

Performance in the Hills.

Black widow on her golden horse, that's what they call me, riding the boundaries of my hill farm. It takes an hour; my horse has fast Spanish blood. He turns to gold when he loses his winter coat and as for my coat, I always wear black. Nothing to do with Owen's death a month ago, I love black. I'm keeping going, little choice.

First I change the sign on the old gate at the end of the track. I've just bought a small power drill which also works in reverse and to my delight the rusty screws fly out of the *Ewes in lamb - please keep dogs on leads* board. The sign is peppered with shot from the feral boys who only make for the footpath if they see me. The fields are crisscrossed with footpaths from the days when men came down off the mountain for work.

I'm fixing *All loose dogs will be shot* to the gate when I see a string of boys attached to the electric fence, an elf-sized boy bouncing in the middle, hurting, laughing, screaming. He's scrawny, impossible to age, anything from eight to twelve, hair too wild to conceal sticky-out ears, little face the colour and texture of a prune, no effort to visualise him as an old man. I retired well before he was born, but as a teacher my heart went out to children like him, scallywags we called them then. I probably taught his father.

They're way off the footpath. I'm too weary to be cross and they're not harming anything but themselves. I'm just feeling satisfied with my new drill and the straightness of the sign on the gate. Whenever I caught myself on the fence, Owen would say a little electric shock sets one up for the day. These boys are hanging on for dear life.

Gathering up the pieces of the old sign, I remember how we'd agonised over the wording. Dear Owen determined to be respectful, thinking they'd respect us in return. They didn't. The last dog killed two ewes and mutilated four. The police begged Owen not to bring

any more dogs to the police station and, though subtle with their wording, more or less told him to shoot any future killers. 'If the owners cared they wouldn't let them out'.

I'm not about to shoot a loose dog. I'm merely making a stand.

I was going to make a stand over the pups, it wasn't necessary in the end. I was fuming with Owen, he'd forgotten Meg was on heat and left her in with the dog. We have four working sheepdogs, quite enough, and the thought of finding good homes for puppies gave me nightmares. The litter of six was born a month before he died. I was beside myself, only two suitable people had shown a vague interest. Some might say I was overreacting.

Owen understood and made a difficult move to save my sanity: the evening they were born he came in from the barn and quietly announced there were just three pups; he couldn't leave Meg with less. He went straight up to the bathroom and I heard him vomit three times. We never spoke of it.

Now eight weeks old, two have gone. Usually bitches are the first to go, but the last pup has a lot of white on her body and a strange face divided down the middle, half white, half black with orangey brown eyebrows. She's a barrel, Meg did them well.

I have her in my arms when a van long overdue for the scrap-heap rattles into the yard and five grim boys in their late teens get out. The track is long and rough, I can imagine their tempers should a boulder hijack their tyres. The elf boy is here and a taller wizened boy who has to be his brother. They're looking for a pup and heard I have some for sale.

I go cold, immediately picture half-starved dogs on chains, shut in old cars, their horrible van. A bitch to breed from will prove lucrative. The format of our meeting is like a stand-off: I tuck the pup deeper inside my black cardigan and step back, the bolshie buyers edge up for a bargain and we move round as if spoiling for a fight and I don't think of saying she's sold or spoken for. Since Owen, I'm in a fog.

Playing for time, I ask, "Do you keep sheep?" I mean their fathers. There are colliers in the village with commoners' rights to run a few ewes on the mountain.

"Yes," says the little one.

"Many?"

I think he says sixty and his brother may say a hundred and fifty but as they speak as one, I don't quite catch the numbers. So they're liars.

"It was my husband's dying wish I keep this one," I say, red-faced, fingers crossed.

"Her ancestry is good on both sides. Don't know how I forgot, his death is so recent I'm still in a fuddle. Sorry." Forgive me, Owen.

The boys shuffle their feet and glare at me and my lie. I can now expect gates wrenched off hinges and sheep out. They return to the van in silence, slamming doors with killer strength. The engine starts. I turn my back on the dust storm and name the pup Fly.

The last vehicle to leave the yard with such drama was the ambulance.

I'm creeping up on elf boy. He's the only one I can see, the others are still making their way through the trees, shouting their orders and I have enough Welsh to understand what they're saying. He's standing at a field gate holding a stick; one of the few gates with metal posts. I've lost enough weight to be hidden by a scrubby tree.

When they came for the pup he was the only one to venture close, as if keen to stroke her and I had inklings he may have loved her. Not that he was going to get the chance.

I'm hesitating. I so badly want him to refuse his hideous instructions. I wonder why the boys are yelling when I could be around, and how they know there's a nest in the post. I didn't and I'm the nature lover. It was my subject.

He slides his left hand towards the hole in the post and I'm on him. Both hands gripping his coat collar to bash his tiny brains out. Head on metal. "Evil little bastard," I hiss

an inch from his face. His head hits the post. Just once. I'm shaking. No one appears. No one jumps to his rescue. My hands squeeze his throat, fingers overlapping. He's spluttering, choking, "I wasn't going ..."

