

Second Place: Fiction

"Wolf Birds"

By Darren Lloyd

Deep in the snow-covered woods, the howl of a wolf rings out. The howl isn't sad or ominous to Dakota; it's familiar, comforting, and as soon as the noise enters the den, he hops to his feet, tail wagging quickly behind him.

His brothers and sisters are still sleeping, their grey, fuzzy bodies pressed tightly against their mother and father to hide away from the chill of the early morning air, and so he does his best to step over them as he rams his head into his father's side, nipping excitedly at the larger wolf's ears. When his father growls in warning, Dakota hurries over to his mother, paw crushing his sister's tail in his haste, and nudges the side of her head with his nose.

"Mom, come on! You said we could go hunting!"

"*Practice* hunting," she corrects, a yawn exposing her sharp teeth.

Dakota yips in excitement before bolting out of the den and into the morning light. When he looks upward, snowflakes drift down from the grey sky.

Another, shorter howl punctures the morning air, and Dakota turns his head back towards the pack. Across the small clearing, Dakota watches wolves slowly beginning to emerge from their dens, and he hears his mother's soft footfalls behind him. When he turns to glance at his mother, he sees his siblings sleepily trailing behind her.

Immediately, Dakota digs his claws into the frozen ground before launching himself forward, bounding across the clearing into the woods.

"Stay close!" his mother calls out, but Dakota continues to run.

More and more snowflakes begin sticking to his fur, as he runs through the forest, nose to the ground. The scents of his packmates intermingle with the fresh scent of the woods and the cloying smell of tree bark.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dakota sees movement, and immediately, he stumbles to a stop. He forces his tail to stop moving as he crouches, keeping low to the ground just as his mother taught him, as a pair of white, fluffy ears swivel nervously.

From behind a nearby tree, a small, fluffy creature with a tiny nose and a poof of fur for a tail emerges.

Dakota stalks towards the rabbit, trying and failing to move slowly, but the crack of a twig alerts the rabbit to his presence. With an excited yip, he gives chase; his little paws pound against the frozen earth as he ducks under bushes and tears through brambles.

Just as he catches up to the rabbit, the fuzzy tail within biting distance, a gust of wind howls through the trees and a chunk of cold, wet snow slams down on him from the treetops overhead. The cold ache that shudders through his bones makes him whimper, and he struggles under the blanket of snow to free himself.

Dakota rises to his feet, shaking the snow off of his fur, as the wind continues to pick up. As he glances around frantically, Dakota cannot see any familiar trees or bushes, and when he howls, there is no response. When he puts his nose to the ground, there is no scent that he recognizes, just the cold bite of frost, snow, and an overwhelming nothingness.

As the wind continues to shake the trees, Dakota hurries back in the direction of his tracks, but they slowly begin to disappear. Despite this, he continues onward, running as fast as he can towards where he is certain his pack will be. Yet, when the wind stops and the snow begins to fall in slow, soft flakes like before, there is still no sign of his pack or his family.

He presses his nose to the ground, searching for a familiar scent, before raising his nose to the air. The scents of the woods are foreign to him, but even more strange is the scent that wafts towards him. The smell is familiar and unfamiliar, warm and cold, wolf and not-wolf.

Dakota hurries towards the scent, hoping that it is his father or mother, their scents hidden by the wind and the strange smells of this part of the forest.

The area here is rocky, similar to the area by his pack's den, and hope swells in his chest as he sees a large, four-legged shape in the distance. As he hurries forward, he recognizes it as the shape of his father – large, imposing – until the light changes, and he slows his pace as he approaches the creature. Its slender body is longer than a wolf's, with a thinner tail, and the slick fur is brown with a golden sheen instead of a dark grey. It is most definitely not a wolf.

The creature's rounded ears twitch as Dakota stops in his tracks, and the creature's massive head slowly turns towards him, its flat face covered in crimson. As Dakota looks into his amber eyes, he begins to shiver, a cold chill working its way into his bones, but the creature just tilts its head curiously.

