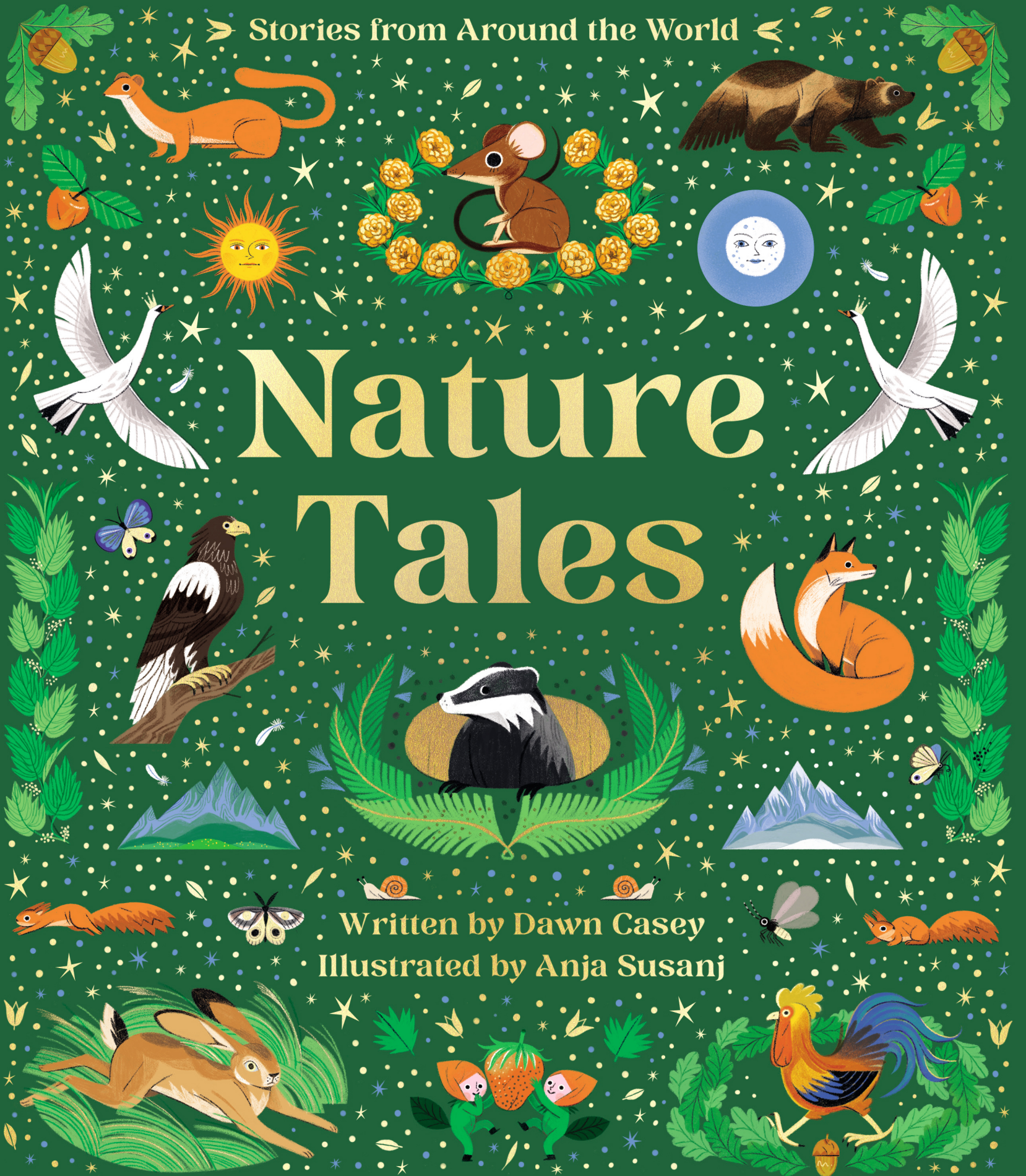


Stories from Around the World

Nature Tales

Written by Dawn Casey
Illustrated by Anja Susanj



Nature Tales



For all my relations – D.C.

*To my late grandmothers: Ljubica, who
sang ancient songs and told the strangest stories,
and Josipa, who helped me find Nature. – A.S.*



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A Note from the Author

*"Stories are among our most potent tools for restoring the land
as well as our relationship to land." – Robin Wall Kimmerer*

I grew up in London, where there were no fields, no farms, no forests. Yet, even in the city, the natural world reaches out to meet us. I wished upon the dandelions that grew through the paving cracks. I feasted on blackberries that thrived on forgotten fences. I played darts with wall barley, stirred petal-potions and made homes for thistledown fairies.

And I read books by Beatrix Potter, Alison Uttley, Jill Barklem, Kenneth Grahame – books that introduced me to woods and hills and hedgerows, and all the little folk who live there.

I heard old tales, of golden apples and nettle shirts, talking animals and singing trees. Stories that affirmed what children already know: that the Earth is alive, the world is magic. So, though I'd never seen a hedgehog or met a mouse, I felt I knew them, and I loved them. It is my pleasure to introduce a few of these dear friends to you.

Here are stories that honour and celebrate the plants, the trees, the birds, the animals, and remind us that they are all our relations, and can also be helpers, healers, wisdom teachers.

Our ancestors knew that stories carry living wisdom. Facts are easy to forget, but stories touch the heart, speak to the spirit, fire the imagination. So I include tales that help children remember that the little stub-tailed bird, hopping in the hedgerow, is Wren, and that the generous gift of fruit that Apple Tree gives helps us to stay healthy. That Oak teaches patience, Nettle protection, and Badger how to walk the old ways. I share stories to nurture a sense of kinship and belonging. Reverence and gratitude for life. And stories to show us that what has been lost can be restored.

I have stitched these ancient stories with threads drawn from the real lives of each being. The tales are rooted in the understandings of our ancestors and in the truth of the natural world. And they are written especially for telling aloud.

So sit beneath an oak and tell *The Magic Acorn*. Eat blackberries while listening to *Bramble's Gift*. Tell *The Bear of Heaven* under the stars. And share the story of *Little Lark*, *Robin Redbreast* and *Jenny Wren* beside the fire, outside – surrounded by feathered friends.

May these stories light our hearts with love for all life.

Dawn Casey

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Bringing Back Wolf

A folktale from Mexico

The cycles of nature show us that life is not linear (with death at the end of the line). In the cycle of life, death and birth are two sides of the same door. This story offers heartening wisdom: that even when much has been lost, we can create the conditions for life to thrive again. Our heart songs – our visions, our prayers, our actions, our creations – can have miraculous effects. The journey of restoring the wild has begun.

For thousands of years, grey wolves roamed wild across the north lands. But in Yellowstone National Park, in America, by 1926 the last of the wolves had gone, shot by a human hunter. In 1995, wolf-lovers set fourteen wolves free. Now Yellowstone is home to a hundred wolves. The silver she-wolf lifts her head and howls, and a chorus answers – a thriving tribe of wild wolves.

In the old time, in the always time, there is an old woman. She is known by many names. Bone woman. Wild Woman. Wolf Woman. La Loba.

Her work is gathering the bones. From the high rocks and the dry riverbeds, she gathers the bones. One by one by one. She collects them together in her cave.

She keeps them safe. The black cave is filled with white bones. The curving antlers of deer,



• BRINGING BACK WOLF •

the rattling tailbones of snakes, the white skulls of black crows. And wolf bones. Hip bones. Jaw bones. Rows of sharp teeth. Knobby thigh bones. Slender ribs. Tiny toe bones.

She lays out the bones, each in its own place, fitting one bone to another bone. Bone by bone. Until the shape shines before her – whole again.

She sits with the bones. She sits with the fire. She allows her song to arise. When the time is right, she lifts her arms over the bones – she begins to sing.

A song of love and life. An old song. An always song. And as she sings, the bones resonate, vibrate. Rattle and shake, as if they are full of life. They are full of life! As she sings, flesh begins to fill the spaces between the bones. Muscle and sinew and skin. Fur prickles and bristles. A coat as strong and shining as silver silk. Lean limbs. Soft paws. Sharp claws.

La Loba sings and the tip of the creature's tail begins to quiver, and to curl upwards. A shaggy silver plume, a flag – waving life.

• BRINGING BACK WOLF •

La Loba sings over and over. The creature's ribs begin to rise, and fall, and rise again. Breath. Like the waves of the sea.

La Loba sings and the creature's heart begins to beat-beat-beat, like a drum.

La Loba sings so deep the ground beneath her feet begins to shake. And the creature opens its eyes.

The wolf lives. She leaps. Stretches her spine, rolls her shoulders. She lopes – away... down through the rocks.

Somewhere, the wolf is running free, splashing through sunlit rivers, moving through moonlit glades. And sometimes, when the light is right or the shadows shimmer, and she lifts up her head and howls, the sound makes the ground shake. The sound of a song of love and life. And all around, the mountains ring.





The Nettle Queen

A folktale from Denmark

Nettles grow in great families and give us many gifts: food, medicine, cloth and dye. Nettle leaves are so rich and tender that many creatures love to eat them – the plant uses its sting to make sure that not too many of its leaves get munchd! Nettle tea is zingy green. Nettle soup helps our bodies and bones grow strong and healthy. People have been using nettle stems to make cloth since Bronze Age times.

Once there was a king who had six sons and one daughter, Eliza. The king loved his family dearly. So, when the king's wife died, he was sunk in grief. But his advisors told him: the country needs a queen! Besides, the children need a mother. So, though his heart had not yet healed, the king married again.

His new queen felt at once the lack of love. Hurt hardened her heart. One day, when the boys woke her with their noise, she snapped. "Get out!" she shouted. "Just go! Fly away!"

Words have power. As she pointed, the boys' skin sprouted feathers. Their arms became wings. Their necks stretched. And they flew; six white swans.

And the girl, Eliza?

Now, the queen made a strong, dark dye – in a great pot, walnut shells bubbled and brewed. She poured the dye into Eliza's bath. It stained her hair and changed her face – she looked so different, even her own father did not know her.

"Who let a stranger in here?" he cried. "Throw her out!"

Eliza fled, into the forest. She wandered the woods, wishing her brothers were with her. But the trees and the plants, the birds and the animals were all with her. She talked to them, as if they were her brothers.

"Hello, Butterfly!"

"Hello, Nettle, may I pick a leaf? Ow!"

The sting made the tips of her fingers tingle. Just then, along came a woman, gathering nettles for soup. She picked a dock leaf for Eliza, to soothe her skin. She showed her the tiny butterfly eggs, sheltered beneath a nettle leaf. She taught her how to pick the very top tips of the plant, which are best to eat. Eliza thanked the woman, and she asked her, "Please... Have you seen six boys – princes?"

The woman shook her head. "No... no princes... But I did see six swans, down on the river."

Eliza followed the river all the way to the sea. But she didn't find her brothers. She did find a white feather, on the shore. She sat on the sand with the feather in her hand. And as the sun began to set, there came a sound – over the pounding of the waves – the singing of wings.

From over the horizon came six wild swans. As they landed, their white feathers fell away. There stood six boys – Eliza's brothers! Then there was hugging and kissing and laughing and crying, and more hugging.

"Every day, when the sun rises, we turn into swans," said her youngest brother. "We only become boys again when the sun sets. We live far off over the ocean, but every day, we fly back, to look for you."

"Now you've found me," said Eliza, "Take me with you!" So Eliza and her brothers gathered supple willow and tough rush, and together they knotted a net.

Eliza sat in the net and her swan-brothers lifted her clean into the sky. They carried her over the sea. But the net was heavy. Their flight was slow. When the sun began to sink, they were still far out over the ocean.

And all around, black clouds were massing, thunder crashing, lightning flashing. And the sun, sinking...

From the seething swell rose a black rock. Just as the sun set, their toes touched land. All through the storm they clung together, as the freezing waves crashed over the rock.

But next morning, the last shreds of storm-cloud blew away, and the sun shone. The swans flew on. The sun dried Eliza's clothes and warmed her skin. The sky-cradle rocked softly, and she listened to the lullaby of the sea. She looked down and she saw castles in the clouds, glowing pink and gold. Was it the realm of the faerie queen, or was it just a dream?

The vision vanished, and Eliza saw real land below. Mountains, trees... a cave in the hillside. Here, the swans landed, and rested. In the cave, their carpet was sun-soaked moss. Their curtains were green creepers. And all around, great families of nettles thrived.

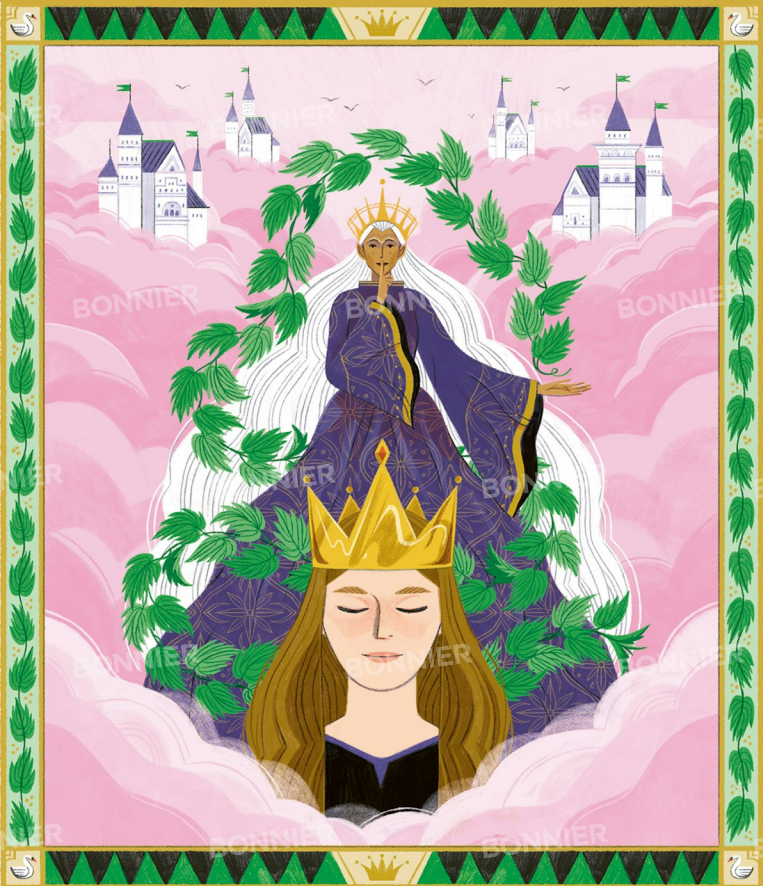
That night, Eliza prayed. Please, help me set my brothers free. She slept with a swan-feather in her hand. And as she slept, she dreamed. In her dream, she felt herself rising up into the air, light as a feather. She was flying, into a land of sun-pink clouds. And there was the queen of the faeries – she looked just like the woman of the woods.

