes, and I'm crying, snotting in these bushes, while a little dog nuzzles my ear.

'Alfie…' My tears fall. 'I'm sorry…'

He paws me. Gently, I butt him away.

'Now…'

And Dad's close, whispering with me,

Now…

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Reaching with me for that strange ball.

Let's see what…

My fingers stretch, close around it. And grab.

We can see…

Ice cold to touch. Not a ball. A stone.

Alfie barks and barks and barks.

'Alf… SHUT…!'

My dad's voice. My dad. My dad.

There's a pounding in my head and I see flashes of light.

A little girl, black hair and white face. She's dancing on the hillside.

Flash.

An older girl, red haired. Freckled and fierce.

Flash.

They're gone and he's there.

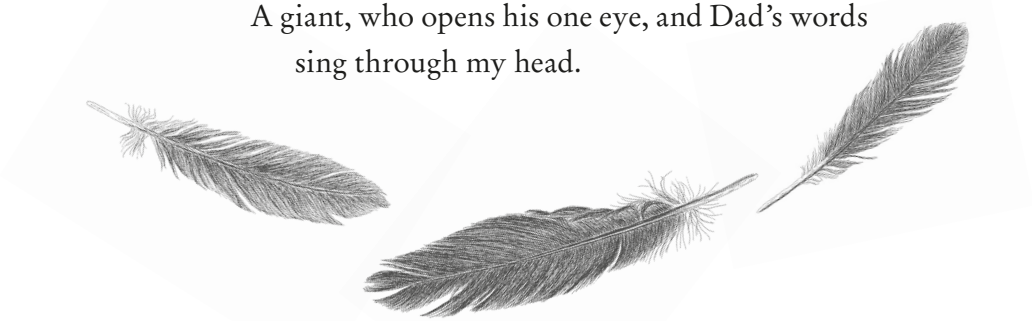
Dad.

He smiles at me.

'Dad!'

He turns to the ridge. There's a man. As tall as a tree.

A giant, who opens his one eye, and Dad's words sing through my head.



Odin, King of the gods.

Waiting to lead the dead.

'DAD!'

He shouts, but I can't hear.

I want to run. But I can't move.

Flash.

Flash.

Flash.

'Wait! Dad!'

But he's gone.



I rub my eyes.

The sun is low, blinding through the gorse. Tricks of the light. It must have been…

Alfie whines.

'It's okay, boy…'

I'm tired, that's it. This day has done me in, making me see things. Alf's wet nose nudges my hand, and I feel the weight of the stone. It's heavy.

'Come on, daft dog…'

We crawl out, sharp little goblin hands dragging at us. I look back at our shelter, seeing me and Bethy sharing a coke and a comic, hidden and happy.

The wind has picked up. It's cold, probably getting late. I shudder slightly, and open my fist.

The stone is white, like an egg.

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I turn it, catching those grains of silver. There's a notch, as if a fingernail has been pressed in. It sits in my palm so neatly.

'Nice find, Alfie…'

I toss the stone, catching it with a slap against my palm. Alfie jumps.

'It's not a ball, you dodo…'

He barks and pushes at my side, sharp claws digging.

'Ow! Oi!' I hold the stone out of his reach.

Alf flattens to the ground, ears back. He's scared.

'Alf, calm down!'

A bird screams over, so close I can see its yellow eyes, feel the whirl of its wings.

It's the owl.

'Look at that! Thought you were a rabbit, Alf!'

But he only growls, as I point with my hand gripping the stone. And then it's strange. As the owl turns in the sky, I see the stone move. No, it's those silver grains. They're like clouds boiling, like faraway stars.

Alfie barks and the owl cries.

Dad, you would have loved this. Dad. Dad.

I draw the stone to my chest, I'm flying down into those clouds as I think of him. Dad who can't love anything, because he's dead and gone, a ghost in my head.

Now, Sam…

The owl cries again as I draw the stone to my forehead. I don't know why. It feels so cool against my brow.

Let us see, what…

Everything goes white.

We can see…

As I fly into clouds.

I soar, wind cleaving my wings.

The earth turns far below, vast and green.

And there, I spy a man-boy, his little dog.

I am bound to him.

From my world to his.

His messenger, his guide.

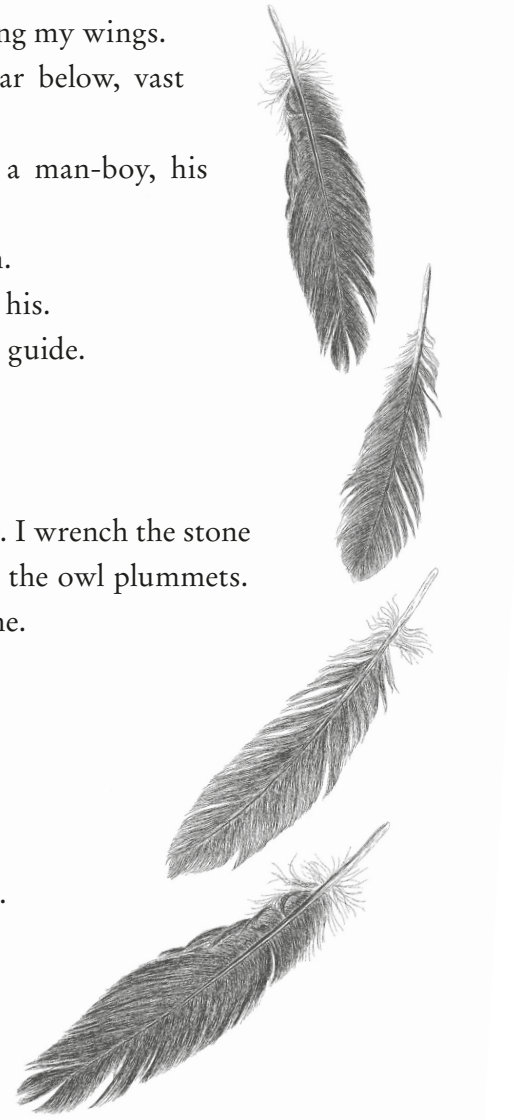
And I swoop.

I can see it coming. I wrench the stone from my forehead, as the owl plummets. White as light. Into me.

I cry out.

I fall.

And fall…



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