

*The Grassic Gibbon Centre*  
*Literary Lights Prize for Creative Writing*

*Winner 2019*

**NINE TAILS**

**Jane Morris**

Mary almost threw herself under the grey car that emerged like a tank from the mist. But if she hadn't got used to risking her life, she would never visit the other side of the A435. She had printed a score of posters that said MISSING – REWARD OFFERED. They didn't possess a laminator, so she had put each one into a transparent food bag and threaded string across the top. Lampposts were too daunting, so she tied them onto railings and fences. Even without any climbing or reaching up, her throat was tight, she was breathless and her eyes watered. At the end of the task, she drifted around the neighbourhood, expecting that each indistinct creature might be Stanley. She couldn't bring herself to return to an empty house by daylight. Empty of Stanley, that was. Her husband didn't really go out any more.

Anthony had brought his toolbox down from the top floor of the house. He selected a screwdriver and dismantled the plywood and plastic structure that had allowed Stanley to determine his own entrances and exits through the back door. He made good the breach in the lower panel and examined it with satisfaction.

By lunchtime Mary had still not returned so he was obliged to prepare for himself a lunch of baked beans and toast and to stack the used vessels in the dishwasher. An hour later, when he had unloaded the machine, he piled up the bowls and dishes reserved for Stanley's use, and stowed them in the carrying cage they had used for trips to the vet or the cattery. It had required violence to make Stanley enter it, but the crockery submitted coldly. Anthony considered. It would be indelicate to put it out on the side of the road just yet. The space on top of the kitchen cupboards was just deep enough. He climbed the step ladder gingerly,

feeling it in his knees, holding the cage handle through an old tablecloth he had used as drapery.

Mary returned at dusk. She carried heavy shopping bags in each hand. Her hair and cheeks sparkled with droplets, and she still appeared slightly out of breath. She looked round the kitchen. Finally, she took out a sack of red-skinned potatoes. 'Do you want a cup of tea, Tony'? she called, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her cardigan, but Anthony had already gone upstairs to put away the toolbox in the room they carefully called the box room. He wondered how long it would take for her to give up hope.

The smell of burning potatoes brought Anthony hurrying down to rescue the saucepan. He disposed of a pair of black cutlets from the grill and reached in the cupboard for a can of beans. Mary sat weeping at the kitchen table over a pack of gourmet cat food sachets she had automatically put in her basket. Anthony laid the table, lit two candles, switched on the radio and served the beans and toast. Mary switched off the radio and watched him eat in silence. He exchanged plates and consumed her portion mechanically. She marvelled again at the extraordinary discipline of this man who had left the navy before they married, but still washed, ironed, polished shoes and kept their home like a tight ship.

Even now, they slept in a shared bed, sealed in the room by the heavy Victorian door and wooden shutters. Around three o'clock Mary invariably went out to the bathroom. As usual, Anthony was woken by the slit of light from the landing. After the flushing sound he braced himself for the press of cold flesh against his back. He realised then that it no longer mattered that Mary left the bedroom door open. There was no Stanley to slink in at dawn and attack his feet. Sometimes he rose early to ensure the cat got his meal without having to assault the man of the house. He remembered the shame when his donation of blood had been turned down by the Transfusion Service because an animal had bitten him. After that he had remained quiet about what Stanley did. But no more. The bed became infinitely more comfortable, the mattress more yielding. Mary's body was warmer than usual. He reached out and she allowed him to hold her hand for a while.

It was true, as Mary said, that Stanley kept mice away. Anthony wished he had also kept birds away from their garden rather than playing with them, bringing them in, bloody and twitching, presumably as payment for the gourmet cat food of the morning, or perhaps in recognition of services to hygiene. Mary believed the cat was house-trained, but Anthony

knew better. He would spend evenings trying to outstare the creature as he lay in Mary's lap, purring provocatively and gently pawing her inner arm as she stroked his ginger back.

That next evening Mary sat with a cushion in her lap and stared blind and deaf in the direction of Anthony's chosen television documentary. Leopards were tearing the guts out of a wildebeest. It was nine years since the snowy Christmas they had officially rescued Stanley from the cat woman's caravan in the back of beyond. In spite of her caresses through the bars of his carrying case, and her offerings of the catnip and titbits she had brought, the scraggy kitten howled persistently and defaecated over his rug. She remembered how Anthony had driven in tight-lipped disapproval, without once looking back on them all twenty seven miles home.

She was embarrassed to find herself considering names for their next cat. Stanley was a vigorous tom, and the neighbourhood was littered with superfluous apricot kittens. She dared not let Anthony know what she was thinking. 'Do you want a cup of tea, Tony?' she asked, starting to rise from the sofa.

'I'll get it,' said Anthony, hand on her arm pushing her back into the cushions.

And now she found herself thinking the unthinkable. Tony would never harm a dumb creature, of course he wouldn't. But he was never one for admitting to any weakness or mistake. It was not part of his nature.

Anthony prepared tea for the two of them, careful to ensure that hers was weak and milky, with a half teaspoon of sugar. He thought of Stanley's body, flattened and deformed by the winter tyres of the four-by-four, leaking dark blood which matted the auburn fur. It looked more like game brought back from a hunt than like the body of a comrade. Nothing like the bodies of men lying after battle, or the deep-frozen corpse he had not wanted to uncover in the funeral parlour.

Monday afternoon was misty. Mary had failed to close the front door. She didn't notice Stanley had slipped out. Reversing the Shogun demanded her full concentration on the fish-eye mirror at their gatepost. There was maybe more of a crunch than usual as she backed into the gap in traffic on the A435 and switched into forward gear.

Anthony had fetched a shovel and scooped the body into a black bag. He carried it over his shoulder to the recycling bin in the next street. He returned and poured buckets of hot water and bleach over the concrete, bucket after bucketful, until the stains were long gone.

It was Anthony himself who had booked the trip to the cat refuge to bring home the unwanted kitten. It was his gift to Mary that first Christmas after Robbie's death in Afghanistan. He would have given anything to mop away one drop of her hideous grief. Yet what sort of a man was he, who could not shed a single tear for his son? As they drove home through the snow and Stanley the kitten wailed in his cage, he felt wetness down his face and the road ahead distorted as if there was rain on the windscreen.