"There is a way to help your brothers," said the woman. "Gather the wild nettles. Make the fibres into fabric. Make each of your brothers a nettle shirt. But, from the moment you pick the first nettle, to the moment the last shirt is done, you must not speak one word."

The woman handed Eliza a nettle. Eliza took it, and at the fire of its touch, she woke.

She began at once. With bare hands, she stripped the leaves. With bare feet, she stamped the stems. From the split stems, she drew out the fibre, and twisted it into thread. She made needles from sticks of wood, and knitted a nettle shirt. She did not speak one word.

The days fell into a green rhythm. Eliza wrapped her silence around herself, a cocoon of quiet. She found that, without words, she heard more. The conversations of the birds, the songs of the trees, the whispered wisdom of the waters.



Until, one day, the silence was shattered by the blast of a horn.
Baying, barking dogs – hunting hounds. And a man, a king, kneeling
before her.

“Your hands!” he cried. “Come with me. My doctors will help you.”

Eliza looked at the king, but she didn't say a word. So he lifted her up onto his horse.
And away they sped, to the palace. Eliza was given gowns of velvet and gloves of silk, to
soothe her hands. Every day, the king tried to find a way to help the girl smile. Eliza grew fonder
and fonder of the kind and patient king. She longed to share her story with him, but she did not
speak one word.

Every night, Eliza stamped and tramped, twisted and knitted. Until she ran out of nettles.
She knew where more grew...

...in the graveyard. In the green gloom she picked the stinging stems. But from the shadow
of the church, the bishop was watching her. And he ran to wake the king. “A witch!” he hissed.
“She's a witch! Picking nettles for her spells.”

The king refused to believe the bishop's words. But the people of the village did:

“So that's why my cow gave no milk.”

“That's why my crops didn't grow.”

“She's why – the witch!”

The king begged Eliza to speak, to explain herself, to free herself. “Eliza, witches
are burnt at the stake – it's the law.” But still, Eliza did not say a word.

Even as they tied her to the stake, Eliza worked on the last shirt
in silence. Even as they lit the blaze, and the first flames began to
lick towards her.

Then came another sound, over the blaze of the flames: the singing of wings... down from the
sky came six wild swans. The swans circled round Eliza and she threw the green shirts over their
white heads. One by one by one, the swans turned back into boys.

The blaze smouldered and smoked, sputtered and died, and the charred wood put down roots,
and sent up shoots, and burst into leaf, a green blaze of life.

And so the spell was broken. Eliza's brothers were free at last.

Later, Eliza spoke. She shared her story with the king. And the king listened, with tears in his
eyes. “I'm so sorry, Eliza... for all I've allowed. The law is wrong. I see that now. I will change it
myself.” He looked into Eliza's eyes, as green as the weeds of the woods. “I love you, Eliza. Could
you ever... Would you ... be my queen?”

Words still tasted strange on Eliza's lips, after so much silence. They were quiet, but clear.
“Yes,” she said. “I will.”

And so Eliza was crowned. Alongside the king, she ruled wisely and well. She shared her love
of the plants with the people of the land. And so the people learned to love the weeds, and they
gave Eliza a new name – they called her the Nettle Queen.





The Stork's Nest

A folktale from Morocco

The white stork's wings are bigger than your arms stretched wide. The bird's huge size and bold colours make it an unmistakable summer visitor. Historically, in the winter, many storks fly to the lands south of the Sahara Desert in Africa. In the spring, they return north to Europe, and north Africa, to nest. Across Europe, and in Morocco, their arrival was warmly welcomed – if a stork nested on your house, it brought good luck to all the family. Around 200 years ago, meadows and wetlands were dug up and drained to plant crops. Without the land they needed, storks began to disappear. Now, white stork projects have helped the birds return once again to nest in the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Sweden. In 2020, a pair nested in the UK for the first time in over 600 years. The stork has long been associated with rebirth – it is the stork who brings new babies, according to European tradition. The bird is a perfect symbol for the restoration of the natural world.

In the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, sits the city of Marrakesh. The streets of the souks are a maze of markets – a hubbub of merchants and mules, stalls loaded with rugs and bags, lamps and lanterns, patterned plates of cobalt blue and saffron gold, and tea pots with curving spouts. There are heaps of glistening olives and piles of powdered spice, red chilli, black pepper, pale ginger and bright turmeric. There are musicians and mystics, storytellers and sellers of healing herbs.

And in the heart of the city stands the royal palace. Its walls are red as desert sand – the colour of sunset. Here, in the palace, lived a girl. She was lonely. Her father was the Sultan of Marrakesh. He was very busy doing all the things a sultan has to do. She had no brothers and no sisters. She had no one to play with.

The princess spent her days in the palace garden, cooling her toes in the tinkling fountains and resting in the shade of the tall palm trees, daydreaming amidst the scent of orange blossom. The garden was a place of peace and harmony, beauty and tranquility. But she wished she had someone to share it with.

One day, as she sat back splashing her feet in the fountain, watching the clouds go by, she saw a great white bird circling the skies. A huge bird with wide wings and long legs, soaring high, delighting in riding the wind.

“Oh, great white bird,” called the princess. “Do come down here and say hello!”

The great bird came gliding down and flapped into the palace garden. A stork! The stork landed by the



edge of the fountain. He dipped his long beak into the sparkling water and caught a fish. The girl was enchanted to see a stork so close. He was almost as tall as she was! He walked with a slow, stately gait, on his long, slender legs, with his head held high.

"Dear Stork," said the princess softly. "Do stay and keep me company."

And the stork did stay. The girl and the bird enjoyed the pool together, side by side. The girl sat very still and very quiet, so the bird knew there was nothing to fear.

After a long time, the princess got up, moving slow and steady as a stork. She went to the palace kitchens and returned with a dish of fresh fish. And the stork bowed his head – and ate.

The next day the stork returned. And the next. And the next. Soon the girl and the bird were firm friends.

The stork greeted the princess by throwing back his head and chattering his long red beak, so it made a loud clattering sound. The princess laughed and clapped her hands. They played together in the garden. They paddled in the pools and splashed in the fountains. They played hide and seek amidst the orange trees and olive groves. Now the garden was filled with the sound of splashing and shrieking, clattering and laughing.

One day, as the girl sat swinging her feet in the sparkling water, the stork landed beside her, and dropped something into her lap. A pebble. It was cool and smooth and white,

like marble. It was round as the moon. "What a pretty pebble!" said the princess. "Thank you, dear Stork." She put the pebble into her slipper, in the turned-up toe, to keep it safe. And she gave the stork a fine fish, to say thank you.

Day after day, the girl and the stork played together in the garden.

But one day, the stork did not come. The princess waited and waited, scanning the sky. But no stork appeared.

That night, the princess didn't touch her meal, though the tagine was rich and well spiced, roasted slow, and there were medjool dates, soft and sticky, and hot, sweet mint tea.



The sultan saw that his daughter was downhearted. "Why so sad?" he asked.

"My friend the stork hasn't come," said the princess. "I miss him."

"Then he will come tomorrow!" said the sultan. "I shall command that he returns! No one disobeys the sultan!"

But, despite the sultan's command, the stork did not return. Not the next day. Nor the next. "Father," said the girl, "I'm worried something has happened to him."

So the sultan sent out a new command – anyone who saw the stork must report to the palace immediately.

Before long, a man did come to the palace. "I've seen the stork, Your Majesty," he said. "It was making a nest on the roof of my house."

"Well!" said the sultan. "Where is it now?"

"I don't know," said the man. "I decided to sell my house, and I thought no one would want to buy a house with a messy old stork's nest on the roof. So I knocked it down, and the stork flew away. I didn't think it mattered. After all, it's just a stork."

"It is not just a stork!" The girl's face flushed with anger. "He's my friend. And that nest was his home – for his family!"

Thinking of the nest destroyed, and the stork gone, the girl was sunk in misery. She sat gazing out of the window at the sky, the round white pebble in her palm. She liked the way it felt in her hand, cool and smooth; soothing. It made her feel that her friend was not so far away.

"What's that you've got there?" said her father.

"It's just a pebble that the stork gave me."

"Let me see..." said the sultan, holding the stone up to the light. "This is no pebble, child," he gasped. "This is a pearl! A jewel beyond price!"

That night the girl sat at the arched window, with the pearl in her hand, gazing out over the rooftops. She thought of her father's words: a jewel beyond price.



Yet her heart knew that a life is worth more than any jewel. The moon shone and the pearl glowed. And an idea came to her. And when her father heard it, he agreed.

So the girl went to their neighbour – the man whose house was for sale. “Will you sell your house to me?” she asked. “For this pearl?”

The man was delighted – he agreed at once.

The princess asked the people of the palace – the master craftsmen and the skilled artisans – to help. Together they made a wide wooden platform, and put it up on top of the roof – a firm foundation for a stork’s nest.

Every day, the princess watched and waited. And one day, she heard a sound: a loud clattering chatter. And there on the rooftop was the stork, making a new nest.

The stork and his mate made a wonderful nest – a huge cup of strong sticks and soft straw. It was so wide, the princess could have sat inside! The stork’s mate laid five fine eggs. And soon the nest was filled with white woolly chicks.

Every year, after that, when it was time for the birds to make their nests, the storks returned. And if you ever go to Marrakesh, you will see that there are storks there still.



Rabbit's Tail

A folktale from Brazil

Across America live a family of rabbits with short fluffy tails – “the cottontails”. In Brazil, the local rabbit is known as the forest cottontail. The European rabbit also lives in America, because in olden days, when it was valued for food and fur, it was introduced into every continent on Earth (except Antarctica). Like their cottontail cousins, European rabbits also have short, turned-up tails. The tufted tail is black on top and white below; when the rabbit runs from danger, the underside of its tail flashes white – a clear warning sign to other rabbits nearby.

Once upon a time there was a rabbit. A little brown bunny, with a twitching nose and fine-tuned ears. Back then, Rabbit had a long tail and Cat had no tail at all. But, oh, how she wanted one! A lovely long tail for waving and swaying, swinging and swishing.

Well, one day, Rabbit was fast asleep and dreaming. His tail stretched straight out behind him, and his chubby cheeks went up and down, round and round, chump-chump-chump, chew-chew-chew – he was dreaming of tender green leaves. Cat pad-pad-padded, closer to Rabbit’s tail. Then, yeeeee! She pounced...



Rabbit woke with a start.

"Oh, sorry!" said Cat. "I didn't mean to wake you. I just wanted to play. I wish I had a tail like yours..." Rabbit thought about his tail. He found it a bit of a bother. Lots of fearsome forest creatures like eating rabbits. Even if Rabbit hid in a hole, his long tail stuck out – he knew a hungry beast could grab it and pull him out and eat him up!

So Rabbit said, "I'll swap with you. If I give you my tail, what will you give me?"

"I'll give you a knife," said Cat.

Rabbit looked at the knife. It had a stout wooden handle and a sharp silver blade. It could be good for gathering leaves.

"Let's swap," said the rabbit. "You take the tail, and I'll take the knife."

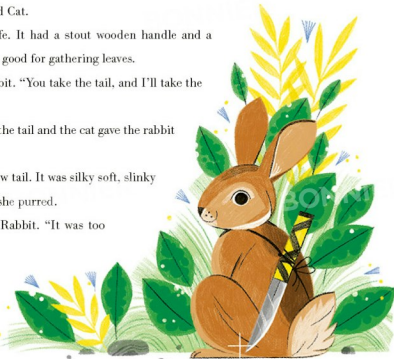
So the rabbit gave the cat the tail and the cat gave the rabbit the knife.

Prrrr... Cat swung her new tail. It was silky soft, slinky and sinuous. "It suits me..." she purred.

"It does suit you," said Rabbit. "It was too long for me, anyhow."

And off he hopped.

He went hop-hop-



hopping along, singing

a cheerful song:

Hop, hop, hop.

A very good swap.

A tail for a knife.

Hop, hop, hop...

He went hop-hop-hopping through the forest, until he came across a man sitting outside his hut with a pile of rushes. Rushes grow in silty waters – their long stems are soft and supple. They were sun-yellow and river-green. The old man was weaving them together, making a basket.

Rabbit stopped to watch. To cut the rush, the old man was tearing it with his teeth. When he saw the knife, he said, "Ah, that's just what I need!"

"Well," said the rabbit. "Let's swap... You take the knife and I'll take the basket."

So the rabbit gave the man the knife and the man gave the rabbit the basket.

Off went Rabbit, with the round rush basket, through the forest.

Hop, hop, hop.

A very good swap.

A tail for a knife.

A knife for a basket.

Hop, Hop, Hop.

He went hop-hop-hopping through the forest. Until he came to a clearing, with a little mud





hut, thatched with long fronds to keep off the rain. The ground around the hut was planted with vegetables. A woman was working in the garden.

Rabbit stopped to watch. The woman was walking among the plants; she kept stopping and stooping to pick lettuces. She put the lettuce into her apron. When the woman saw the basket, she said, "Ah, that's just what I need!"

