

Ash A. Hulme

The Taxidermist's Son

Joseph could arrange a wing in many ways – flush against the back of a bird and overlapping with another wing at its tips, extended like a fan, just as it had been when there was a breeze to lift it, or locked into an acute angle behind the feathered mantle. With hands stained yellow-brown, he adjusted the skin. Two glass hemispheres were fixed into place within their plaster mould. He preferred to work with plaster instead of beeswax. It was less susceptible to occasional fluctuations in the temperature of the room.

“Don’t touch,” he admonished Isaac. “That’s meant for the museum.”

Isaac withdrew his hand, but continued to stare at the eyes of his father’s latest sculpture. His childish fingers plucked the lace of his sleeve.

“Fingers make it dirty.” The boy repeated his father’s lesson. He stood very still for a moment, but soon his right hand was tugging the skin of his left. Joseph scowled at him with increasing irritation.

“Stop fidgeting, Isaac.”

“He keeps *looking* at me,” protested Isaac.

“This bird can’t look at anybody,” Joseph insisted. “I showed you the box of eyes. They aren’t real, and besides, this was a female.”

But Isaac did not release the bird from his own blue-eyed scrutiny. His face was bone-white, lips and nose turned ruddy in the mild surrounding chill. He sucked thoughtfully on his lower lip.

“Did it hurt when you took her skin away?” he finally asked.

“Where do you get these notions?” Joseph sighed heavily, suddenly aware of the constant ache along his spine. “I must fit this more closely to the mould,” he said. “I will answer your questions later, but for now, let me concentrate.”

“Do...?” Isaac’s hands had clasped the hem of his jacket, but he snatched them away when his father turned to look at him once more. Shoulders hunched, he shuffled out through the workshop’s single exit, and reached up to close the door – carefully – behind him.

Light from outside shone obliquely into the room, and left an acute triangular patch upon the owl’s left wing. Joseph’s gaze lingered for several seconds. The skin was still not quite sitting correctly, he decided, and smoothed down the feathers with

agitated fingers. “Right,” he muttered to himself. He could do no better. He would set the creature aside for now, and package it for transport in the evening.

Already, the sun was getting low. Its rays would not creep any further inside before rising again on the following day. The dead resided in Joseph’s workshop, with scarcely a breath of air passing sluggishly across their outer surface. Days and nights would be lost to memory, while new skins floated in their chemical tubs, and creatures shaped by plaster scaffolds stood and crouched in the shadows at each corner. Even Joseph had not escaped the touch of cool stagnation.

He stared into the fierce eyes of the owl. *So dead, and yet, somehow... not.* It was not the glass which produced the illusion of such intelligence. Just as he had said to Isaac, the eyes came from a box of coloured hemispheres. The bird’s outer skin – the shape of its brow, the line of its feathers as they rested against its head – that was where the true expression could be found. The sunlight on the owl’s brown feathers did not quite touch Joseph’s hands.

This house, he thought. *It claims you by inches.*

It stood at the tip of a rocky peninsula, barely connected to the mainland by such a narrow line of sand that two sides of ocean almost kissed when the tide was high. Joseph had slowly accustomed himself to the groans of dark brown timber that his grandfather had imported from the forests inland. He had been a sickly child within those walls, trapped by so many ailments that he could barely distinguish between them in his memory. Wary of the elements, he had huddled indoors with an open book upon his knees and his head bowed low.

Only occasionally would he glance up to look outside, where a layer of tiny shrubs was scattered over the skin of the land. Each was small and dark and cast misshapen shadows over the brittle grass. Even this had thinned in several places to expose the peninsula’s scalp.

No roads connected Joseph and Isaac to the cities of the mainland. Only a single boat came twice a week, and delivered Joseph’s crates of animal specimens into town.

“This isn’t a *house*,” had been a frequent complaint from his much younger wife. With her left hand gripping the edge of the dining room table, Lucy had raked half-clenched fingers through her

hair. "Joseph, it's a prison. I'll go mad if I have to stay here much longer."

Joseph glanced fleetingly at the door to the workshop, barely five steps from where he stood with his back to the hall. She had seemed so happy when they married, so eager to escape the unceasing scrutiny of her family, so excited when she first saw the beach near the house and smelt her first breath of fresh salt air. When had that changed?

"Well?" demanded Lucy.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry." She clenched her teeth, gazed at the floor and tapped one index finger several times against the splintered varnish of the table. She spoke again after a single deep sigh, but her voice was subdued. "It comes down to this," she said. "I can't stay in this life any longer. I'm lonely, Joseph. Do you understand? I miss my friends. And this... This place! Either we leave together – you, me, the baby – or I'll leave by myself. The choice is yours. But I'm dying here."

The pressure was tight against Joseph's throat, as if someone's hand were clenched around it. What would it mean to leave the house, the familiar surroundings where the grey of indoor shadows had long since crept beneath his skin? He studied the face of his wife. Lucy's brown eyes were just slightly golden where the light shone into them directly. He noted the mole upon one of her cheekbones and the thin wisp of a curl hanging down over her brow. He absorbed every detail in silence, and finally, he backed away. "I understand."

Isaac turned once towards the house. A shadow formed across his eyes as the sun reflected brightly from his gold-blond – almost white – and slightly uneven hair. But he turned back quickly and trotted further away along the narrow animal trails, absentmindedly slapping a nearby shrub with a stick he'd picked up from the ground. A black and white cat dodged away from the boy. Whatever bravado it had possessed swiftly vanished like a passing gust of wind.

