

On the Verge Writing Contest 2023, First-Place Fiction Winner
By Emily Clark

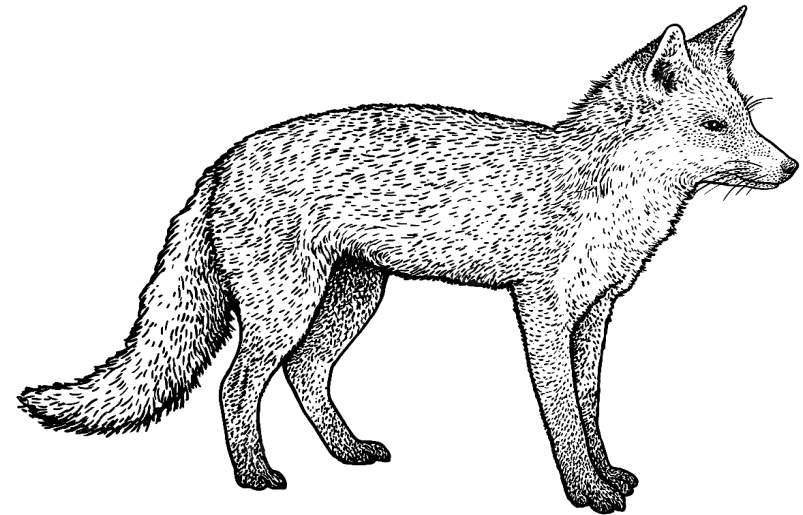
Raccoon Makes It Right

One day, all the animals in the forest gathered together, because something big had happened, and they always came together for big things.

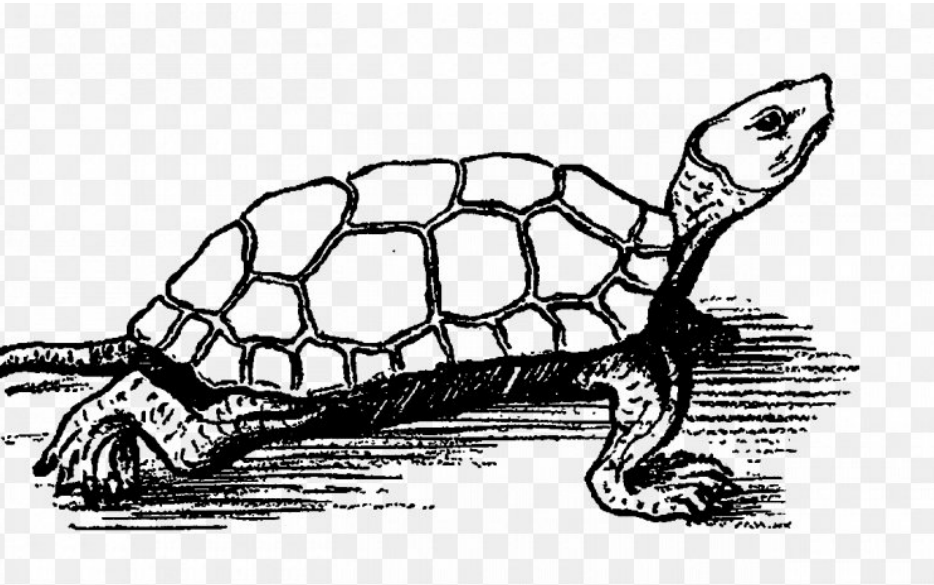
Big things were sometimes fun,
but today was not fun.



“Tortoise! Tortoise!” wailed Fox. “A terrible thing has happened, and something must be done! You’re our wisest, most honorable friend: we need your help.”



“Slow down”, Tortoise groaned. “Whatever happened, we can fix it together.”



“Raccoon has been stealing from Rabbit!” said Fox.



