

I arrived at Highcopse School on a bright, clear morning to take the children for poetry writing. I paused for a moment before entering the building, breathed in the fresh air and surveyed the swath of green rising to the misty fell side, dotted with browsing sheep. I could see rabbits cropping the grass at the edge of a nearby field, and a fat pheasant strutted along the craggy limestone wall bordering the school. A squirrel ran up the trunk of an ancient tree by the road and then peered at me between the yellowing leaves. High above in a vast and dove-grey sky, the rooks screeched and circled. Here was poetry indeed.

I gathered the small children around me on the carpet in the Reading Corner and we talked about several large colour photographs of various animals which I had brought with me. I explained that we were going to write some little descriptive poems about the different creatures which included a mole, rabbit, squirrel and dormouse. We were to look at each picture in turn and it was my intention to encourage the children to talk about the colours and shapes. I did not, however, get very far. When I held up the large photograph of the mole, one of the older children, a large round child called Thomas, remarked casually that his granddad killed moles.

'Does he really?' I replied equally casually and attempted to move on. 'Now look at his little fat black body. He's an unusual little creature, the mole. Can you see his big flat paws like pink spades and the sharp claws? Can anyone tell me what -'

'They dig and dig wi' them claws, deep underground they go and chuck up reight big mounds of soil,' explained Thomas to no one in particular. 'Do a lot o' damage to a field, do moles. They're a real pest my granddad says. Some farmers put down poison but me granddad traps 'em and hangs up their bodies on t'fence.'

I decided to look at another picture. 'Here we have a grey squirrel. I saw a squirrel this morning peeping from between the branches of the tree outside. Look at his large black eyes and long bushy tail. Can anyone tell me what -'

'Tree vermin,' commented the same boy. 'My granddad shoots them an' all. Ruin trees, they do. My granddad says squirrels are a damn nuisance. They eat all t'corn put out for t'hens. Rats wi' bushy tails, that's what squirrels are. My granddad goes out in t'morning with his shotgun, shoots 'em and hangs up their bodies on t'fence.'

'Just listen a moment, will you, Thomas,' I said, catching sight of Mrs Dunn, their teacher, sitting at the back of the room with a self-satisfied smile on her face. She seemed to be quite enjoying my discomfort. 'We can perhaps talk about that later on. Now I want us all to look very carefully at this picture of the rabbit. I saw quite a few rabbits this morning as I -'

'My granddad kills them an' all,' said Thomas. 'He pegs a little string net ovver rabbit warren holes and lets one of his jills down.'

'Jills?' I asked.

'His ferret. He keeps her half fed to make her keen. If he underfeeds her, she eats

t'rabbit and won't come up out of t'ole. If he overfeeds her, she won't go down at all. He lets her down t'hole and she chases t'rabbits out into t'net. Then my granddad breaks their necks. He's reight good at that.'

'Really,' I said feebly. 'Well perhaps later on we could hear all about that, Thomas, but for the moment let's look at the picture and think of the shapes and colours in it.' I selected the final large photograph of a doormouse and decided on a pre-emptive strike.

'And what about dormice, Thomas? Does your granddad kill those as well and hang them up on the fence?'

'No, he quite likes dormice. They don't really do any harm.' Thank goodness for that, I thought. 'Right then,' I said cheerfully, 'let's all look at this shy little dormouse, clinging to a stalk of wheat. Look carefully at the colour of his fur and his large round eyes which -'
'Sheba kills dormice, though,' said Thomas in his flat, matter-of-fact voice.

'Sheba?' I sighed.

'Our farm cat. She catches `em in t'fields, carries `em into t'kitchen and plays with `em before killing `em. We try to get `em off of `er but she runs off'

'I see,' I said wearily.

'And sometimes she brings shrews into t'kitchen an' all, and bites their `eads off and -'

'Is there anyone else who would like to say anything about animals?' I interrupted, in the hope of changing the subject. A small, pixie-faced little boy sitting right under my nose raised his hand eagerly.

'Yes?' I said pleasantly, looking into the keen little face. 'What have you to tell me?'

'I've got frogs on my underpants,' he announced proudly.