“Don't be afraid, little pup. Who are you? Why have you entered my domain?”

Dakota takes a nervous step backwards as the creature stares at him.

“I'm Dakota. I'm-I'm trying to find my pack.”

All of the tension leaves the creature's body at once, its lips turning up to show its teeth, tail lashing behind it.

“Oh, you have no pack? You are alone, little pup.” The creature advances forward, and Dakota continues to slowly slink backwards, his tail tucking between his legs. “Don't be afraid. I'll help you reach them... if only you would come just a little closer.”

A sharp squawk from overhead pierces through the air, and the creature's head turns upward with alarm.

A shiver runs through Dakota from the tip of his ears to the tip of his tail, and without waiting a second longer, he turns tail and runs as hard as he can. The creature behind gives a leisurely chase, paws shaking the ground behind him as it laughs.

Dakota remembers the rabbit, how it darted under fallen trees and into bushes, and sprints for the nearest set of leafless brambles. Even as he darts into the smaller space, the creature easily chases him, watching him struggle to tear his way through the undergrowth with amusement glinting in its eyes.

Running as fast as he can, Dakota tries to lose the creature, but he finds that no matter how fast he runs or how the brambles stand between him and the creature, it always finds a way to end up right on his heels. Lungs and legs burning and numb, he launches himself towards an open clearing, hoping that somehow, some way, his family will be waiting for him on the other side.

There is no pack past the edge of the trees, though. There is only a large, deep ravine with water rushing past sharp rocks.

"There's nowhere to go, little one," the creature growls lowly.

Dakota turns around quickly, hoping to find a way to escape, but the creature is already upon him, head lowered so that they are eye-to-eye.

"Jump!" a voice calls out from the sky.

With one last look at the creature's face, an irritated look passing over its furry features, Dakota turns and jumps.

Wind bites into his fur as he falls before he hits the water with a splash. Instantly, his body is jerked from side to side through the water, and he struggles towards the surface. His head bobs

above the water as he frantically paddles towards the edge of the river, but as soon as he grips onto a wet rock, his body is tugged back towards the center of the stream. He fights again and again against the current as it shakes him viciously. His body trembles with cold, his ears and tail numb as he fights the water.

Sharp claws dig into the scruff of his neck and drag him towards the edge of the shore as he paddles frantically, and when they release, he is able to scramble up onto the wet rocks and carry his shaking form towards the snowy shore. His legs give out as his wet paws touch the snow, and a whimper tears out of his throat.

When he glances back towards the river, he sees a small, black blur hop towards him. Blearily, he remembers his father's nighttime tales about the darkness that takes hold of the living, a creature that he had called *Death*. Yet, the creature has no teeth and claws; instead, it is a small bird that tilts its head from side to side.

"Hello, my friend." The bird caws and hops closer to Dakota's numb body. "I am Munnin, and I am here to help."

Dakota whimpers again, trying to raise his head, but Munnin presses his head to the wet fur of Dakota's chest, nudging him lightly.

"I would understand if you do not trust me," the bird admits, "but I ask that you use your strength to follow me back up the river. There is an abandoned den not too far from here. I promise to stay by your side."

"I'm not sure... I can."

Munnin pecks at the ice forming on Dakota's fur, his black, beady eyes unreadable as he flaps up into the air. Dakota tries to haul himself to his feet, but his body cannot support him.

Without warning, sharp claws dig into the scruff of his neck again, which causes Dakota to yelp. The cool air from the flap of Munnin's wings makes him tremble harder, but together, they manage to get him to his feet.

Dakota and Munnin move slowly, but eventually, the rocks turn back into snow-covered grass and trees begin to poke out from the snow in the distance.