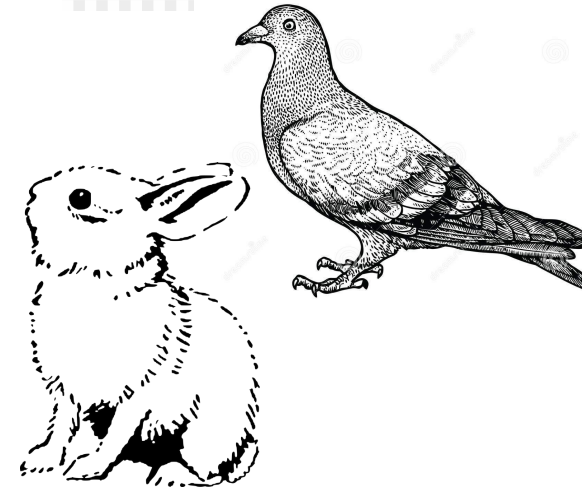
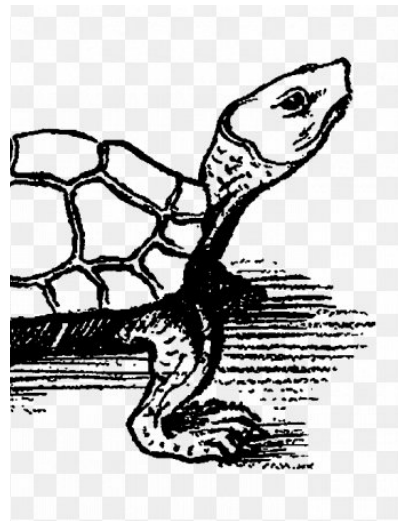
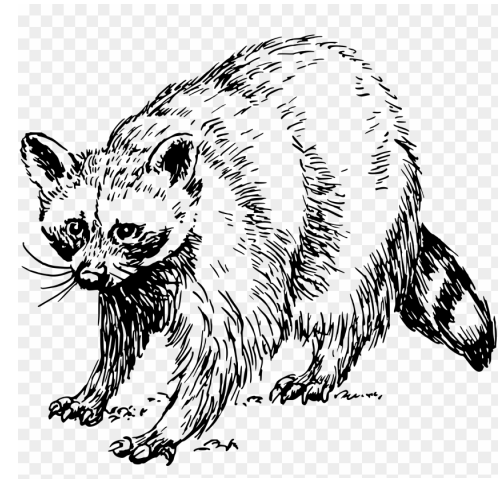
“Sneaking into the Burrow, taking all sorts of vegetables and fruits and seeds that don’t belong to him!”

“Oh, how terrible!”
said the animals who had gathered around.

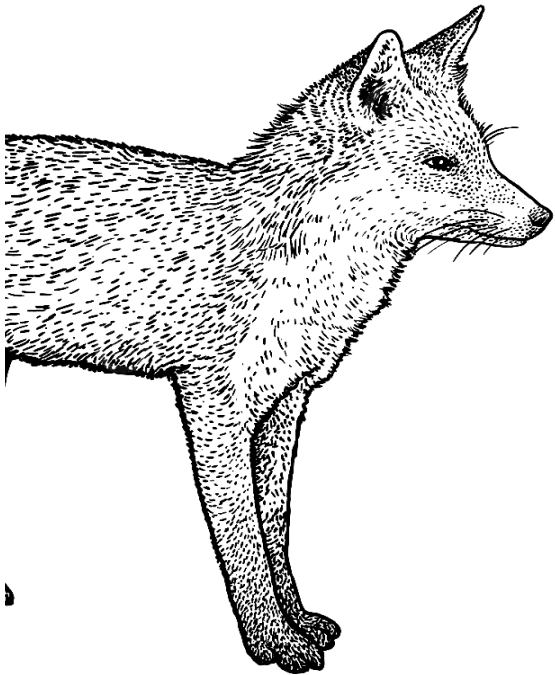
Rabbit shivered,
but said nothing.



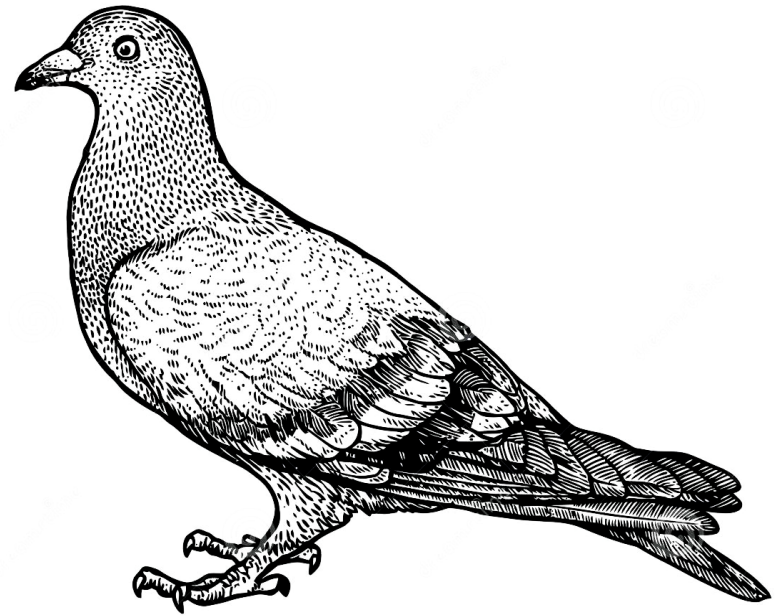
“Something must be done”, sighed Tortoise,
who was ever so wise.
The animals began talking all at once, until...



“I know what to do!” Fox declared. He knew himself to be very clever, and very quick, so everyone listened to him. “Raccoon should *cross the Road*.”