"Well," said the rabbit. "Let's swap... You take the basket, and I'll take some of those fresh green leaves."

So the rabbit gave the woman the basket and the woman gave the rabbit a lettuce.

Off went the rabbit with the fresh green leaves.

Hop, hop, hop.

A very good swap.

A tail for a knife.

A knife for a basket.

A basket for a bunch of greens.

Well, before long, the smell of those green leaves began to tickle and tantalise Rabbit's twitchy little nose... Mmmm, they smelt good!

Rabbit stopped hopping and began nibbling. His chubby cheeks went up and down, round and round, chump-chump-chump, chew-chew-chew. Mmmm, they tasted good! So good.

So, now, if you see Rabbit hop-hop-hopping along, you'll see he still has a fluffy little tail, like a tuft of cotton wool. And, he still loves lettuce.



Hare's Ears

A folktale from Siberia

The brown hare is larger and lither than its rabbit cousins, with longer ears and legs. Hare is swifter than even the champion runners of humankind, able to reach speeds of up to 45 miles per hour. Hares like open land where they can run, resting by day in hedges and woods, and venturing out at dawn and dusk.

Between the holy hills and the rippling river lies a great plain. Rich grasslands thrive side by side with wide woodlands; forests of larch and fir, scented cedar pine, bird cherry and bilberry.

Of all the creatures of the forest, Great Elk was the biggest and the strongest. He wore a pair of mighty antlers, huge horns to attract a doe or repel a bull. Once every year, Great Elk shed his old antlers and grew a new pair.

One day, Great Elk and his wife were talking together. Hidden in the long grass, lying low, Hare's ears twitched. He crept closer, and crouched against the ground, listening.

"I have two old antlers," Great Elk was saying. "I'm wondering who to give them to. What do you think?"

Hare's amber eyes were round and wide. "I'd like a pair of antlers!" he thought.

"Well," the Elk-wife was saying, "You could give one pair to Reindeer. He'd find them useful, I think..."

"All right," said Great Elk. "And what about this other pair? They're a fine set of antlers, big and broad. Strong as stone."

From out of the undergrowth, up sprang Hare! He leapt up on his back legs, bouncing about and shouting.

"Me! Me! Great Elk! Me! Please give me the antlers!"

Great Elk smiled down at Hare. "Why, my little friend, what would you do with such great big antlers?"





"I'll scare 'em off – Fox and Lynx, Wolf, Weasel, Wolverine, Eagle and Owl – all of 'em!"

Great Elk gave a whistle. "All right, little Hare, you can have my antlers. Here..."

Together they balanced the heavy horns on top of Hare's head.

"Yay! Antlers!" Hare skipped and jiggled and jumped about.

That very moment, down fell a pinecone.

BONK! It hit Hare right on the head. "Yow!"

With a sudden start, Hare raced off into the forest. He was quick as the wind. But as he plunged into the undergrowth, his antlers caught in the bushes and tangled in the briars. The more he struggled, the more he stuck. He was stuck fast.

Great Elk and his wife looked down at Hare. "Well, my little friend," he said, "I don't think antlers are quite right for you. I'll give you something else, instead."

So Great Elk took back the antlers and gave Hare a pair of long, velvety ears. "I think these will be best for you, Hare. As you do love listening."

So that is why Reindeer has long, sweeping antlers. In the winter, he uses them to scrape away the snow, and reach the lichen he likes to eat. And that is why Hare has no antlers. Instead, he has a fine pair of long ears, brown as the good brown ground and tipped with black. When he runs, his ears lie flat back, so he's quick as the wind.

So here's to Hare. Old Keen-ears, Long-legs, Fleet-feet. The leaper, the bounder, the racer. The Stag with the Velvet Horns.



Fox's Tail

A folktale from Norway

In the summertime, it was traditional in Norway for farmers to herd their animals up to the mountain pastures to graze. A milkmaid lived there all through the summer, making cream and butter and cheese, whilst a shepherd boy kept watch over the animals. Red foxes live across the whole Northern Hemisphere. The white tip at the end of a fox's tail helps its mate to follow through the long grass.

High in the hills was a little mountain cabin. The floor was bare earth, swept smooth, and there was grass growing on the roof. In the cabin lived a milkmaid. She was looking for a shepherd to mind the sheep. She went walking through the fields and the forests, and before long, she met a bear. A big brown bear, lumbering and cumbersome, shaggy and shuffling.

"Where are you going?" said the bear.

"I'm looking for a shepherd to mind the sheep," said the milkmaid.



"Well," said the bear, "I'll be your shepherd."

The milkmaid thought, "Hmmm... How would you call the animals, to bring them back down from the mountain?"

"Like this..." said the bear. He cleared his throat and: "**HAAARGH!**"

"Oh, no!" said the milkmaid. "That will never do!" And off she went on her way. She walked and walked, and before long, she met a wolf. A silver-grey wolf, with bright blue eyes.

"Where are you going?" said the wolf.

"I'm looking for a shepherd to mind the sheep."

"Well," said the wolf, "I'll be your shepherd."

"Hmmm... How would you call the animals, to bring them back down from the mountain?"

"Like this..." said the wolf. He threw back his head. "**How-ooooo!**"

"Oh, no!" said the milkmaid. "That will never do!" And off she went on her way. She walked and walked, and before long, she met a fox. A rusty-red fox, with pricked ears and a bushy tail.

"Where are you going?" said the fox.

"I'm looking for a shepherd to mind the sheep."

"Well... I'll be your shepherd."

"Hmmm... How would you call the animals?"

The clever fox gave a loud, clear call. It travelled over the treetops, and made the mountains ring. "**Hey-yo... hee-ho... Yip!**"

"Oh, yes!" said the milkmaid. "You shall be my shepherd."

So the fox became a shepherd.

On the first day, the milkmaid said to the fox, "Take the goats to the high pasture to graze. But don't let them get lost." And off she went to make the butter.

The milkmaid skimmed the cream from the top of the milk and poured it into a wooden barrel – her churning pot. She took a





stout stick – her churning staff – and plunged it, up and down, up and down, into the cream. Not too fast. Not too slow. She sang as she worked.

Come, butter, come.

Come, butter, come.

Inside the churn, the staff went up and down, up and down.

Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh!

Now, the fox had a family of cubs back at his den. Four fluffy little cubs, playing leap and pounce, catch and chase, tumble and chew. Stretching and scratching, snuggling and snoozing. When the fox came to the den, the cubs welcomed him with waggly tails and nuzzly noses. But for days, they'd had nothing to eat but worms. They were hungry.

Now, a goat would make a fine meal for four fox cubs. So, up on the hill, the fox stalked the goats. Step slow, tail low... He crept, he crouched, he waited – poised. Then, *LEAP! SNAP!*

Maaaa-a! The goats skittered and scattered this way and that. The fox went twisting and turning after them. The goats ran and ran all the way into the forest – they got well and truly lost. So, the fox did not catch a goat, but out in the woods, he did catch a pigeon, and his cubs ate well that night.

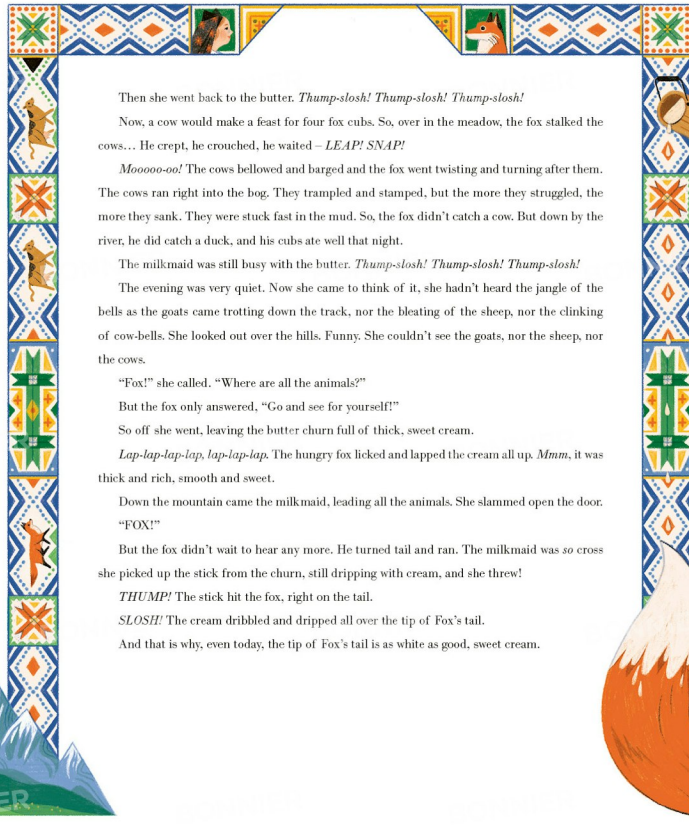
On the second day, the milkmaid was still busy with the butter – she didn't check the goats. She said to the fox, "Take the sheep up to the mountains to graze. But don't let them go on the rocks." Then she went back to the butter. *Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh!*

Now, a sheep would make a mighty meal for four fox cubs. So, up on the mountain, the fox stalked the sheep. Step slow, tail low... He crept, he crouched, he waited – *LEAP! SNAP!*

Baaaaa-a! One sheep fled and the rest followed, and the fox went twisting and turning after them. The sheep scrambled right up to the top of the rocks, out onto the high ledges. They couldn't get down again, so they stayed there – *skärfäst* – stuck. So, the fox didn't catch a sheep. But up on the mountain, he did catch a rabbit, and his cubs ate well that night.

On the third day, the milkmaid was still busy with the butter – she didn't check the animals.

She said to the fox, "Take the cows over to the meadow to graze. But don't let them go near the bog."



Then she went back to the butter. *Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh!*

Now, a cow would make a feast for four fox cubs. So, over in the meadow, the fox stalked the cows... He crept, he crouched, he waited – *LEAP! SNAP!*

Mooooo-oo! The cows bellowed and barged and the fox went twisting and turning after them. The cows ran right into the bog. They trampled and stamped, but the more they struggled, the more they sank. They were stuck fast in the mud. So, the fox didn't catch a cow. But down by the river, he did catch a duck, and his cubs ate well that night.

The milkmaid was still busy with the butter. *Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh! Thump-slosh!*

The evening was very quiet. Now she came to think of it, she hadn't heard the jangle of the bells as the goats came trotting down the track, nor the bleating of the sheep, nor the clinking of cow-bells. She looked out over the hills. Funny. She couldn't see the goats, nor the sheep, nor the cows.

"Fox!" she called. "Where are all the animals?"

But the fox only answered, "Go and see for yourself!"

So off she went, leaving the butter churn full of thick, sweet cream.

Lap-lap-lap-lap, lap-lap-lap. The hungry fox licked and lapped the cream all up. *Mmm*, it was thick and rich, smooth and sweet.

Down the mountain came the milkmaid, leading all the animals. She slammed open the door.

"FOX!"

But the fox didn't wait to hear any more. He turned tail and ran. The milkmaid was so cross she picked up the stick from the churn, still dripping with cream, and she threw!

THUMP! The stick hit the fox, right on the tail.

SLOSH! The cream dribbled and dripped all over the tip of Fox's tail.

And that is why, even today, the tip of Fox's tail is as white as good, sweet cream.



Badger Boy

A story inspired by Irish folklore

Badgers have been with us for at least 250,000 years – since long before the great ice covered the land. Badgers live together in a sett, an underground den of tunnels and chambers. Setts are used year after year, and handed down through the generations. Some setts have been used by the same family of badgers for hundreds of years! Badgers are nocturnal – they only come out at night. If you see a big hole in a bank, with a heap of loose earth beneath it, you’ve found a badger’s sett! Well-trodden paths lead from the sett in all directions – like the dens, these badger-roads are often used for generations. You might even spot a round badger pawprint, with the marks of five clear pads and five sharp claws.

Once there was a couple who had hardly enough to survive. So when a child was born they didn’t know what to do. They could barely feed themselves – they couldn’t imagine how they could feed a child too.

And so, though it broke their hearts to do it, one night, they wrapped their baby in a blanket and tucked him into a basket. They left the basket at the edge of the woods. They prayed that he would be found by a family who could give him what he needed.



Well, their prayer was answered, in a way. For there was a family living at the edge of the wood. But it wasn’t a human family. On a steep bank, grew an elder tree. And underneath the elder, sheltered by nettles, was a hole – the entrance to a badger’s den.

In the soft dusk, in the moonlight, a badger poked her striped snout out of the doorway. She raised her nose and breathed in the night. The smell of the trees. The taste of the air. And... what was that? She knew that warm, milky smell – the smell of a cub.

The badger nosed over the basket. She hugged the warm bundle to her chest, and shuffled back, tail first, into her den. She shuffled down the passage, to the chamber where her own cubs slept, small and silky-grey, curled in a bed of bracken. She laid down the bundle. The baby badgers and the baby boy snuggled up together, and the mother badger fed them all. The cubs were safe and snug, deep in the earth, warm in their beds – they purred. The baby smiled in his sleep.

And so, under the ground, the boy grew. Summer came around. The land was lush with life. Alight with white blossom. The pale plates of elderflowers glowed in the gloaming. In the warm summer evening, the cubs crept up to the doorway of the den, and sniffed the air of the outside world. And the little boy followed, crawling on his chubby, muddy knees. Out into the night! A world of wonders!

Under the moon, the cubs and the child played. They sniffed at sliding snails and leapt at flitting moths. They balanced on logs. They chased, round and round. They tumbled and rolled and romped.



The cubs grew bigger, and the mother badger took them out, into the evening. A band of badgers, and one little boy, learning to find food in the night. The badger cubs rooted up bulbs and slurped down worms. The boy learnt all the wild things that are good to eat, and all the things that aren't!