As soon as the pair reaches the first set of trees, Dakota spots a hole in the ground dug into the roots of a tree. With unsteady legs, he makes his way inside before collapsing onto the ground. The wind is quiet here, and although the ice and snow clinging to his fur still aches on his skin, there is a warmth to the place that makes him desperately miss his mother.

"Don't worry, my friend," Munnin says after a moment. The brush of feathers against Dakota's fur makes him flinch, but the wing settles over him gently and he slowly relaxes under it. "I will keep you warm."

When Dakota awakens, the raven is still there with his head tucked under the wing not around Dakota. His body is warm for the first time since before the snow first fell on him.

"Are you ready to head home?" the raven asks quietly.

Dakota yips in agreement, cautiously making his way out of the den. This time, Munnin takes to the skies instead of staying close to Dakota. Whenever Dakota looks up, Munnin is there, hovering just above the trees.

Continuing to scent the air, Dakota cannot smell anything familiar. Yet, he begins to pick up the scent of blood as he continues onward.

The raven leads him to the edge of the woods towards what Dakota realizes is a cliff. The open air makes him tremble at the thought of the creature from before with its tawny pelt and blood-stained maw, but when he glances upwards, Munnin is still with him.

As they grow closer to the cliff's edge, the scent of blood grows stronger, and as they approach the edge of the cliff, Dakota finally spots the source of the scent.

Hovering over the body of a dead deer is the golden-brown predator from before, and as soon as Munnin swoops downward, the creature's large head moves away from the bloodied chest cavity of its prey. Dakota stops in his tracks, tail tucking between his legs as he lowers his head closer to the ground, but Munnin swoops down and lands in front of him, blocking the creature from before as it approaches.

"You return, little one. It is time, then, for you to come with me."

Munnin squawks loudly before launching himself at the creature. The creature lets out an awful, bellowing roar as Munnin's talons sink into the left side of its face. Blood drips down from its eye before it focuses its attention back on Dakota with a snarl.

Dakota sprints towards the woods, but Munnin's large wings block his path.

"Face it!" the raven squawks.

Dakota lets out a low whine before sprinting to the side. He hears the flap of Munnin's wings as he runs closer to the cliff's edge, followed by the aggravated roar of the other creature. As he approaches the cliff's edge, he stops and turns, watching Munnin swoop down towards the creature's head as it bats at him with its large paws. One paw barely manages to clip the end of Munnin's wing, causing the bird to flap frantically to right himself.

The creature charges towards Dakota as fast as it can, Munnin following closely behind but not quite able to catch up.

“You’re mine!” the creature bellows.

Dakota closes his eyes and lowers his body close to the ground before darting forward as the creature lunges forward. Body bracing for impact, Dakota keeps his eyes closed until no pain immediately follows.

When he turns to glance backwards at the creature, its claws are scratching futilely at the edge of the cliff, rocks sliding out from under it. With one anguished roar, the creature’s bloodied eye disappears over the cliff’s edge.

Munnin lands next to Dakota, nudging at him with his head once more.

“Let’s find the deer, and after you eat, you will be able to return home. Follow me, Dakota.”

Familiar smells race through the forest all around him as he runs, Munnin soaring overhead. Warmth enters back into Dakota’s bones as he rushes into the clearing. He raises his muzzle to the sky and howls briefly, the sound high-pitched and youthful, as he waits for his pack with a wagging tail.

The clearing is silent.

Then, after a moment, the pack begins to emerge from their dens. His brothers and sisters tumble out from the den, followed quickly by his mother and father.

Dakota rushes forward into the warm embrace of his family, small body wiggling excitedly with the movement of his tail. He presses his head into the fur of his mother, hiding his face away from the world for a brief moment as he basks in the warmth surrounding him.

After several moments with his family, Dakota manages to break away from them as he turns back towards the raven perched precariously on a half-broken branch overlooking the clearing. Munnin watches him with one, beady eye, but he says nothing.

“Thank you, my friend,” Dakota barks, “for guiding me home.”