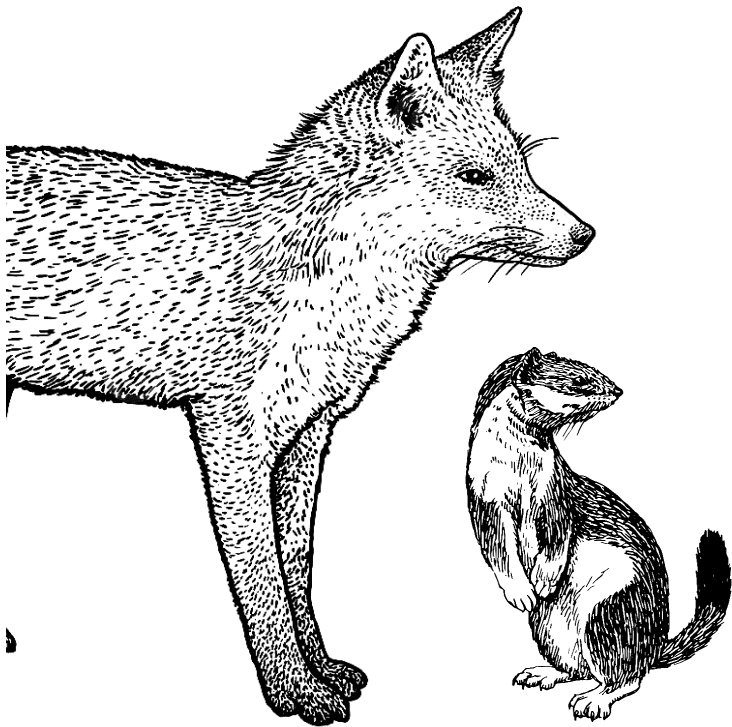


All the animals gasped in surprise.

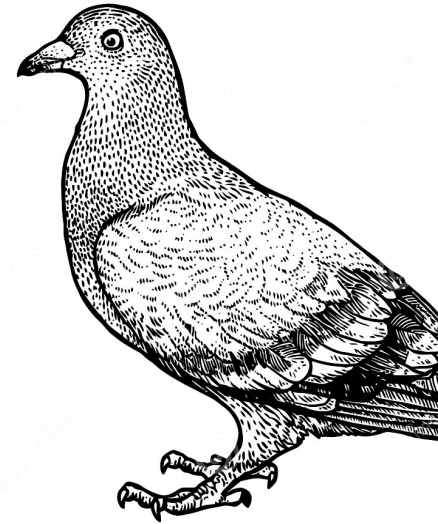


“But no one’s crossed the Road since Chicken!” said Pigeon, who remembered that day well, and remembered Chicken even better.

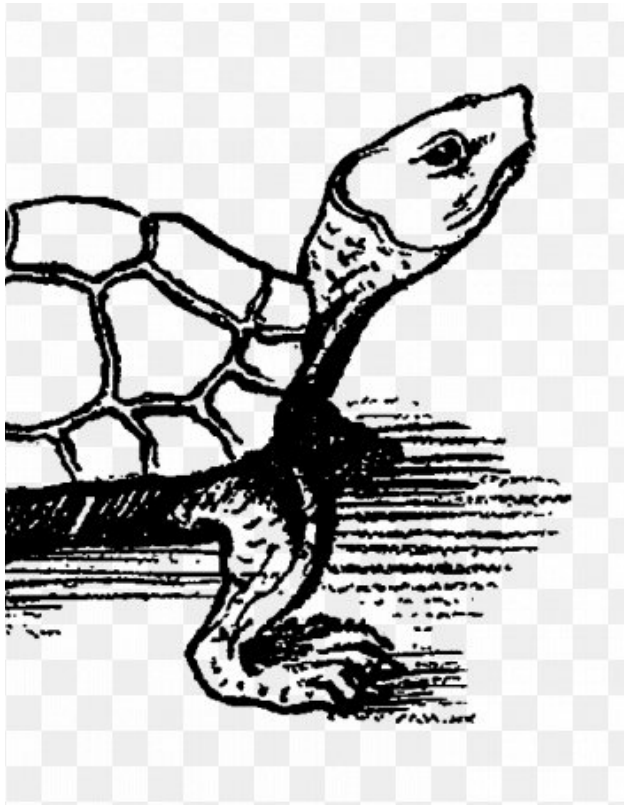
“It’s the only way!” insisted Fox, puffing his chest out. “Raccoon did something bad, he’s a bad animal who made a bad choice, and now all of us are hurting because of it. If he stays, the forest won’t be safe anymore!”