The wild oats bowed their heads and turned to gold, and they all feasted on grains and nuts, fruits and berries, getting nice and fat for the winter.

Beneath the harvest moon, they dug tunnels and rooms – making ready their winter quarters. At the rusty end of autumn, they gathered crackly bracken to make warm beds. And in the winter, they stayed in the sett for days at a time, just resting.

When spring came around again, and a new litter of cubs was born, the boy helped his badger-mother to kick out the old brown bracken and bring in the fresh green fern, to keep the little ones clean and comfortable.

And so the boy learnt the ways of the badger.

As night follows day and moon follows sun, the years passed. The boy was happy, belonging to the badger clan.

Until, late one night, when the boy was out foraging for food, a man came walking through the wood. When the man saw the boy, all alone in the forest in the middle of the night, he thought the child must be lost. He questioned the boy, but the child didn't seem to understand his words. So, in the end, the man took the boy by the hand and led him back to the village.

At first, the villagers were half afraid of the strange wild boy from the woods. They called him *Carlach Coileánach*, "the foundling". They whispered to each other.

"He goes out at night!"

"Digging things up!"

"Slurping worms!"

But the boy had learnt from the badger how to take care of a clan. When he met a child, crying with hunger, he showed him where the best berries grew. When he met an old woman, lonely in her tumbledown cottage at the edge of the village, he wore a track to her door. The children of the village came with him on his visits, and the old woman felt again that she was part of the clan.



He showed the people how to clear the ground and how to dig deep. He showed them how to walk the old ways – to treasure the gifts of the ancestors, and to pass them on.

The villagers grew to cherish the presence of the badger boy in their lives.

The boy stayed in the village, visiting his badger family in the smudgy dusk, when day and night unite, and their two worlds became one, for a while.

The boy grew into a man, with a wife and children of his own. His children grew, and they had children – the old man became a grandfather. His dark hair was striped with streaks of white. People no longer called him “the foundling”. His grandchildren, and all the children of the village, loved him – they called him Grandpa Badger.





Wild Strawberries

A folktale from Britain

In the lazy, hazy days of summertime, wild strawberries grow. They are smaller than their farmyard cousins, and sweeter – a tiny taste of midsummer magic. In the old stories of Britain, the “Little Folk” is a respectful name for the faeries. In these tales, faeries embody the spirits of waters and woods, trees and plants... In this tale, the Little Folk show us how to harvest what we need from the natural world in a respectful way.

Once upon a time, a little girl and a little boy lived with their grandmother in a cottage, down a green lane. Sometimes, they didn't have enough to eat, but they were healthy and well and they loved each other, so they were grateful for what they did have.

By watching the way the old woman lived, the children learnt to treat other people with respect. Not just other humans, but all living beings – trees and plants, birds and animals. The people of the village liked being treated well, and they often gave the children a turnip for the pot, or a cabbage leaf, or a crust of bread.

The family had a little white nanny goat – *Maaaa-a!* Every day the children took the goat along the lane, to graze. The lane ran along the side of a farmer's field. Now, the farmer had fine

orchards and golden corn and a whole herd of cows. But he counted his cabbages and kept his turnips. He never gave anyone a crust of bread.

Whenever the farmer passed the children's cottage, he always helped himself to a cup of warm goat's milk. But when he saw their grandmother gathering elderflowers in the lane, he said she was a witch. And when he saw the children go past with the goat, he set the dog on them!

“Stay away from my field! That's MY grass!”

So the children had to go further and further to find grass for the goat.

It was midsummer. The breeze carried the scent of wheat, ripening in the sun. The evenings were sweet with honeysuckle. The grass in the lane grew tall and tickly, and the hungry goat could hear it calling to her. One day, she answered. She broke her rope. *Snap!* And she ran off, *trit-trot, trit-trot, trit-trot*. The children ran after her.

“Come back! Come back!”

But the goat didn't come back. She ran – *trit-trot, trit-trot, trit-trot* – all the way up the lane – *trit-trot, trit-trot, trit-trot* – all the way into... the Wood of the Little Folk, the faeries.

Now, everybody knows the Little Folk must be treated with respect.

“Please forgive our goat,” called the children. “She doesn't mean any harm – she's just hungry!” The children looked at one another. “Please!” they called. “May we come into your wood? We must get our goat back...”

It was dark in the wood. The wind made the leaves shiver. The children couldn't see the Little Folk, but they could feel them, watching.

There, in a clearing, was the goat, champing and chewing – not grass, but strawberries! The ground was covered with strawberry plants. Each little plant had one, two, three leaves, shiny-green on top and silky-grey below. And swinging from the silver stems were teeny tiny berries, like little fairy bells.

The children ran and slipped the rope over the goat. They looked and looked at the strawberries – so round and red.

“Please!” they called. “May we have some of your berries, and take just a few for Grandma?”



A gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the plants, and the biggest, ripest berries peeped out, like an invitation. The children felt a kind of “yes” feeling, inside.

The girl turned to her brother. “We’ll take just enough,” she said. The boy nodded.

The wind stilled and the children thought they could hear laughing. The Little Folk can be tricky little pixies – they were looking at each other with twinkly smiles, giggling. Because they knew that the berries were enchanted – unless they were harvested with respect, whoever ate them would never, ever be able to stop.

The children picked just a few berries. They were so ripe they almost rolled into their hands. Wherever they looked, they saw more and more – peeping out from beneath the leaves. So small. So sweet!

“Mmm. Thank you!” cried the children.

They picked a handful for Grandma. They left plenty for all the little folk: the birds and the bunnies, the tiny mice, and the faeries, of course.

The children came running into the yard. “Look, Grandma! Look what we found!”

But the funny Little Folk had charmed the children’s boots, and they went tripping and tumbling onto their knees, spilling the strawberries this way and that.

“Oh!” cried the girl. “A curse!”

But as the children watched, each fruit put down roots, and sent out shoots, and grew. Soon, the garden was green with leaves and red with berries. It was not a curse. It was a gift – a gift from the Little Folk.

The children cared for the plants, they gave them water and manure from the goat. In return, the plants gave the children baskets full of berries. Grandma made jams and jellies, and they had cream tea in the garden.

Well, one day the farmer came past. And when he saw the strawberries, he didn’t bother asking. He just got down on his knees and began to eat.

Num-num-num-num, num-num-num! He ate and he ate and he ate.

“More!” he cried. “More! Now!”

“There are plenty more in the forest...” said the children. “But—”

The farmer didn't wait. He ran up the lane. He went crashing into the forest, snapping stems, scaring birds.

Num-num-num-num, num-num-num! He ate and he ate and he ate. He ate all day and he ate all night. He couldn't seem to stop.

On Monday, he ate and ate and ate.

On Tuesday, he ate and ate and ate.

On Wednesday, he ate and ate and ate.

On Thursday, he ate and ate and ate.

On Friday, he ate and ate and ate.

On Saturday, he ate and ate and ate.

On Sunday, he ate and ate and ate, until...

POP! He burst! So that was the end of him.

But the little girl and the little boy, the old woman and the nanny goat, they all lived happily ever after. Every summer, they savoured the strawberries, and they always gave thanks.



Pigeon and Bee

A folktale from Ukraine

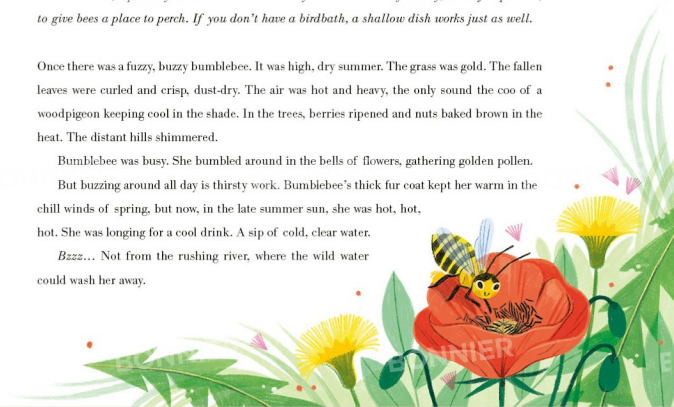
The crooning of the woodpigeon is a soothing sound – a familiar five-note song: coo coooo coo, coo-coo. Fuzzy bumblebees buzz in parks and gardens across the land. Both birds and bees need water to drink, especially in hot weather. To make your birdbath bee-friendly, add a few pebbles, to give bees a place to perch. If you don't have a birdbath, a shallow dish works just as well.

Once there was a fuzzy, buzzy bumblebee. It was high, dry summer. The grass was gold. The fallen leaves were curled and crisp, dust-dry. The air was hot and heavy, the only sound the coo of a woodpigeon keeping cool in the shade. In the trees, berries ripened and nuts baked brown in the heat. The distant hills shimmered.

Bumblebee was busy. She bumbled around in the bells of flowers, gathering golden pollen.

But buzzing around all day is thirsty work. Bumblebee's thick fur coat kept her warm in the chill winds of spring, but now, in the late summer sun, she was hot, hot, hot. She was longing for a cool drink. A sip of cold, clear water.

Bzzz... Not from the rushing river, where the wild water could wash her away.





Bzzz... Not from the dark lake, full of hungry fish.

Bzzz... Ah, a puddle! A sun-dried puddle, shallow, to you and me, but a deep pool for a tiny bee.

There was no pebble to perch on. Bumblebee couldn't swim and she didn't like getting her feet wet.

Carefully, she balanced at the water's edge. She lowered her head. She *streeetched*. She couldn't quite reach. Just a little further...

Oops! *PLOP!* Into the puddle she fell. Bumblebee buzzed and she kicked but her wings were wet and she couldn't fly. She was spluttering and sinking. Drowning!

With whistling wings, down flew Woodpigeon. He picked a leaf with his beak, and held it out to Bumblebee. Bee lifted her head and kicked her feet and scrambled up onto the leaf. With wobbly legs, she crawled over the leaf, back to dry land. Soggy and dripping. Coughing and sneezing. But alive.

"Oh, thank you," gasped the bee. "Thank you. You saved my life."

She buzzed her wings and shook herself, sending droplets of water in every direction. "Perhaps one day," she said to the pigeon, "I can help you."

The pigeon smiled at the little bee. But inside, he was thinking, how could a teeny-tiny bee ever help a great big bird like me?

He nodded his head goodbye. And with a whistle of wings, he was gone.

The very next day, a hunter came to the forest. He was looking for a pigeon. A nice big pigeon, fattened on forest acorns. So plodding and slow – an easy catch. So plump and plum-pink – perfect for a pie!

Silent, the hunter waited. He heard the whistle of wings, and looked up. There, flying slow overhead – Woodpigeon.

The hunter raised his gun. He aimed, bang in the middle of that plum-pink chest. His finger on the trigger began to squeeze...

Zzzzzzoom!

OW! Bumblebee stung the hunter, right on the hand, and he dropped the gun with a cry.

Away flew Pigeon. Away flew Bee. Happy and free, and glad to be alive.





Little Brown Mouse

A folktale from the Himalayan mountains of India and Nepal

The sandy-brown wood mouse is also known as the field mouse, since it lives in forests and farmlands, hills and hedges and even city gardens. Wood mice often spend the daylight hours in their burrows. Under cover of darkness, they venture out into the open, where other small mammals rarely go. Their long tails help them balance on slender stems. Their strong back legs help them leap and bound. Look carefully, and you might find a hazelnut shell that's been nibbled by a mouse – with a neat little round hole, edged with teeny teeth marks.

At the foot of a mountain, down in the leaf litter, below a root, was a burrow. Home to a little brown mouse, and her father. Above the ground, there were hidden doorways – tunnels marked with secret signs, little twigs and bright leaves, for when Fox pounced or Owl swooped. Below the ground, there were long, windy passages, leading to bedrooms full of soft moss, and storerooms full of nuts and seeds.

At night, the little brown mouse came out to play. She liked scampering and bounding and climbing. She liked gnawing nuts and nibbling berries. She also liked the little mouse who lived next door. She liked the bounce in his step and the twinkle in his eye. She wriggled her little nose and breathed in his scent – the smell of soft moss and warm fur and the mysterious, tantalising smell of the forest floor at night.

Now, the mouse's father loved her so much that when it was time for her to marry, only the best, the greatest, the most powerful husband in all the world would do! But who is the most powerful being in all the world? The old mouse thought and thought. *Ab-ha!* The sun himself!

So, the old mouse, with his daughter by his side, went to the sun.

"Oh, Bright Sun!" called the old mouse. "I seek the most powerful being in all the world. Only he may marry my daughter. That is why we come to you."

The little brown mouse looked up at the sun. She squinted. She whispered, "Father, I am grateful for the power of the sun. His light and warmth gives life to us all." The sun beamed. "But... he is not the one for me."

The sun understood. He called down, "Old Man Mouse! I am not the most powerful being in all the world. No matter how bright I shine, Cloud can always dim my light and cool my heat. Cloud is more powerful than me."



So, they went to the cloud. “Oh, White Cloud!” called the old mouse. “I seek the most powerful being in all the world. Only he may marry my daughter. That is why we come to you.”

The little brown mouse looked up at the cloud. A drop of rain plopped onto her nose. She wiggled her whiskers. She whispered, “Father, I am grateful for the cloud’s power. He carries the water of life. He makes the great glacier, the sacred river... the whole ocean.” The cloud laughed – a rumbling chuckle. “But... he is not the one for me.”

The cloud understood. He called down, “Old Man Mouse! I am not the most powerful being in all the world. The wind can blow me clean away. Wind is more powerful than me.”

So, they went to the wind. “Oh, Wild Wind! I seek the most powerful being in all the world. Only he may marry my daughter. That is why we come to you.”

The little mouse looked up at the wind. A great gust blew. She shivered. She whispered, “Father, I am grateful for the wind’s power. His air is the breath of life, the cool breeze, and the wind of change. He carries our stories and scents and songs.” The wind gave a satisfied sigh. “But... he is not the one for me.”