Then I see I might kill him and stop.

He slumps to the ground in a heap, limbs in all directions and starts to cry. Shuddering violently, I sit on the ground and lean against the post, terrified and heartbroken we could be so brutal. Him and I. But then he didn't carry out his orders, I'm the only savage here. God almighty I'm afraid of myself. The boys' shrill voices ring in my head: 'throw the birds into the air high as you can, we'll hit them with the sticks as they fall. One at a time, mind'.

I'm sobbing now. Minutes pass. I picture Owen's disbelief and sadness. Verging on hysteria, I'm unaware of the boy crawling towards me. A gentle tap on my arm, I drag my sleeve across my eyes. He's sitting next to me. "I wasn't going to do it," he says quietly. "I was going to say they'd flown, that the nest was empty. That's why I had to get here before them." He takes a dirty packet of cigarettes from his pocket, shakes one half out with the panache of a practised smoker and offers me. I shake my head.

All boys smoke here, one at my school boasted having his first fag at three. He lights up knowing I'm in no position to disapprove, his skinny hands trembling. We stand up together our bawling over and hear the loud tweeting coming from the post: babies desperate for food. I can't speak. I move away, he follows and a Blue Tit begins her frantic descent through leafy branches.

I think he's telling the truth. In that pitiful screwed up face, I see two clear amber eyes beseeching me to believe him and I'm thinking for heaven's sake and he rubs the back of his head and his hand comes back bloody. I go to whisk him round and he jumps back. Quite rightly, I'm a mad woman.

"It's okay," he says. "Head cuts always bleed more, I've had worse."

I sink back against a tree. "I saw red," I say.

"What?"

"It's a saying, when you're incensed a red mist covers your eyes, blinds your actions."

"Not to do with blood then?"

"Probably. I must look at your head, please."

He turns obediently. His hair needs no parting and the small cut I inflicted has almost finished bleeding. That's because he's young. I cover my face in shame. "I'm sorry. I'll make this up to you. Somehow." We sit for a while in silence, apart from the faint rustle of boys lurking in the undergrowth. One thing, I won't give him Fly.

"Can I ride your golden horse?" he says, wide-eyed at the thought.

I don't ask if he can ride, here all boys ride. Some fathers own shepherding ponies, there's still one private mine with pit ponies coming up for holidays and certain ponies on the mountain can be caught by the wilier boys.

I nod. He's off, aiming for home through the fence they've bent down, realises and doubles back to use the gate. I need to shout after him, say he can only ride if I accompany him, explain my horse is sensitive, lively, strong. But I can't shout, his little figure is so tiny.

I usually walk last thing at night. Not far till I tuck Fly under the arm of my black coat, Meg always jumps up; she'd like to be there too. The only white on us showing is the tip of Fly's cheek and the blaze down Meg's face. I'm not nervous in the dark. The boys may be around, but if they did witness my behaviour that day, I'll be left well alone. Labelled crazy.

Meg stops dead and gives a little growl and I see minute lights twinkling in the field next to the farmhouse, the one sloping down to the river. The boys light fires there, stick potatoes in the embers, sit for hours by the water, drink cider and smoke. Other times they favour the woods, live in dens with thick walls and watertight roofs woven from bracken and

hay, these boys are skilled. I never know where they are. Owen compared them to cats: swift as panthers and changing territory whenever the fancy takes them. Our cat, my cat, favours the sofa for a month then tiptoes through the photograph frames and takes up residence on the windowsill for the next month.

The moon is half full. There's movement at the bottom of the field. I shush Meg, place my hand on her head and we stand perfectly still at the gate. A low blue haze is wafting across the fluff of a thousand dandelion clocks and phosphorescent shapes are emerging from the riverbank trees.

Owen's choice of return was as a barn owl, mine is a pampered cat. We were always talking about reincarnation, though neither of us believed, it was a form of comfort. But I've already seen him once at twilight with his huge white wings.

This is no owl. There are two beams of light a yard apart, separating and coming together, travelling slowly and eerily up the field. I hold my breath and don't move. My horse materialises through the mist. An apparition walking between the pearly lights lifting his legs ridiculously high as if stepping out from underwater and I wonder if he's crossed the river. Chiffony clouds seem to rise with his glistening hooves, spread into streamers and disperse. The little dot of a figure on top has no saddle or bridle, his legs stretch across the horse's back, but don't reach halfway down his sides. He's holding a small torch in each hand, quietly waving them out to the side then back, one at a time, to the left, to the right and my beautiful horse is responding. Moving gracefully to the direction of the lights, obeying this little creature on his back and I'm shaking more than when I attacked him. They sway and twist in elegant circles. Elf boy is skilled.

My golden horse in a night circus. Then a swoop of glorious white wings, so few flaps necessary for such a glide along the trees. The ringmaster.

They don't see me, I'm in black.