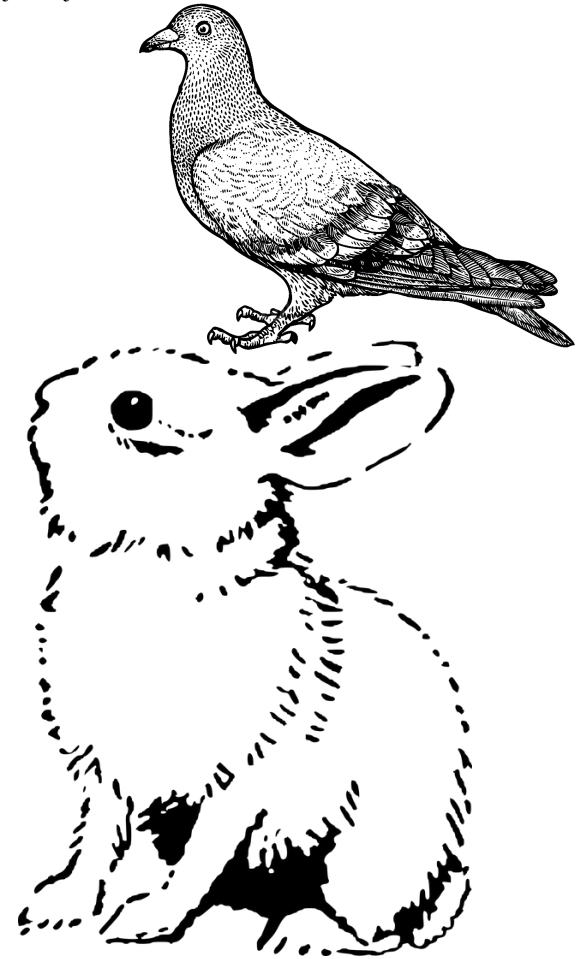
“Fox is right,” said Weasel, who liked to agree with Fox almost as much as she liked to disagree with Pigeon. “This is best for everyone.”



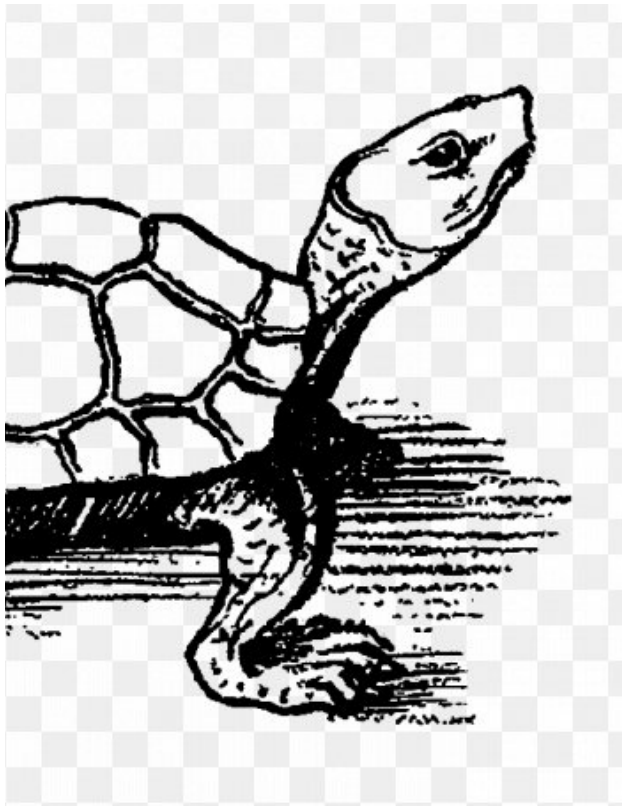
“Well, what about Hibernation?” said Tortoise. “The Road is so noisy, and at least Raccoon could Hibernate, and then come back for a while.”



“You didn’t mind when Chicken crossed the Road.” Weasel pointed out. “And anyways, Hibernation is silly, we should stop doing that.”



“Hmmm...” Tortoise was frowning. “I’m not so sure. Hibernation is what we’ve always done. There’s the right way to get justice, and then there’s the wrong way. I don’t think we should do it the wrong way.” He said, wisely.



Rat scoffed,
“If Hibernation is so good,
then how come I have to go
all the time for nothing at all?”



“Not for nothing,” squeaked Mouse. “You steal cheese!”

“So do you!” said Rat. “And you’ve never Hibernated, not ever, not once!”

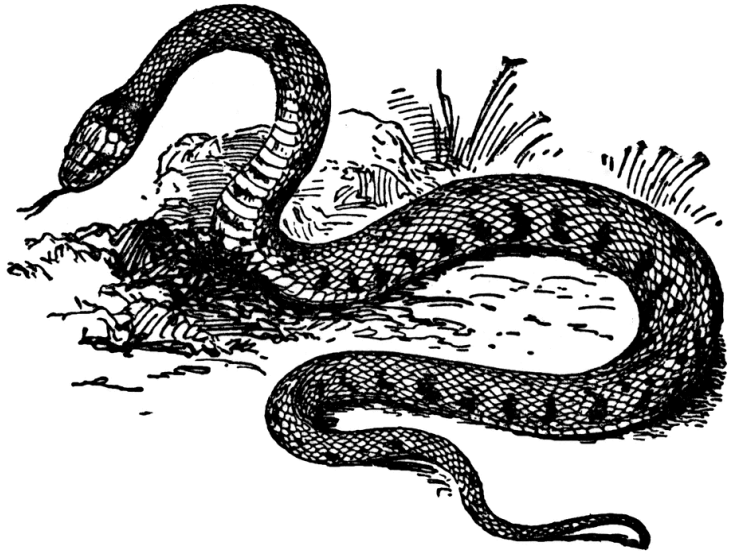


“What about Snake?”