The wind understood. He called, “Old Man Mouse! I am not the most powerful being in all the world. No matter how I blow, I cannot move the great mountain.”

So, they went to the mountain. “Oh, Great Mountain! Home of the snows!” called the old mouse. “I seek the most powerful being in all the world. Only he may marry my daughter. That is why we come to you.”

The mountain stood still and silent. The little brown mouse looked up at him in awe. She whispered, “Father, I am grateful for the mountain’s power. He stands strong and holds firm, old as time.” The mountain smiled inside. “But... he is not the one for me.”

The mountain understood. He thought long and hard. “Old Man Mouse,” said the mountain. “I am not the most powerful being in all the world. There is one who is more powerful than me. One who gnaws right through my rock. Mouse!”

So, they went to the mouse. The bright-eyed wood mouse who lived next door. “Oh, yes!” cried the little brown mouse. “He’s the one for me! The mouse who gnaws the mountain, that stops the wind, that moves the cloud, that covers the sun. The most powerful husband in all the world! Oh, yes! He’s the one I love.”

The old mouse laughed. “Very well, my dearest. I see that nothing is more powerful than love. You have my blessing.”

And so the mice were married. The sun shone. Clouds floated on the gentle breeze. And the great white mountain watched over them all.

Before long, they had a nestful of babies – tiny little mousies with fluffy white tummies, bright black eyes and delicate little pink paws. And their grandfather loved them all, each and every one.





Bramble's Gift

A folktale from Greece

Blackberries are a familiar autumn treasure, growing strong in hedgerows and thickets, and in wild corners of towns and cities. The ripe black berries are delicious straight from the bush, a hedgerow feast for animals, birds and humans alike.

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who had one, two, three big sisters. Their mother had barely enough money to buy bread for them all. There was no money for clothes.

Sometimes, a kind neighbour gave the girls' mother an old dress that her own children had grown out of. It was worn by the first daughter, then the second daughter, then the third daughter. By the time the dress reached the fourth daughter, it was nothing but tatters and rags.

In the summer, the girl didn't mind. She skipped and played barefoot in the sun. But one evening, after weeks of heat, the air baked and the sky boiled. Clouds thundered. Fire cracked the sky. And the girl woke to the sound of rain.

After the rain, the sky stayed grey. The air had cooled. There was a smell of wet earth and damp leaves. All of a sudden, it felt like autumn. The wind blew from the north and the girl shivered in her thin, threadbare dress. She thought of the winter to come. The cold and the wind

and the wet. So the girl took an empty basket, and off she went to see what she could find.

She hadn't gone very far when she came across a spider's web: a wheel of silken spokes. She watched the spider walk a spiral path, joining one thread to another thread. The silver web shone in the morning light.

Very carefully, the girl walked around the web, so she didn't snap a single thread. And off she went on her way, until she saw a bird. A baby bird, all fuzzy and fluffy, sitting on the path. The bird looked up at the girl and blinked its big, dark eyes.

Peep! Peep! Peeeep!

It had fallen out of the tree.

Very gently, the girl picked up the bird and put it back in its nest. And off she went on her way, until she saw a tangle of brambles, covered with berries. Green and red and black. She picked a fat blackberry. It was round and ripe. It tasted of summer sun and autumn rain.

She put one in her basket, one in her mouth. One in her basket, one in her mouth. Then she ate the ones in her basket too. *Yum!* Soon her fingers were purple. Her lips were purple. Her tongue was purple. She was very happy.

On the other side of the bramble – "*Maaaa...*" – a little lamb, eating blackberries. The girl helped the lamb, picking the berries that were too high up for him to reach. She held them out in her open hand, and the lamb ate them. "*Maaaa...* Thank you."

But the biggest blackberries were dangling just out of reach. The girl stood on the tips of her toes. She *streetched*. And her ragged dress caught on the bramble's sharp spikes. Oh! She pulled away. *Rrrrip!* "Oh!" cried the girl. "My dress!"

The lamb said to the bramble, "Look what your thorns have done!"

"Oh," said the bramble. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any harm. I need my hooked claws to help me climb. And besides, my thorns shelter tiny trees, and protect little ones from hunters."

"I do see," said the girl. "It's just... my dress..."

Now, anyone who's been blackberry picking knows how generous brambles are, even if they can be a bit prickly. "I'll help you make a new dress," said the bramble. And the bramble told the lamb just what to do.





The lamb trotted round and round the bramble bush, and the bramble caught little wisps of wool with its thorns. Soon enough, the bush was covered in tufts of soft, white wool, all neatly carded – combed smooth by the sharp spikes.

“Take plenty of berries,” said the bramble. “They’ll make a good dye.”

“Thank you!” said the girl, and off she went, her basket full of berries and her arms full of fluffy white wool.

“This wool is all ready for spinning,” said the girl. “But who will help me spin it?”

“I will!” said a big brown bird. It was the mother of the little chick! She took the end of a tuft of wool in her beak, and she flew – the wool was pulled, and the girl twisted it into thread. Soon enough, all the wool was spun into yarn.

“Thank you!” called the girl, and off she went on her way, with her basket full of berries and a ball of yarn in her hands. “This yarn is all ready for weaving,” said the girl. “But who will help me weave it?”

“I will!” said the spider. Around and around the spider went. Soon enough, all the yarn was woven into cloth.

“Thank you!” called the girl, and off she went on her way, with her basket full of berries and a roll of fine white cloth under her arm. All the way home to her mother.

“Look!” said the girl. “This cloth is all ready for dyeing. But who will help me dye it?”

The girl’s mother smiled. “I will.”

So, together, the girl and her mother filled a big pot with hot water and black berries. They stirred and simmered and strained. They made a good dark dye. In went the plain white cloth. Soon enough, out came a coloured cloth – as rich as a royal robe.

The girl’s mother laid the cloth on the table. She cut it and pinned it and sewed it. She made the girl a brand-new dress.

The girl was so pleased with her new dress. It kept her warm in wind and rain, sleet and snow. It was soft as a lamb and light as a bird, smooth as silk, and bright as a blackberry.



The Healing Apple Tree

A folktale from the Carpathian Mountains of Poland

Apples have a secret deep inside: hidden within is a five-pointed star. Apple trees belong to the rose family and, like the wild rose, bear the pattern of five, with star-shapes upon their fruit and blossoms of five petals. Imagine an apple is the Earth, and cut the fruit along the equator to reveal the secret star – the chambers where the seeds sleep. There's truth in the old saying: an apple a day keeps the doctor away. Apples do restore health and are good for the belly, the brain, the blood and (like the wild rose, the flower of love) the heart.

Up in the mountains, a peasant woman lived with her son. The boy loved wandering the wooded hills and sunlit meadows. Amidst the wildflowers grew an old apple tree. The boy's father had planted it, before he had sickened and died. The tree was the boy's special friend.

Every spring, the beauty of the blossom, glowing rose, lifted the boy's heart. Every summer, he sat in the branches, in the dapple-dance of light, swinging his feet and dreaming. Every autumn, the tree was red with apples, and the boy and his mother ate apples stewed and apples



baked, apple pies and apple cakes. Strings of apple rings hung over the stove, scenting the room with their sweetness. Every winter, when the snow lay on the mountains, branches of old apple wood burnt bright in the hearth. The swirls of smoke smelled of deep roots and sweet fruit.

The years passed and the boy grew. The old tree came to the end of its days. One day, as the autumn storms scoured the land, the tree let go its hold in the earth, and fell.

The years passed. The boy was on the cusp of becoming a man. It was time for him to make his way in the world. But he didn't know which path to take. His mother wondered what to do to help him find his way.

One day, when the boy's mother was out in the forest, gathering berries, she met an old woman, resting on a white rock. The woman's coat was embroidered, collar and cuff, with patterns of red thread.

"I'd love some raspberries," the old woman said. "And, in return, I'll help your son."

So the mother handed over the pot. The old woman ate every last berry.

Then she said, "When your son does the work he loves, he'll be happy himself and, what's more, he'll be helpful to others."

"But what work would my son love?" said the mother.

But there was no answer. The old woman was gone. On the white rock, only a lizard sat basking in the sun. But the clay pot was brimful of berries.

The boy's mother wondered what trade her son would love. When she met a tailor, she asked his advice. "What do you think, Sir? What's the best work in all the world?"

"Well, that's easy!" said the tailor. "Making clothes is the best work I know!"

So the woman sent her son to work for the tailor, and learn his trade. The boy learnt to cut and pin and sew, to work with warm wool, soft silk, fine

linen, and snip-snapping scissors.

After a while, his mother came to see how he was getting on. "How do you like being a tailor, Son?"

Her son frowned. "The tailor makes fine clothes, Mother. But I don't want to make rich men coats of gold brocade, when poor folk shiver in the cold."

So the boy gave up being a tailor. The mother thought again.

When she met a cobbler, she asked, "Tell me, what's the best work in all the world, do you think?"

"Ahh..." said the cobbler. "Shoemaking for sure!"

So, the woman sent her son to work for the cobbler. The

tip-tapping of the hammer and the rich leather smell. Hides dyed tan-

brown as autumn acorns. Stout boots. Supple slippers. Shoes polished smooth as a chestnut.

After a while, the mother went to visit. "So, how do you like being a cobbler?"

"The cobbler makes good boots, Mother. But I don't want to make fancy boots for rich men, when poor folk go barefoot."

So the son gave up being a cobbler. The mother thought again... When she met a swordsmith, she asked, "What do you think? What's the best work there is?"

The smith's eyes shone. "Forging swords. Nothing better!"

"Now," the mother told her son. "I'm getting fed up with this. If you don't like this work, you can stay on the mountain, and be a shepherd."



So the boy went to work at the forge. Fierce-white fire and hissing steam, the hammer's swing-and-clang, the soot-smoke smell. The boy learnt to shape and sand and sharpen, to pound and polish.

"So, how do you like making swords, Son?"

"The smith makes useful tools, Mother," said the boy, "but I don't want to make weapons that hurt and harm. I'll do as you say – I'll be a shepherd..." So the boy spent his days looking after the flock. He liked looking after the animals; if they were sick, he made them medicine from the mountain herbs. But he was lonely, up on the mountain.

One day, when he looked down from the hillside, he saw smoke rising from the woods – a forest fire! He ran... Flames blazed around a white rock, and stuck on the rock, frozen with fear, was a lizard.

The boy held out his crook – a bridge over the flames – and the lizard skittered to safety. As soon as its feet touched the ground – *snap!* – it changed. There was an old woman, with a beautiful coat, embroidered with red thread.

"You've been good to me," said the old woman.

"Now I'll be good to you. Come with me."

She led the boy to a cave, high in the rocky hillside. Inside, a dazzle of light...

On one side of the cave was a heap of rubies, gleaming red. On the other, sparkling sapphires, flashing blue fire. And in the centre of the cave grew an apple tree, shining with golden apples. A dear old apple tree, just like the one he used to love!





“Choose which you please,” said the old woman.

Without a thought, the boy knew: “The tree!”

No sooner had he spoken, than the tree lifted up its roots, shook off the soil, and followed the boy home. The boy dug a deep hole. The tree settled itself into the earth and wiggled the tips of its roots, content.

The boy was the tree’s special friend. He gave the tree his care. And the tree gave the boy apples, baskets and bowls, boxes and barrels, full to the brim. The boy held an apple in his hands – a perfect golden globe. He took a bite; firm and crisp, juicy and sweet.

The boy took a basket of apples and he walked to the village. He shared the golden fruit with everyone he met. And, a wonder! Every person who ate an apple felt better. The man with the bad back stretched and straightened, strong again. The ancient old woman leapt out of bed with a laugh. The golden apples healed all the ills of the village.

And so the boy became a healer. His mother smiled. “Your father would be proud.” The boy had found the work he loved. He was happy himself and, what’s more, he was helpful to others, for all the days of his life.



Little Red Squirrel

A folktale from the Appalachian Mountains of America

Red squirrels have lived alongside humans since prehistoric times. The American red squirrel lives across the United States and Canada and its cousin, the Eurasian red squirrel, lives in Europe and Asia. In their homelands, both are known simply as "red squirrel". Look for Squirrel's leafy nest in the fork of a tree, often sheltered against the trunk. Find the chewed core of a pinecone, perhaps beneath a conifer or on a tree stump – the squirrel holds the cone between its paws and nibbles from one end to the other, the same way we eat corn on the cob.

Way up in the mountains, in a cabin in the woods, a little old lady and a little old man, a little girl and a little boy all lived together, right next door to a little red squirrel. The human folk lived in the cabin, and the squirrel lived in the round crown of the old pine.

The children put out nuts for the squirrel, and they all loved to sit out on the porch and watch him. Sometimes he sat on a stump and nibbled a nut, his curly tail like a silky plume. *Nibble-nibble-nibble-nibble-CRACK! Nibble-nibble-nibble-nibble-CRACK!*

In the autumn, they watched him scamper across the woodland floor, a wave of rippling red. They watched him dig beneath the fallen leaves, drop a nut and cover it up again, stocking up his winter stores.

With his long tail and strong feet he could balance and leap. He could bound across the treetops and walk right along the laundry line.

The old woman said the squirrel was a real good neighbour and a special friend of all the family. Well, one day, in the autumn, the squirrel was busy gathering hazelnuts. *Chitter-chitter-chitter. Chub-chuk-chuk.* Inside, Grandma was busy making hazelnut cookies. She had flour and she had butter and she had hazelnuts, but what she did not have was maple syrup.

Now every year, at the end of winter, the old man made maple syrup. He made a little hole in the trunk of the maple tree, and put in a spout and hung the metal bucket to catch the sap. The *plip-plip-plip* of sap dripping into that bucket was a sweet sound.

He took the bucket of sap to the sugar shack – a little shack he built himself, down by the creek where it was cool.

He boiled up the sap 'til it turned into maple syrup. He poured the syrup into cans and he stored the cans in the shack.