Joseph struggled to recall when he had first seen the stray. It must have been five years ago, a short while after Lucy's departure. At times, the animal would be crouched beside one of the pillars of Joseph's front porch. On other days, it would be hunting near the rocks. He had seen it torment a stranded chick, whose thin legs hobbled, whose tiny wings flapped and whose cries were barely louder than the waves. The cat had claimed the peninsula as its own personal tundra, but never once ventured into the house. Isaac's clumsy attempts to approach had never yielded any success.

That boy belonged to the world outside. His attention flitted like a moth and, even at that moment, he had dropped his stick and started in the same direction where the cat had disappeared.

I will speak to him at supper time, vowed Joseph.

Returning once more to his work, he commanded himself to focus. There was a reddish tint to the owl's false eyes. Two feathered clusters formed what looked like horns at the top of its head. It seemed to glare. Joseph moved slowly as he transferred his tool tray to the cleaning station and washed, scrubbed and thoroughly dried his hands. Shuffling, cautious of the ache in his back, he turned his attention to a pre-constructed box. Lined with acid-free foam, it was designed to fold in around the owl until the lining fitted snugly about its wings.

Even the small effort of lifting the box onto the table left him weary. He felt each loss of meagre energy with every crack of his shoulder joints. He looked again at the face of the owl.

It screamed.

Gasping, Joseph struggled to recall the proper rhythm of his heart. He staggered back and reached down to steady the chair on which Isaac sometimes sat.

Isaac.

A thin grey cloud was approaching from the left side of the window. Its shadow was sharp upon the ground, where it had not yet obscured the bright afternoon light. The wind was strengthening outside of the house, and Joseph could no longer see his son.

There *had* been a scream, he realised, half-staggering as he hurried for the front door and wrestled with the latch. But it had not come from the immobile skin of the owl.

He called Isaac's name between stabbing breaths and wrapped both arms around himself. *You might have thought to fetch a coat*. His steps were less assured than those of a younger man – or a boy – and the wind-chill had already numbed his skin. He could hear the sound of ragged breaths behind his ears. "Isaac!" he called against a robust gale. No child answered. With unsteady steps, the old man followed a sandy trail towards the coast.

His breath stalled in his throat.

The boy was a thin, pale shape, half concealed at the base of two large rocks. A succession of waves had eroded a shallow dent into the sand beneath his back. Avoiding the rocks to find a safer way down, Joseph waded through ankle-deep brine and dared the wind to topple him. His chest was tighter than he could bear, but a greater pain pressed like a rod into the soft tissue of his belly. "Stay there!" he called to the boy. "I'm coming. Just stay there, Isaac – I'm..."

His voice had been dry-throated, barely a gasp. A touch of grey-blue had come to Isaac's face, and a cloud of barely diluted red fluid was already spreading into the shallow water. *No.* Joseph knelt beside his son. The breath was snatched from his own lungs, snatched into the air. The wind at his back was frigid. At the eye-level of a kneeling man, he could see a glint of fresh wet blood upon the stone.

"Foolish boy," he whispered – half choked – and leant down to be closer to the body. "I told you not to venture so close to the rocks. Did I not always say...?"

When? When did you say?

Eyes closed, Joseph bowed his head once more. Anger burned, tight and acrid in his stomach. *Stupid, foolish old man.*

He was silent as he gathered Isaac into his arms and struggled once more to his feet, just as silent as he began to trudge back up the hill to his grandfather's house. His journey from the beach felt longer than it had on any other day.

The black and white stray was underneath the balcony and tensed its back as Joseph approached. Its tail flicked in uneven spasms, until the cat sprang away in an uneven trajectory between the surrounding thickets. Joseph saw something – a partial bird, perhaps a starling – dangling from the animal's mouth, where its teeth had pierced the delicate honeycomb structure of the bones.

The air was sluggish in the old man's workshop, dry and odourless. But where else on his land did the dead belong?

It felt like the natural thing to do, to place Isaac's body upon a narrow table and wash the blood and sand from his skin. A frozen menagerie surrounded them both, accusing and strange in its dark asymmetry. As Joseph cleaned the skin of Isaac's face, he felt feeble and old. His own hand was noticeably heavy.

He could almost believe that the boy still lived. Isaac could be very pale on a cold early morning. He could have merely knelt to say his prayers and climbed into bed with a furtive wish up to the stars. *If I called his name...* thought Joseph, lowering both arms to his sides. *Isaac, it's time to wake up.*

He frowned at the smallest of ticklish sensations, like a child's plaintive fingertips brushing lightly against his palm. His own hand curled slightly to meet the unanticipated touch. But then he closed it to an iron-tight fist and pressed it hard against his thigh.

"*Don't look at me!*" he snarled at the jury of skins upon their stands, mounts and perches. Hands clutching the edge of the table, he hunched against it. This time his voice came more quietly to his ears. "Don't look at me."

He had never been a superstitious man – never believed that he would live after he died. But of all the creatures in the room, he realised, the most hollow among them was himself. He stared at Isaac's face for as long as his eyes would allow without having to blink. He had not even noticed, not until that moment. But the boy's mouth remained just slightly open, lips caught forever on the threshold of a question.