Mouse said, changing the subject.

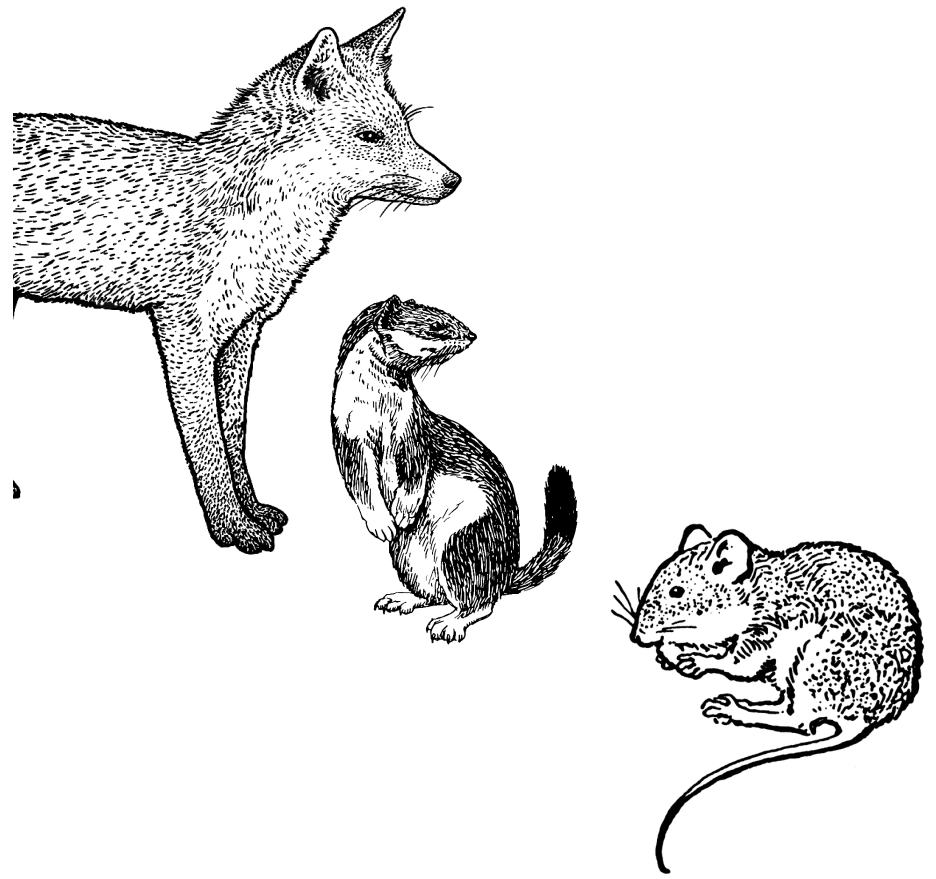
“They keep Hibernating, and nothing ever happens!”





“I can’t sssshed my sssskin while Hibernating, what am I sssssupossed to do?” Snake muttered, but no one heard, because Mouse was still talking.

“Fox is right. We need something new!” he said.
“I agree!” said Weasel. “Fox has the right idea.”
“I only want what’s best.” said Fox, ever so modestly.
“If we let Raccoon go, animals will start thinking they can be bad whenever they want. It’s just not safe.”



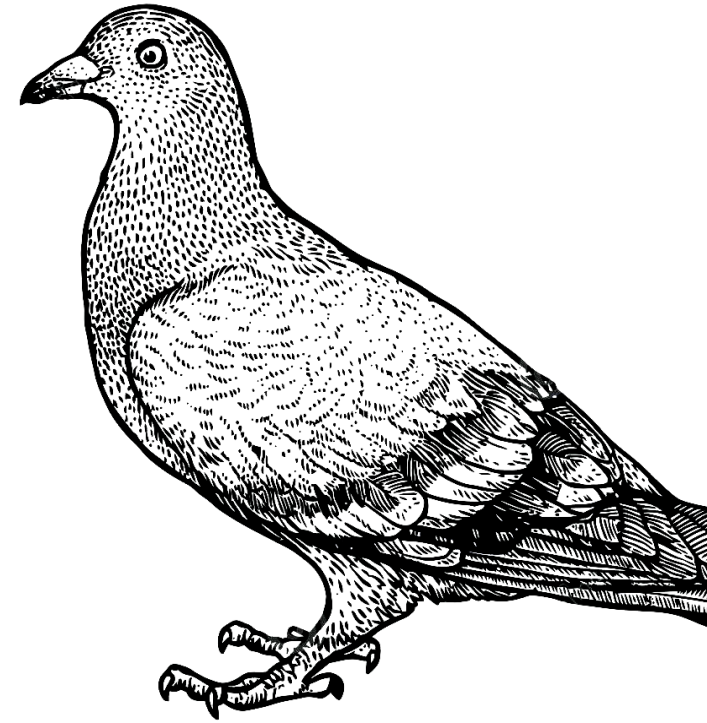
Fox and friends and all the rest of the animals turned to Rabbit, who shuffled nervously.