So, when the old woman saw there was no maple syrup in the house, she said to the little boy, "Son, go on down to the sugar shack and bring us back a can of syrup."

So off goes the boy, out of the cabin, down the track, through the woods, over the rickety-rackety bridge, to the sugar shack. And back he comes with a clanking can of maple syrup. Back over the rickety-rackety bridge...

Sniff-sniff... Sniff-sniff... RARRR! Up jumps a bear! A big black bear sniffing that sweet maple-syrup smell and licking his lips. He comes scrubbing and scrambling and busting through the bushes. Shaggy and shuffling, growling and scowling. He rises up in front of the boy.

"RARRR!" says the bear. "Who's that crossing over my bridge?"

"It's only me..." said the little boy.

"Well, Little Boy," said the bear. "I'm gonna swallow you up!"

And he did. *GLUMP!* Just like that. He swallowed that little boy right up, him and his billycan, in one big *GULP!*

Well, back at the house, the old woman waited and waited, but the little boy did not come back. "What can be taking that boy so long?" said the old woman. "Little Girl, you go down to the shack and fetch him back!"

So off goes the little girl. Skipping out of the cabin, down the track, through the woods, over the rickety-rackety bridge...

UP jumps the bear! "*RARRR!* Who's that crossing over my bridge?"

"It's only me..." said the little girl.

"Well, Little Girl, I swallowed up a little boy, him and his billycan, and I'm gonna swallow you, too!" *GLUMP!*

Well, back at the house, the old woman waited and waited, but the little girl did not come back. "What's taking them kids so long?" she said. "Old Man, you better go down to the shack and fetch them kids back."

So off goes the old man, out of the cabin, down the track, through the

woods, over the rickety-rackety bridge...

UP jumps the bear! "*RARRR!* Who's that crossing over my bridge?"

"It's only me..." said the old man.

"Well, Old Man," said the bear, "I swallowed up a little boy, him and his billycan, and I swallowed up a little girl, and I'm gonna swallow you up, too!" *GLUMP!*

Back at the house, the old woman waited and waited. "What in the world is taking them fool folk so long?" said the old woman, and off she went herself to find out.

Outta the cabin, down the track, through the woods, over the rickety-rackety bridge...

UP jumps the bear! "*RARRR!* Who's that crossing over my bridge?"

"It's only me..." said the old woman.

"Well, Old Woman," said the bear, "I swallowed up a little boy, him and his billycan, and I swallowed up a little girl, and I swallowed up an old man, and I'm gonna swallow you up, too!" *GLUMP!*

Back at the house, there was no one left. Well, there was one little somebody, up in the old pine tree – who was that? Little Red Squirrel!

So, off goes the squirrel, scampering down the track, through the woods, over the rickety-rackety bridge, scuttering and chattering to himself. *Chitter-chitter-chitter. Chuk-chuk-chuk.*

UP jumps the bear! "*RARRR!* Who's that crossing over my bridge?"

"*Chitter-chitter-chitter,*" said the squirrel.

"Well, Little Squirrel," said the bear, "I swallowed up a little boy, him and his billycan, and I swallowed up a little girl, and I swallowed up an old man, and I swallowed up an old woman, and I'm gonna swallow you up, too!"

But, the squirrel was too quick. He went skittering up a tree. And that great big bear came clambering after him. *HUMPF! HUMPF!*





HUMPF! HUMPF! 'til he came right to the very tip-top of that tree, and there was the squirrel, out on the branch, balancing at the very tip.

The bear swung his paw. *HUMPF!* And the squirrel... jumped! He went flying clean through the air, and landed in the next tree.

Well, that big old bear looked at the squirrel and he looked at the gap between the trees. And he said to himself, "*GRMMM...* if that squirrel can jump like that with them stumpy little legs, then sure I know I can jump it, with my great big strong legs!"

One, two, three! He jumped right outta that tree. And came slithering and cracking and tumbling down through the branches. *CRACK! Ow! SNAP! Oh! CRASH! Oof!*

And when he landed, *BAM!* He bust! Right open!

Out of his belly jumped the little old woman. Out came the little old man, the little girl and the little boy, still swinging his billycan. They weren't none of 'em hurt one bit, cause that bear had swallowed 'em whole.

Well, when the old woman saw the bear busted right open, she felt sorry for him. So she took out a needle and thread from her apron, and she sewed that bear's belly right up, good as new. Well, almost. Then she says to him, "*NOW, YOU GET! YOU GET OUTTA HERE AND DON'T YOU COME BACK NO MORE!*"

"HUMPF!" said the bear. And off he went, stumping into the trees.

"Now," said the old woman, "where's my syrup?"

The boy gave her the can. So the old woman, the old man, the little girl, the little boy and that little red squirrel all went along home – over the rickety-rackety bridge, through the woods, up the track, back to the cabin. And the old woman made hazelnut cookies. They were warm from the wood stove, sweet and crunchy with roasted nuts.

They put out the biggest biscuit for the squirrel, and a whole heap of hazelnuts besides. And the little red squirrel ate them all up. *Chitter-chitter-chitter. Chuk-chuk-chuk. Nibble-nibble-CRACK! Nibble-nibble-CRACK! Nibble-nibble-CRACK!*



The Magic Acorn

A folktale from Russia

In Russian culture, the World Tree is a central symbol, connecting the underworld, our middle earth and the heavens above. The oak tree, with branches reaching up to the heavens and roots reaching down below the ground, is a perfect picture of the World Tree, the sacred Tree of Life.

In the heart of the forest was a little wooden hut, with a pitched roof. Inside, lived a dear old couple. The old woman was round and smiling as a Russian doll, with her rosy cheeks, neat apron and bright scarf. She and her husband had no money for bread, so, instead, they went out into the wood, to gather acorns to eat. They liked being in the forest, breathing in the smell of the earth. They smiled at the crinkle and crunch of dry leaves under their feet, and they savoured the stillness.

Each little acorn they found was round and brown, with a neat little hat. One by one their basket grew full. The old woman carried the acorns home, singing and swinging the basket. When she put the basket on the table, one little acorn rolled out. Perhaps it was a magic acorn – it went rolling, rolling over the floor, and dropped down through a crack, into the cellar.

It was dark and quiet in the cellar. The little acorn snuggled into the soft earth. He stretched

his toes, and a little root began to grow... down... down... He stretched his tip, and a little shoot began to grow... up... up... through the hole in the floor, right up into the heart of the hut.

"Well, well," said the old woman. "A sapling!"

The old man cut a hole in the floor, to give the tree room to grow. He cut a hole in the roof, to let the sun shine in. The old woman gave the sapling water to drink. The little tree grew... The shoot grew buds. The buds opened into tender leaves, with curvy edges.

In time, the tree's bark grew brown and bumpy – home to soft moss and grey lichen. Its leaves made a green dome – home to bugs and birds. The tree grew so broad that the old couple could only just touch their fingertips as they hugged the trunk. So tall, it grew right through the roof. So wide, its arms sheltered the whole hut. It was crowned with golden leaves – the king of the forest. The heart of the old couple's home. The centre of their world.

In the springtime, they gathered leaves and made wine. In the summer, they gathered twigs and made a new broom for the bathhouse. In autumn, they shredded the fallen leaves into compost, for the vegetable garden. In the long winter, they gathered fallen sticks for the fire. The wood burned slow and hot – as bright as the summer sun. The old couple talked and laughed and worked and played around the oak. Every evening, they rested their backs against the great trunk and felt the slow strength and quiet peace of the tree.

When autumn came around again, the old woman said to her husband, "Let's not go to the forest today. We can climb our tree to gather acorns!"

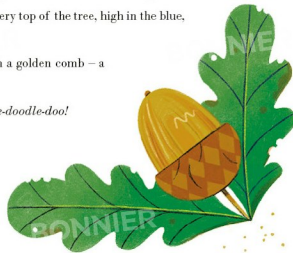
So up the old couple went. A foot up. *Ooh!* A leg up. *Oof!* A hand up. *Oy!* All up. *Ura!*

Up they went. Past the woodpecker's hole. Past the squirrel's nest. Past the sleepy owl. Past the butterflies and the buzzards. Until they reached the very top of the tree, high in the blue, blue sky.

And there, right at the top, was a rooster! A rooster with a golden comb – a sun-bird, shining.

Cock-a-doodle-doo! crowed the rooster. *Cock-a-doodle-doodle-doo!*

"I have for you a mill of blue!"





There, beside the rooster, was a hand-mill, for grinding grain.

You put the grain in the cup and you turn the handle, and the mill grinds the grain into flour.

The old man and the old woman looked at each other and they looked at the hand-mill. It was painted blue as the sky. The bright cup was golden as the sun.

"A hand-mill would be good for grinding acorns," said the old man.

"We could use acorn flour to make bread," said the old woman.

"Take it," said the rooster. "And I'll come, too."

So the old woman took the hand-mill and they all clambered back down.

The old woman put the mill on the table. The old man took some acorns from his pocket, and dropped them into the cup. He turned the handle, slow and steady. *Trundle-crunk... trundle-crunk... trundle-crunk...* At each turn of the handle, out flew, not flour... but pancakes!

Now, in Russia, they say the first pancake is always lumpy. But not this one! It was round and brown and plump! Out flew good brown pancakes, one after another, until there was a stack of fat pancakes. The old couple sat down to enjoy them.

From that day on, they enjoyed acorn pancakes every day, beneath the branches of the oak tree.

But one day, a *boyar* – a rich man – came riding through the forest. He knocked at the door and the old couple invited him in. His long coat was heavy with gold brocade, his high hat was made of finest fur. He sat down at the table to share their pancakes. When the boyar saw the pancakes flying out of the hand-mill, his eyes opened wide with surprise. His belly was full but his eyes were hungry!

"What a wonderful mill!" he said. "I'll buy it from you."

The old woman shook her head. "It's not for sale."

But that very afternoon, when the old couple were snoozing by the warm stove, the boyar crept in and he took the hand-mill. The rooster crowed, *cock-a-doodle-doo!* But it was too late; the boyar had taken the mill and he was gone.

"I'll go after him," said the rooster. He followed the trail where the boyar had trodden and tramped the undergrowth, until he came to the boyar's house. He flapped up onto the balcony, and perched upon the carved wood.



From inside, came the clinking of glasses and the scraping of plates. Loud voices, shrill laughter. The boyar and his guests were feasting on acorn pancakes. The rooster opened his beak and he crowed. *Cock-a-doodle-doo!* "Give us back our mill of blue!"

"Drat that rooster!" cried the boyar. "Cook! Throw him into the well!"

Wheee... SPLASH! Into the well flew the rooster. But... *glug, glug, glug...* he drank up every drop of water in the well. And flapped back up onto the balcony.

Cock-a-doodle-doo! "Give us back our mill of blue!"

"DRAT that rooster!" cried the boyar. "Cook! Throw him into the fire!"

Wheee... FLASH! Into the fire flew the rooster. But... *splooosh...* out of the rooster's beak poured all the water from the well. *Fzzzt...!* The flames fizzled and hissed and died.

The rooster flapped up onto the table and strutted up and down amidst the crockery, knocking over the golden candlesticks. *Cock-a-doodle-doo!* "Give us back our mill of blue!"

When the rich man's guests saw the rooster, all soggy and sooty, crowing and causing chaos, they ran. And the rich man ran after them. "Come back! Come back!"

The rooster picked up the sky-blue hand-mill and he carried it back home.

Cock-a-doodle-doo! "I've brought us back our mill of blue!"

So, from that day on, the old man, the old woman and the rooster with the golden comb enjoyed acorn pancakes every day. They lived in peace and plenty underneath the branches of the good old oak.



Eagle and Owl

A folktale from Wales

This folktale, originally known as "The Long-Lived Ancestors", celebrates Stag and Salmon, Blackbird and Frog, as well as Eagle and Owl. The story reminds us to value our elders, and honour our ancestors – the old ones who have lived before.

Once there was an eagle, the Eagle of Gwernabwy. An old and noble bird; his hooked beak and frowning brow gave him the regal air of a king. The eagle had once had a wife, and a nest noisy with chicks. But his wife had died a long time ago and his children had all flown the nest. He was lonely. He had no one to cheer him or hear him. The eagle wanted a companion, he wanted a wife. Not a flighty, feather-brained young thing. No. A wise old bird, like himself. He liked the old owl, who lived in the woods. He liked her fierce power and her feathery softness. He liked the sound of her song, on autumn evenings, when the moon rose over the woods. It woo-ed him, somehow – it made him feel at home. He'd heard the owl liked him, too. But, was she a wise old bird?

The eagle stretched his wings out wide. He went riding the winds, soaring the skies, over the green hills and lush valleys, into the fern-wood. He went to the oldest, wisest creature he knew, the Stag of Rhedynfre.



Under the old oak, the stag was resting. A royal stag with a crown of antlers. The two old nobles greeted each other with a nod. The eagle asked his question. "Do you know, wise Stag, the age of the owl?"

The stag was quiet for a moment, thinking. "You see this great oak?" said the stag. "When I was a fawn, it was just an acorn. Three hundred years it took to grow. Another 300 it stood in its prime. Three hundred more have passed since then. That's how long I have been alive. And yet, even when I was young, the owl was old.

Still, there is one who is older than I, and that is the Salmon of Llyn Llifon."

So the eagle flew to the great lake, where the ripples of water cradle curls of light. A leap, a *splash!* A flash of silver. Salmon. The eagle asked his question. "Do you know, wise Salmon, the age of the owl?"

The salmon shimmered in a shoal of shining bubbles. He said, "You see the scales shining on my back? I am as old in years as the number of silver scales. And yet, even when I was young, the owl was old. Still, there is one who is older than I, and that is the Blackbird of Cilgwi."

So the eagle flew to the green grove where the song of the blackbird was clear and bright as water from a spring. The eagle asked his question. "Do you know, wise Blackbird, the age of the owl?"

