

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## GOTHIC NATURE II

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*Model IV*, 2017

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Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

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Michael Belcher

## A Story About Animals

*Michael Wheatley*

Their fourth daughter died the same as their third, their second, and first.

Deaf and blind at birth, they grew up as all young girls should. They weaned themselves off mother's milk, when love left her tired and tender. They slept, every night, in a communal cuddle, their father always last to join. And, oh! how they screamed! For, when one child cried, her sisters always responded in kind.

The latest born cried the loudest, while the first whispered a whimper. The middle girls only wept with each other, as this made them safe to feel sad. If their home was too cold, or their siblings too far, their mother would always soothe them. And when their eyes opened at last, the colour divined like tea leaves emerging from milky blindness, they were hazel. They were their father's.

Inseparable since then, they explored the forest surrounding their home. Careless and clumsy-limbed, they tripped over themselves as they grew, settling into their senses. They first felt the rain against their faces, scrunching their noses at the alien assault. They first heard the breeze brush through their hair, shivering slightly alongside it. They first saw the trees inflame to meet their matching coats of fur.

Under the guidance and guardianship of their parents, the girls experienced everything, new to them but oh-so old, with brightness in their eyes.

At the end of each day, the family then returned as one. They ate food found by the father: foraged fruit and hunted game. Beyond that, there were little luxuries: no amenities, no addendums, no excess. There was a roof. An entrance. A couple of walls. And to each of them, a home.

As the days began to shorten, with the sun scurrying to set, the girls continued to play together. Braver now, they ventured further into the forest, where the leaves fell like litter. They found fences to squeeze through and great oaks to scale; rivers to wade through and homes to peer inside. They fought over silly things and then silly things helped them make up.

Watching on one day as they weaved through the wood, the mother buried her head in the father's bristle. Though their eyes might have been his, the black marks skirting the edge of their ears would always belong to her.

Later, when the snow fell and the first frost settled, the girls left home less and less. Growing still in size and confidence, they set out for the woods only occasionally, leaving ever-larger imprints behind them as if trampling on freshly ironed sheets.

But there was little need for them to brave the cold, and for this the parents were thankful. They had warned the girls not to play alone and never to stray too far. They were only to leave when the sun was fully risen or fully resting, for the limbo between was where the animals lurked. Sunrise, above all, was most dangerous. Now that the sun had changed its pace, they would all have to adapt.

Yet, their warnings were as all warnings are: a motto to tell oneself in times of trouble, but little use when trouble calls. In truth, it did not matter where they were when the animals attacked. They would be found. Flushed out. And they would be killed.

But the animals never came, and absence breeds anxiety. Worrying it too long since the last hunt, the parents refused to leave home. The father kept watch, every morning, but saw only an empty expanse. Trapped indoors, the girls screamed and cried; the mother could do nothing to soothe them. Days passed until they passed into weeks, and soon everything edible was exhausted.

With the girls needing to eat, they could stay home no longer. One trip and they would restock for the winter, wait it out until sun and spring. The parents knew of a nearby farm, at the

opposite end of the woods, where the owners kept a store of supplies. Judging it safer if they grouped together, they readied the girls to leave.

Wrapped up warm in their familial coats, they arranged into three pairs of two. The mother and the youngest took point at the front, the most in need of protection and so most cautious in approach. The father and the eldest kept guard at the back, looking out for family and foe. Between them, the middle-borns: stood together, safe together.

Skulking out into the forest, the snow crunched beneath their feet. Each pair inhabited the prints of those in front. In the blue-red sky, the moon made a fleeting appearance. The sun was cresting the horizon.

As they travelled, it seemed almost a normal trip. They mounted the odd hill or hillock, shimmying down them in a quickstep two-step. From the peaks of these mounds, they caught glimpses of the farm, smoke billowing from the chimney. They even found one or two berries in the snow which, following their parents' approval, the girls shared between themselves, juice staining their tongues.

Then the roar came. The roar somehow worse than a thousand cries of battle; a deep howl that screeched, squealed, bellowed and burrowed, coming once, then twice, then again. The parents' warnings shattered like the frost beneath their feet. In the distance, the animals approached.

The family stood silently, the last shouts shuddering through the trees. Frozen in fear, the parents hesitated; the girls huddled to their legs. Home was familiar but offered no protection; there was safety in numbers at the farm. Looking around at the wilted woods, it seemed neither choice was right.

Ducking under branches and leaping over detritus, the family hurtled for home. Behind them, they could hear the gnashing of teeth and the churning of earth; the sounds of those the animals had tamed. The trees, dead or decaying, seemed to close in around them. Birds fled the

forest in flocks. But to the parents' relief, the girls kept by their side. They ran from the animals as one.

Then the roar came louder; the gnashing and churning repeated. Through the trees, the father caught sight of the animals. They gave chase in staccato; stop-motion monsters disappearing and reappearing within the wood. Dressed in blood, the father could feel their hunger. They looked on with feral eyes.

The family kept running, all six astride of each other. But when the parents next checked, they were five. The eldest had fallen, trampled behind them. Seconds later, the middle-borns slipped from sight.

A family halved, they saw their home in the distance. Then, the youngest fell. She curled into a foetal position as her parents ran for the hills, for home, from horror. The animals bayed in victory, their pets tearing her into chunks. They took her eyes before anything else. Before all was torn and consumed.

Now, another child comes slowly. Despite everything, they still search the forest for food, now more than ever. They never have a proper meal. Never eat together. But it keeps them sated. Surviving.

It keeps them from home. What was once a wilful emptiness now draws attention to how little they have. The walls are caving in, the floor scattered with dirt and soil. The silence is so suffocating that they stand at the entrance. When no sound comes, they cry out.

They had sex, once, during spring. Now they sleep separate. She wanted it over with, afraid of the consequences. His mind was elsewhere too. She fears he has someone else, it's in his nature. Someone far away. Away from the woods.

He doesn't want them. She doesn't know if she does. Six weeks away from birth, she questions what these children are for. She will have four more. A gift or a joke. But they are not to replace, no, never to replace. They might, she hopes, repair.

The leaves are shedding again, but now it seems unnatural. The rain falls with nobody to receive it. The wind blows silent through the trees. Her children might make the world warm again. Or the world will make them cold like the rest.

The next few days, he keeps watch at the entrance while she rests. The gesture is symbolic, strained. It hadn't helped them before. But he can't bring himself to be with her.

One night, as he stood watching nothing, she came and stood beside him. There was no bridging their distance. They cried out into the woods once more.

This morning, she knows it's happening. She wakes late and he's gone. She heard no movement, he simply up and left. Perhaps it had all been too much for him. Perhaps their nothing had been easy to leave behind.

With the father gone, she sits softly at home. She feels her children kick, lays down on the ground. The roar can be heard now, approaching like a wave. She's happy for it to swallow her.

When they arrive, a monster of shining silver worms its way in. Curled up like her youngest had been, she stares into its eyes. With a boom, it speaks. The monster roars a cloud of smoke.

As the smoke rises from the den, the animals cheer and wait.

Lifting the body of the fox, they say: 'Pest'.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Michael Wheatley** is an Associate Lecturer in Creative and Professional Writing at the University of Worcester. He is currently researching for a creative writing and practice-based PhD at Royal Holloway, University of London. His debut collection of short stories, 'The Writers' Block', is published by Black Pear Press. Further prose and poetry has been published in various literary magazines including *Three Drops from a Cauldron* and *Inside the Bell Jar*. Other research interests include metafiction, perceptions of creativity, and cannibalism.