“Well, Hibernation doesn’t sound good, not good at all...”



“WAIT!” said Pigeon.

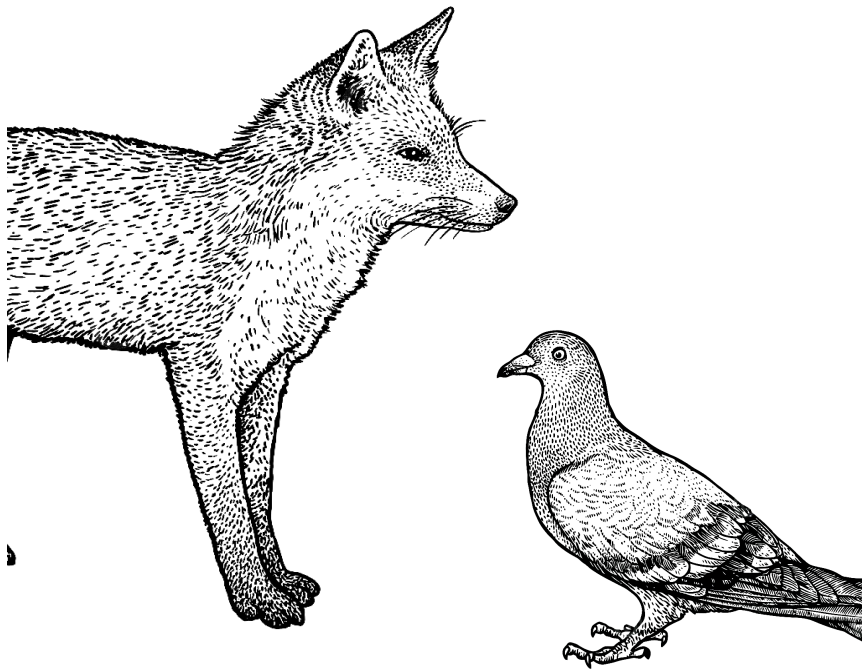
“There’s another way!”



“No, there isn't,” said Fox, quickly.

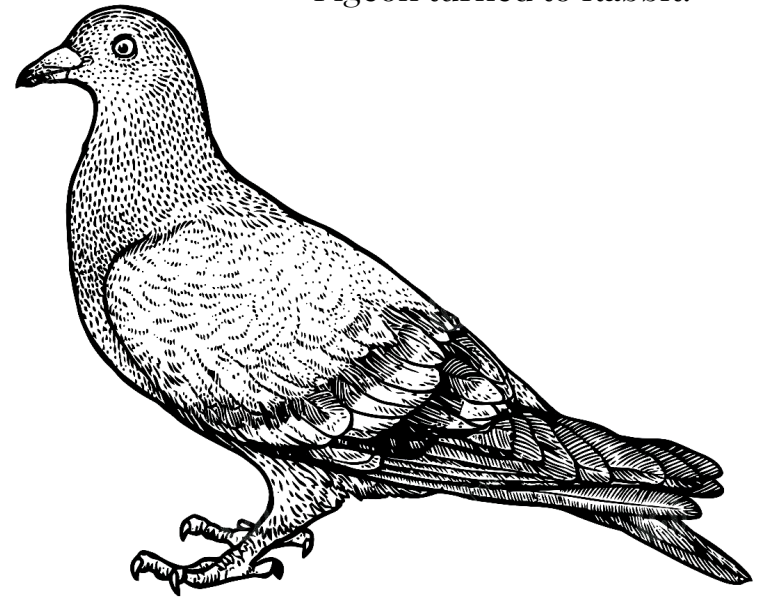
“Yes, there is!” Pigeon snapped, glaring at Fox.

Fox fell silent, letting Pigeon speak her mind.

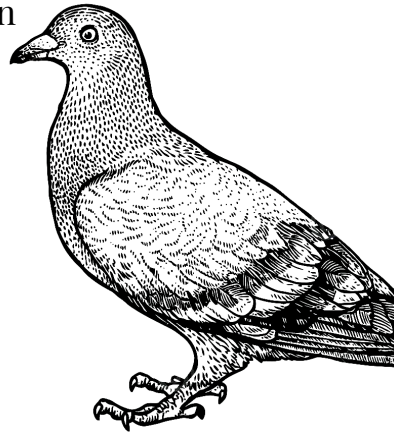


“Well, it’s like you said, Weasel. Hibernation doesn’t work. Rat is punished for the same things that we let Mouse get away with all the time. Snake can never change, because they’re always locked away in Hibernation. We’ve been relying on a system that hurts more than it helps. We don’t even know *why* Raccoon did all that! Maybe he was hungry, maybe he was scared, maybe it was a mistake. We haven’t asked him! We haven’t even asked Rabbit how he feels. If this is about protecting everybody, then everybody should try to help, and everybody should be heard.”