The blackbird flicked his tail and cocked his head. "You see this bright stone I sit upon?" he said. "When I was young, it was a blacksmith's anvil, huge and heavy. Every evening, I wiped my bill upon the bright bronze, to keep my beak neat. So many years have passed that now my



beak is bright, and the anvil itself is no bigger than a nut. And yet, even when I was young, the owl was old. Still, there is one who is older than I, and that is the Toad of Moncho Bog. And if he doesn't know the age of the owl, there is not a creature alive that does."

So the eagle flew to the peat-dark bog where the squelching land was waterlogged. Where carpets of moss grew green-and-gold-and-red. And bog-plants bloomed, plumes of yellow stars, pearls of pink bells, and tufts of white fluff. Toad blinked his golden eyes, and with a flick of his sticky tongue, he caught a tiny fly.

The eagle asked his question. "Do you know, wise Toad, the age of the owl?"

"You see those high hills?" said the toad. "Every day, I eat just a smidge, tiny flies and tiddly-widdly worms, and yet, over all the years of my life, the food I've eaten would make a heap as high as those hills. That's how old I am. Yet, even when I was young, the owl was old. Old, old, old she was. Yes, the owl is the oldest of us all. And that's all I can tell you, young fellow."

So at last the eagle was satisfied that the owl was truly a wise old bird.

The eagle courted the owl, and after a time, he proposed. And so the eagle married the owl, the oldest of them all.



Pronunciation guide:

Gwernabwy – *Gwern-a-bwoy*

Rhedynfre – *Rhed-in-vrair* (roll the r!)

Llyn Llifon – *Chlin Chl-i-son*

Cilgwri – *Kil-gor-ree*

Mochno – *Mokh-no* (the "ch" has a throaty sound, as in "loch")



The Hedgehog and the Hare

A folktale from Germany

Hedgehogs are one of the oldest species of mammals on Earth – their ancestors lived alongside woolly mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers. The hedgehog curls up into a prickly ball to protect itself from danger and hibernates all through the winter. Hedgehogs roam far and wide to find food; garden hedges give them shelter and are easy to cross, but fences and walls block their way. In Britain, the hedgehog has become an endangered species. We can all help hedgehogs to thrive: create a “hedgehog highway” by cutting a hole (13cm by 13cm) at the bottom of your garden fence, so hedgehogs can roam. Plant a hedge of native trees and bushes. Avoid toxic chemicals. Make a pond safe with a ramp. Leave a corner of your garden wild...

One fine morning, Father Hedgehog stood at the edge of his hedge, looking out over the land. The ploughed fields were velvet brown. The sky shone through the last leaves. A robin sang. Father Hedgehog lifted his nose and sniffed the chill air. Wet leaves, woodsmoke... damp earth... snuffle-snuffle... turnips... Hedgehog's tummy rumbled.

Father Hedgehog snuffled and shuffled through the fallen leaves under the hedgerow, all the way to the corner of the turnip field. Hedgehog liked a bite of turnip now and then. Round the corner he went, where the sloe tree grows at the bottom of the field, and there, he saw Hare. He didn't often catch sight of Hare – when Brown Hare lay low, with his ears flat back, he looked just like a heap of earth.

“Good morning,” said Hedgehog, bright and cheerful, despite his hunger.

Hare twitched the black tips of his long ears. He looked down at Hedgehog. Instead of saying, “Good Morning, Hedgehog, and how are you?” Hare said, “What are you doing in my turnips?”

“Oh, just taking a stroll, you know,” said Hedgehog. “Lovely morning!”

Hare stared at Hedgehog's stout shape – he was round as a plum! Hare stared at Hedgehog's short legs. He began to laugh. “A walk? With your stubby little legs?” Hare laughed and laughed.

Now, Father Hedgehog did have short legs – they were just the right size for a hedgehog. He could walk and swim and climb.



Being so close to the ground, he could sniff out crunchy beetles, juicy worms and plump slugs.

Usually, Hedgehog would have risen above Hare's disrespect. After all, he liked his legs just the way they were. If Hare didn't, that was his problem.

But, this particular morning, Hare's words made Hedgehog prickle. He hadn't had his breakfast. And the year was turning. Father Hedgehog had already started to pile up warm leaves under the hedge, for his winter nest. He was looking forward to snuggling down to sleep. Hedgehog was tired and he was hungry. So he replied, "I'll show you, Mr Hare! I challenge you to a race!"

Hare only laughed harder. "A race!" He spluttered and gasped for breath. "With your legs? Come on then!"

"Hold on..." said Hedgehog. "Less haste, more speed. I haven't had my breakfast yet. I'll meet you here tomorrow."

Hare agreed, and off he loped, away over the open slope.

The sun set early. In the soft dusk, Father Hedgehog found Mother Hedgehog. She was following her nose through the long, wet grass, foraging for food, their three baby hoglets following behind, all in a row.

"Mother Hedgehog," said Father. "I need your help. I've challenged Hare to a race."

Mother Hedgehog nearly choked on her beetle. "Hare!" she cried. "Hare the light-foot? The spring-heel? The jumper? Leap-the-ditch, spring-the-hedge, ring-the-hill Hare?"

"Yes," Father Hedgehog sighed. "Hare."

"But..." He brightened. "I've got a plan... Tomorrow morning, before sun-up, you hide

yourself at the foot of the field. At sunrise, I'll meet Hare at the top, ready to race downhill. When Hare gets to the bottom, all you have to do is jump up and shout out: 'Here I am!'"

"But Hare will see that I'm not you," said Mother Hedgehog.

"He won't," said Father Hedgehog. "We hedgehogs are so far beneath his notice, he doesn't even give us a second glance."

"Beneath his notice?" said Mother Hedgehog, pricking. "Well! I never heard such a thing!" She gave a huff. "*Humph!* We'll see about that!"

So, next morning, Hedgehog and Hare met at the top of the field, by the gate. They each had a furrow for a track.

"Ready?" said Hare. "One, two, three – AWAY!"

Off he sped like the wind. All Father Hedgehog saw was a flash of dark fur as the top of Hare's tail disappeared.

But Father Hedgehog had a plan. He didn't rush off after Hare. He stayed exactly where he was. He settled himself down at the top of his furrow and waited. Hare pelted down the field. And when he got to the bottom, up jumped Mother Hedgehog. "Here I am!"

Hare couldn't believe his eyes. Because, to his eyes, Mother Hedgehog and Father Hedgehog looked exactly the same! "How did you get here?" said Hare.

In the hedge, a row of little hoglets peeped out from beneath the leaves, nudging each other and giggling.





"I can't believe it!" cried Hare, "I demand a re-match!"

So, one, two, three – AWAY! Off sped Hare, back up the field. Mother Hedgehog stopped in her spot. And when Hare came to the top of the field, up leapt Father Hedgehog, "Here I am!"

"What?" cried Hare. "Race again!"

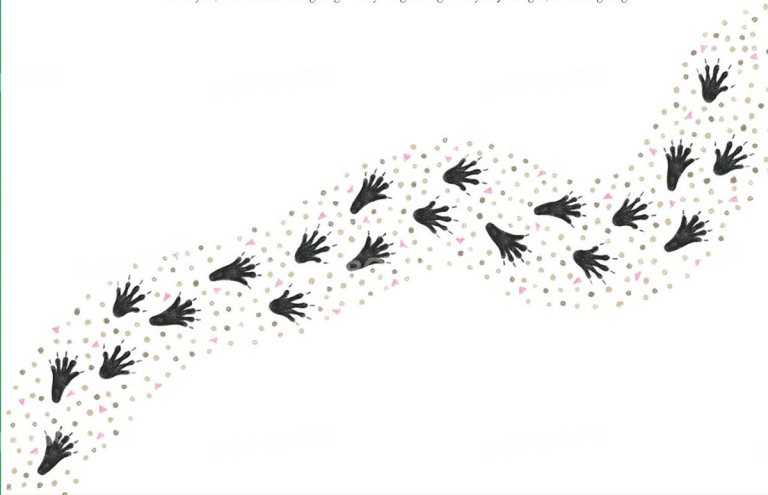
One, two, three – AWAY! "Here I am!"

Every time Hare came to the top of the field, Father Hedgehog jumped up.

Every time Hare came to the bottom of the field, Mother Hedgehog jumped up.

Until at last Hare flopped down by the gate. He had to wait until he could breathe again, and his throat had stopped hurting, before he could speak. "Your legs are incredible!" Hare gasped. Father Hedgehog inclined his head. "I was wrong to call you names," said Hare, "I'm sorry."

"Thank you," said Father Hedgehog. "They are good legs. They're just right, for a hedgehog."





The Pine Tree

A folktale from Japan

The pine tree is one of the oldest of all species on Earth. In many cultures, the pine tree is a symbol of divine light and everlasting life – it is evergreen, keeping its leaves even in the depths of winter. Shinto, the oldest religion in Japan, teaches that an old tree is home to a living tree spirit. Ancient trees are regarded with awe, and marked as sacred with a special rope, called a shimenawa, to warn people against chopping them down.

Once upon a time in Old Japan, there lived a man who made his living from the trees. The mountain slopes were green with pines. Every day he went up the mountain path into the forest to find branches and sticks and twigs. Every day he went down the mountain path into the village to sell his bundles for firewood.

The woodsman loved to be beneath the pines. He loved the sound of the wind in the boughs. He loved the way the tall trunk pointed straight up, and the branches grew around and around – a spiral staircase to heaven. He loved to stand tall and breathe deep the keen, clean scent of the pine-pure air.

The pines stood tall. Most were slender young trees, their low branches reaching outwards

and upwards in graceful curves, their narrow crowns pointing to the sky. But there was one ancient old pine. Its tall trunk was ridged and rough, orange-red and amber-brown. High on the mountain it grew, its wide, flat crown in the heavens. Its topmost branches brushed the sky, sweeping clean the wind.

Seasons and stars turned and always the old tree was glowing with green – shining with life. It seemed to the woodsman that the tree gave him a picture of the divine – the light of life that never dies. The woodsman always bowed low to the venerable old tree.

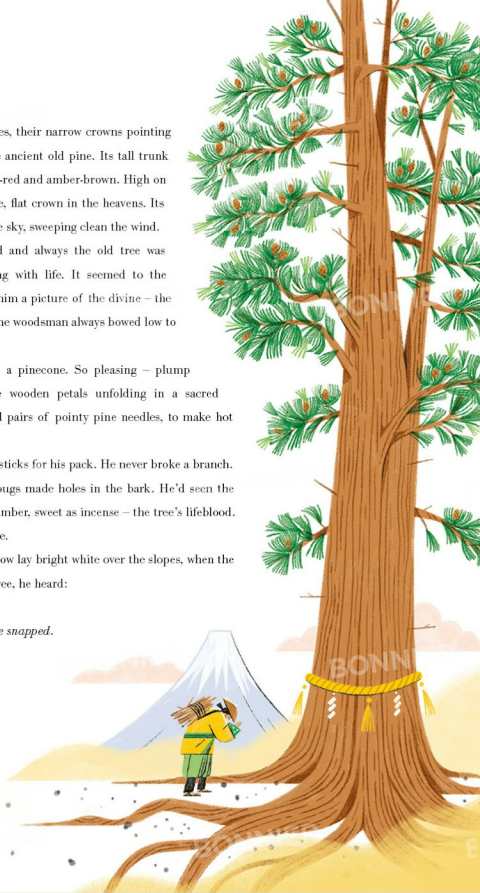
Sometimes he picked up a pinecone. So pleasing – plump and round and brown. The wooden petals unfolding in a sacred spiral. Sometimes he plucked pairs of pointy pine needles, to make hot healing tea.

He only picked the fallen sticks for his pack. He never broke a branch. He'd seen the places where bugs made holes in the bark. He'd seen the way the sap dripped, rich as amber, sweet as incense – the tree's lifeblood. He didn't want to hurt the tree.

Well, one day when the snow lay bright white over the slopes, when the woodsman bowed to the old tree, he heard:

Sticky-sticky is my sap,

When my tender twigs are snapped.





The woodsman looked up and he saw that a big branch had been broken clean off the tree, and the sap was running out, drip-drip-dripping from the wound. Though it was cold, he ripped the cloth of his robe into strips and made a bandage. He tended the tree, wrapping the broken branch with care.

And on the still air, high above, came a sound... like the cool chime of shrine bells... like icicles, tinkling in the wind... And clinking and chinking down from the tree, came... Cones? No. They were oval as cones, but not brown; they were bright gold. Coins! Jingling all around him. The woodsman stared in awe. He bowed low – thanking the old tree with deep respect.

Well, time passed, and one day the woodsman's neighbour was passing by. The neighbour saw the coins and his eyes gleamed. "Where did you get that gold?" The honest woodsman told him the whole story. Well, the neighbour went straight to the old pine. He tilted his ear. And he heard: *Sticky-sticky is my sap,*

When my tender twigs are snapped.

He looked up. There was not a single broken limb. So the neighbour reached up and – *CRACK!* – he broke a branch. *SNAP!* He broke two. *RRRIP!* Three.

And from the broken branches out poured a flood. Not of gold, but of sticky-sticky sap. Sticky as syrup, gooey as glue, the sap oozed and glooped, glogged and gushed... All over the awe-struck man. The sap stuck in his hair. It flowed down his robe. It made a gummy golden pool around his feet. And straight away, it set. The neighbour was stuck fast, stiff as a broken branch.

For three days the neighbour stood stuck in the sap – one for each of the branches he had broken. Only after three days did the sap soften enough for him to crawl his way home.

So, the poor woodsman was poor no longer. He lived in happiness and harmony in the forest, tending the trees and treasuring his friendship with the old pine. As for the neighbour, he had had three whole days to reflect, and he learnt from his mistake. He never broke a branch from a living tree again.