Pigeon turned to Rabbit.



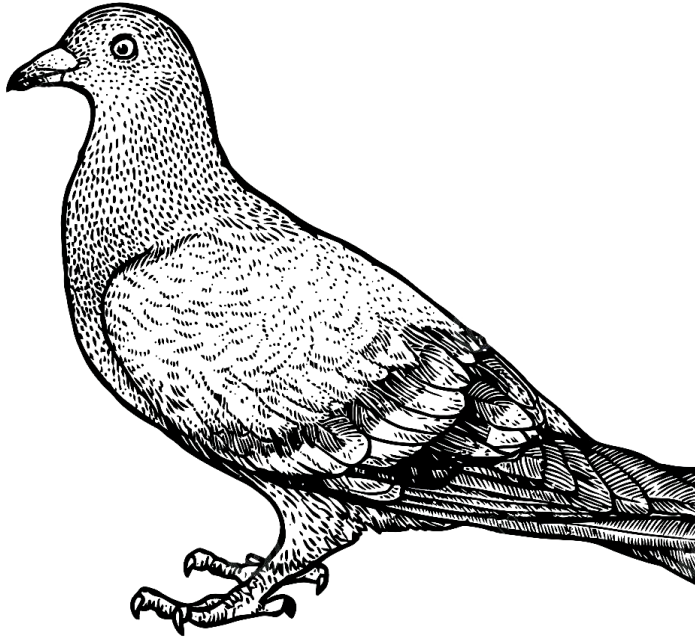
“Rabbit, I know what we have now isn’t working,
but we just *can’t* send Raccoon
to cross the Road,
we just *can’t*!
Would you be willing
to try something new?”



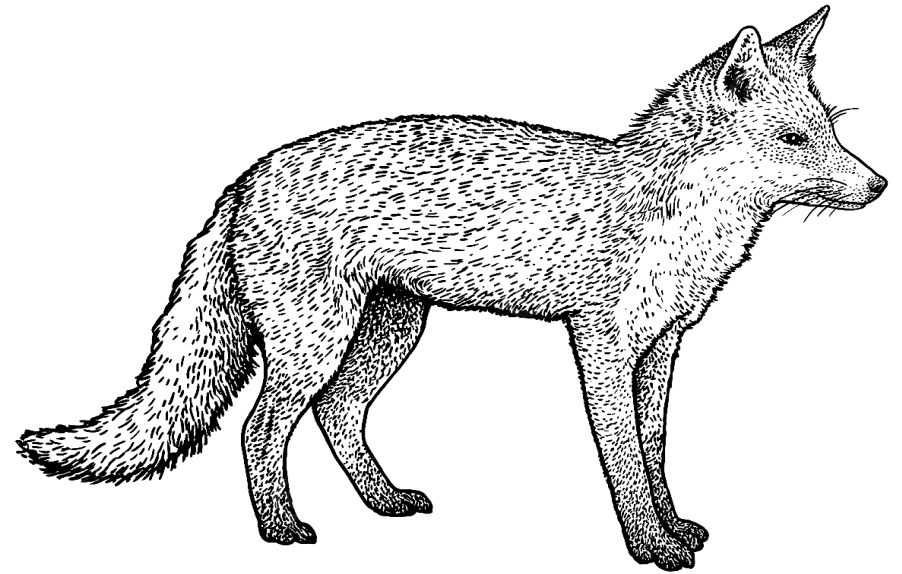
“That sounds hard...” Rabbit whispered.



“It will be hard, Rabbit.” said Pigeon. “But we’ll help you. We all live in the same forest, after all.”