Little Lark, Robin Red-breast and Jenny Wren

A folktale from France

With quivering wings, Skylark sings as he rises straight up into the sky. He rises high out of sight, his song cascading down to earth. Skylark's spectacular soaring-and-singing attracts a mate. The Robin's red breast attracts his mate, and warns off other males. Wren's short, upright tail helps the tiny bird move around in even the smallest spaces, whilst hopping round the hedges hunting for food, or nesting into a nook to sleep.

Long, long, loooooo ago, there was no fire on earth. The animals had their furs and the birds had their feathers. But the people were cold.

In the deep winter, the woods were white. The Earth was hard. The sky was dark. The snow froze and the wind was a sting. The ice held tight. There was no blaze to circle round. No warmth. No light.

Babies cried. Adults huddled and hunched. Elders felt the cold in their bones, like crystal spikes.

Who could help? Who could fly into the sky to fetch fire from the sun?

The little wren knew more than most how hard the cold can be. Little Jenny Wren is tiny as a mouse. She knew that warmth or cold can mean life or death. One freezing year, almost all of her kind, so little and so light, didn't make it through to spring.

And so she had learned how to keep warm through the winter. On freezing nights she snuggled together with all her family and friends – sometimes a hole in a tree would be packed with birds, all cuddled up tight. They took turns sleeping in the feathery centre, and they all made it through the night.

So when Jenny Wren saw the people shivering in the cold, she felt for them, and she vowed to help. Though she was small, her voice was big, loud and clear. "I'll help!" called the little wren. "I'll fly up, right up to the sun, and bring back a spark of fire."

Up she flew, a whirr of wings. She was little but she was lively; she didn't stop whirring her wings until she reached the sun, high in the sky. And there she plucked a spark of fire. She set it on her tail, to carry it back down to Earth.

Down and down she whirred, her tiny wings a blur, carrying the flame on her tail.

But before she was halfway down there came a smouldering smell and a sizzling sound. A swirl of smoke! A flash of flame! Feathers on fire!

What could she do? Her wings were small but her voice was big. Loud and clear she called: "Help! Help!"

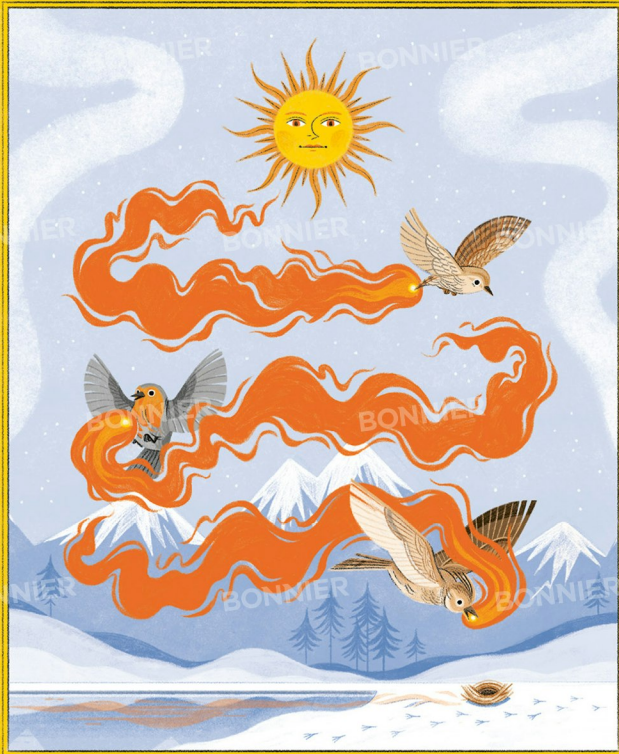
And, in the deepening dusk, high in the bare branches, Robin heard. Dear old Robin, who always sang a winter song to cheer the hearts of humans. Dear old Robin who had a soft spot for little Jenny Wren.

Quick as a wink, Robin flew up to help. Wren entrusted Robin with the gift of fire. He took the spark of sun from her tail, and she sighed with relief as her feathers began to cool.

With a brave heart, Robin carried the spark upon his breast. But before he'd touched the ground, his feathers began to flare into flame. A bright blaze.

On the ground, Lark looked up. And into the dark, rose Lark, winging and singing, up, up, up. Straight up. On fluttering wings, he hovered, mid-air, and Robin gave him the flame.

Down, down, down, Lark dropped, down to the ground.



On the ground, in a hollow, was a cup of dry grass – Lark's old nest. His chicks had long since flown. With tender care, Lark lay the spark in the nest.

Together, the three little birds fanned their feathers, helping the wind to blow and the coal to glow. In their beaks, they brought tiny twigs to feed the flame. The children brought sticks. The adults brought logs. The flame leapt to life and the first fire was born, for the people of Earth.

The elders knew the fire was a sacred gift; they welcomed it, with songs and offerings. They tended it, to keep the flame alight. And they gave thanks.

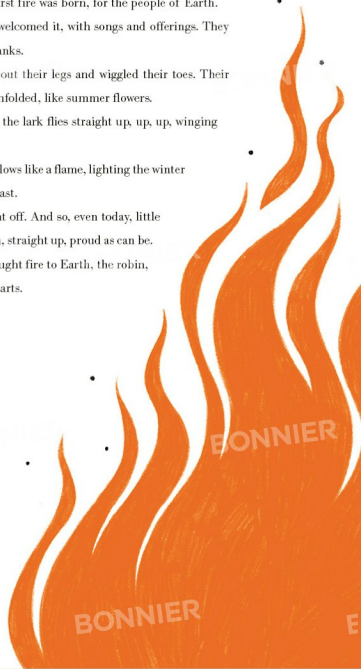
In the warmth of the fire, the people stretched out their legs and wiggled their toes. Their shoulders eased. Their jaws softened. Their hearts unfolded, like summer flowers.

All this happened long, long ago. But still today, the lark flies straight up, up, up, winging and singing, high into the heavens.

The robin's brown breast was burnt red. Now, it glows like a flame, lighting the winter land, and he is known by a new name: Robin Redbreast.

As for the wren, her tail feathers were burnt right off. And so, even today, little Jenny Wren has a teeny-tiny tail. But she holds it high, straight up, proud as can be.

And the people, when they see the birds that brought fire to Earth, the robin, the wren and the lark, they greet them with warm hearts.



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The Bear of Heaven

A creation myth from Finland

Before Finland became one country, many different peoples lived there, each with their own language and culture – yet many of them knew the bear as sacred. Some held Bear as their ancestor. Because Bear was so revered, it was disrespectful to say the name aloud. Instead, Bear had hundreds of nicknames, some worshipful, some playful, all affectionate: Forest Treasure, Apple of the Forest, Forest Keeper, King of the Wilderness, Long Wool, Honey Paw... The old songs tell that Bear began in the heavens – on the shoulders of the seven stars of the Great Bear. Still today, the beloved Bear is Finland's national animal.

This tale comes from the Kalevala – an ancient epic folk-poem. In the Finnish language, the song has a special rhythm of eight beats per line. Ideas and images repeat and resound, ring like a bell. The words, spoken aloud, are almost a chant, or a magic spell...

Up in the night sky, shine seven silver stars. There, Bear began...

Above the curve of the moon, where the heavens ring with blue, there walked a Maiden of the Air, with dewy skin and cloudy hair. On her feet were golden sandals. Her flowing robes were violet-blue.



In her hands, she held two boxes. And in each box there was a treasure. One was full of warmest wool. And one was full of softest fur.

The maiden knelt upon a cloudlet. She took the treasures in her hands. She gazed upon the world below, kissed her gifts, and let them go.

Down and down and down they drifted, sinking softly through the air.

So they landed on the waters – on the oceans, on the rivers... There the waves were soft and gentle; the treasure rocked upon the seas.

From the waters rose an island, a land alive with forest trees. And in the greenwood lived a goddess, Goddess of the growing forest – Mielikki.

Carried by the wind and water, the treasure washed upon the shore. Mielikki knelt upon the sands and took the treasure in her hands. She wrapped the wool and fur together – made a soft and silky bundle. She laid the bundle in her basket.

The basket was of silver-birch bark. She looped across it cords of gold. She hung the basket on the tree-top, in the pine tree, in the leaves. There the winds were soft and gentle; the cradle rocked upon the breeze.

The goddess rocked the magic cradle – rocked to life the tender bundle.

The woolly creature woke and wiggled. Squeaked and stretched and blinked its eyes. In the basket was a bear cub, furry-soft and woolly-warm.

So the Goddess of the Forest became the mother of the bear. Protecting him with strength and courage, nourishing with tender care, healing hurts with herbs of magic – a fierce and loving Mama Bear.

And so the bear grew tall and strong. His nose was broad, his mouth was wide.

But though he had huge jaws and paws, he had no teeth, he had no claws.

And so Mielikki, Forest Goddess, spoke to Bear a solemn promise:

'Teeth, I would be glad to give you.

And let claws be granted, too.

If you vow to use them wisely,

I will give them both to you.'

Bear knelt down before the goddess – vowed to use his claws for digging, vowed to use his teeth for honey.

So Mielikki looked for something, something strong and something curving, to make his teeth and make his claws. Not the rowan, not the alder. Not juniper, nor mighty oak.

On a mountain grew a pine tree, rising to the stars of heaven. Each pine branch was shining silver. Each pinecone was gleaming gold.

The goddess took the curving branches; she made a set of teeth and claws.

Then she set the great bear free.

Free to wander in the woodland, walking barefoot on the earth. Free to wander on the heathland, through the plains and over marshes. Free to play in golden meadows. Free to roll in dewy grasses.

She taught the bear the way to thrive. How to live in ease and pleasure. How to sniff the air in springtime. How to roam the land in summer. How to feast on autumn berries. How to rest and sleep in winter.

Underneath the stars of heaven.

Where the bear began.





Sources

Bringing Back Wolf

Women who Run with the Wolves, Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1992).

The Nettle Queen

Hans Christian Andersen's *Wild Swans* has eleven birds.

I tell the tale with six, as in Grimms' *Six Swans*.

The Stork's Nest

In James Holding's *The King's Contest, and other North African Tales* (1964) there are two pearls, and the stork is captured and brought back to the palace, details I omit. I added in feeding the stork (inspired by the way we befriend garden birds) and the roof-platform (a traditional way of encouraging storks to nest).

Rabbit's Tail

In Elsie Spicer Eell's *Fairy Tales from Brazil* (1917), Cat cuts off Rabbit's tale. Thank you to Tay Khan for her suggestion to change this detail, to make the tale gentler for the very young.

Hare's Ears

Kutkha the Raven: Animal Stories of the North, translated by Faima Solasko (1981); *The Sun Maiden and the Crescent Moon: Siberian Folk Tales*, Riordan James (1989).

Fox's Tail

Norwegian Folk Tales, Asbjørnsen and Moe (1844), translated by Pat Shaw and Carol Norman (1960). In the original, Fox eats all the animals – my retelling paints a more true-to-life picture of Fox's diet.

Badger Boy

A story inspired by a scrap of folklore in *Ireland's Animals, Myth, Legend and Folklore*, Niall Mac Coitir (2015). I embroidered the scrap with details of Badger's true nature, and my own sense of what we can learn from the Badger clan.

Wild Strawberries

In Katharine Briggs's *A Dictionary of British Folk-tales* (1970) the magic strawberries grow even in winter. In the spirit of valuing seasonal food, I celebrate the strawberry as a summer treat.

Pigeon and Bee

Ukrainian Folk Tales, translated by Irina Zheleznova (1985).

Little Brown Mouse

My sources include *The Panchatantra* (in which the mouse is turned into a girl, but chooses to turn back again, so she can marry her beloved) and *Folktales from the Kingdom of Nepal*, Kesar Lall (1990), in which the hero is a rat who wants to marry the king's daughter.

Bramble's Gift

In *Folktales of Greece*, by Georgios A. Megas (1970), Bramble gives two gifts – suggesting the new dress and carding the wool. I added two more of Bramble's gifts – sweet berries and natural dye.

The Healing Apple Tree

From the opening chapter of *The Healing Tree*, in *Best of Polish Fairy Tales: 52 Fairy Tales*, Sergiei Nowikow (2016).

Little Red Squirrel

American folklorist Richard Chase collected this tale, in Virginia. Chase's oral storytelling, in rich Appalachian dialect, inspired this retelling. Storyteller Margaret Read MacDonald added in the sewing scene. In Chase's *Grandfather Tales* (1948) the missing ingredient is baking soda. I changed it to maple syrup and made the biscuits hazelnut – natural ingredients squirrels and humans enjoy!

The Magic Acorn

Russian Fairy Tales, Aleksandr Afanasev (1945); *The Acorn Tree and Other Folktales*, Anne Rockwell (1995); *Heroes, Monsters and Otherworlds from Russian Mythology*, E. Warner (1985).

Eagle and Owl

The ancient animals first appear as wise helpers in Culhwch and Olwen, in *The Mabinogion. Welsh Fairy-Tales and Other Stories*, P.H. Emerson (1894) is the earliest written source in which Eagle seeks to marry Owl.

The Hedgehog and the Hare

In Grimms' tale (1843) the exhausted hare collapses and dies. I imagined Hare learning from his mistake instead.

The Pine Tree

Peach Boy and Other Japanese Children's Stories, Florence Sakada (2008).

Little Lark, Robin Redbreast and Jenny Wren

Faune Populaire de la France – Tome II, Eugene Rolland (1879); *Le Folk-lore de France – Tome III*, Paul Sebillot (1904). The “wren” in this tale may once have been a goldcrest – a tiny bird with a cap of fire-gold feathers – since, in the French language, the goldcrest and wren can both be called “kinglet”. Some versions of this tale add that Owl was the only bird not to give Wren a feather, to replace her burnt plumage – hence why Owl is scolded by other birds even today.

The Bear of Heaven

The Kalevala, translated by John Martin Crawford (1889); *Kalevala*, translated by W.F. Kirby (1907); *Kalevala*, translated by Eino Friberg (1988).