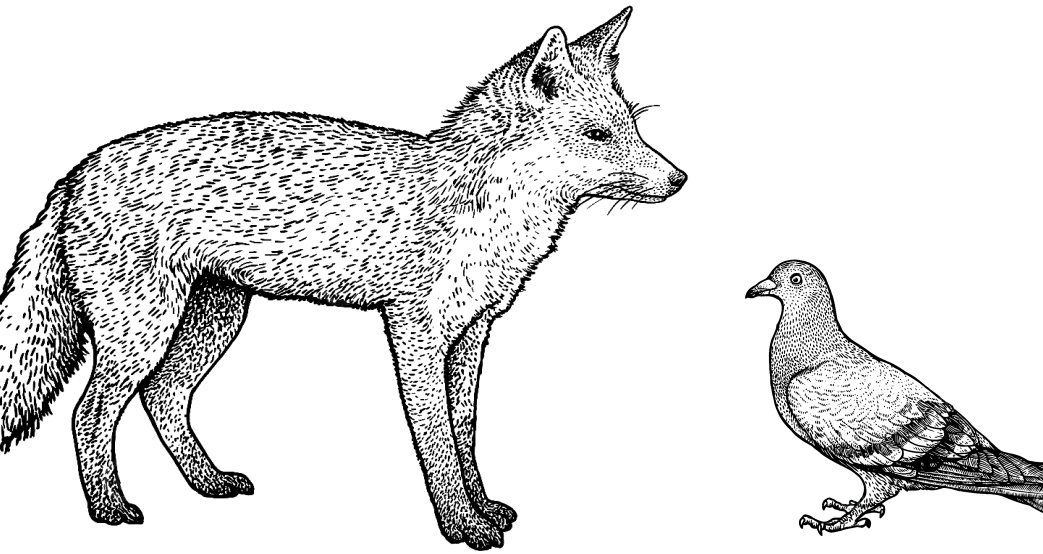


“No!” snapped Fox, sensing that something might not be going his way. Eyes wide, teeth bared, he began to shout, “This is crazy! Rabbit, you can’t be thinking about just letting Raccoon go. He was so mean to you. What if he does it again? What if, next time, he does something *worse*?”

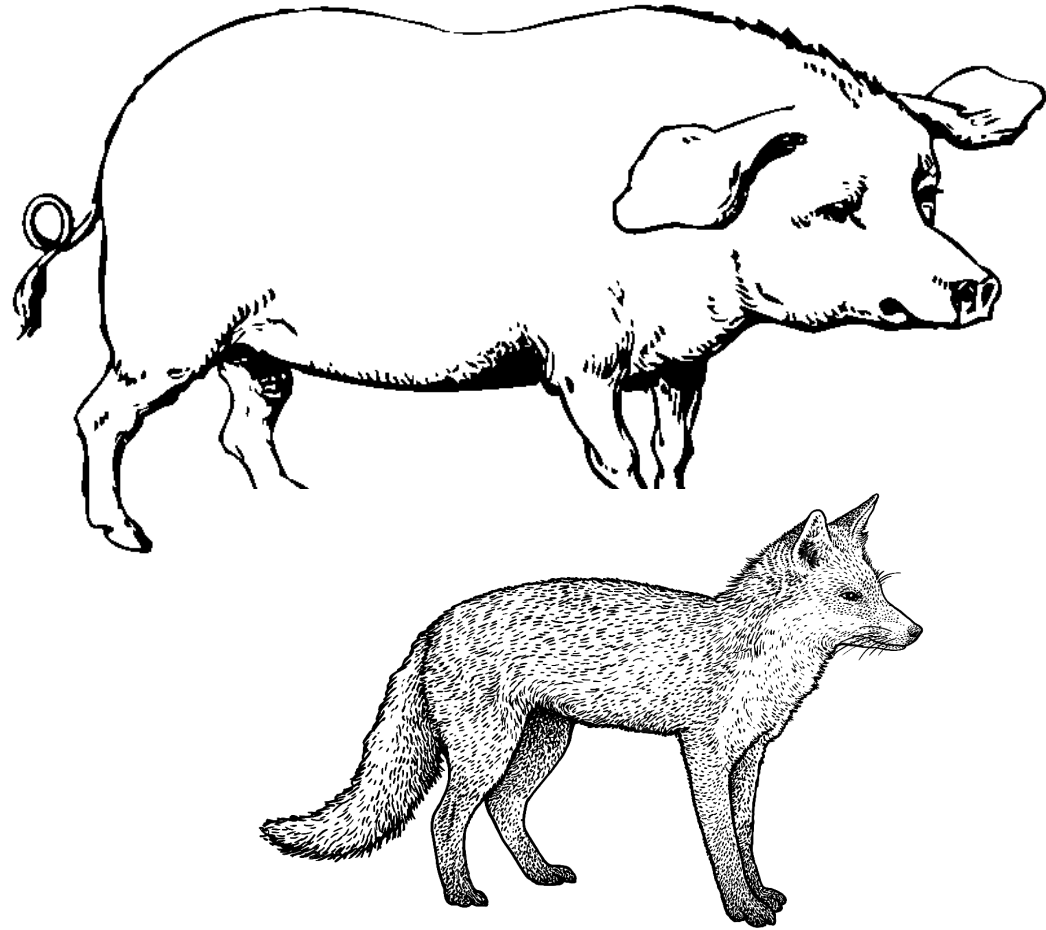


Fox turned to the group. “We can’t let bad things happen to good animals like Rabbit, it’s not right! We need to protect the forest from bad animals like Raccoon. This is what’s best for all of us”

Pigeon began to speak, but then-



“I agree with Fox” Pig said in his big, booming voice, stomping his hooves, towering over the other animals, glaring at each of them and scaring them into silence.



“I also agree with Fox!”
said Weasel, which was unsurprising.
“Bad animals should cross the Road.”

This sounded like a very good idea indeed, and it
sounded even better with Fox and Pig standing
behind Weasel, looking very big and very clever.



It sounded so good, in fact, that the other animals
began repeating Weasel's words,

‘Cross the Road!’

‘Cross the Road!’

Cross the Road!’

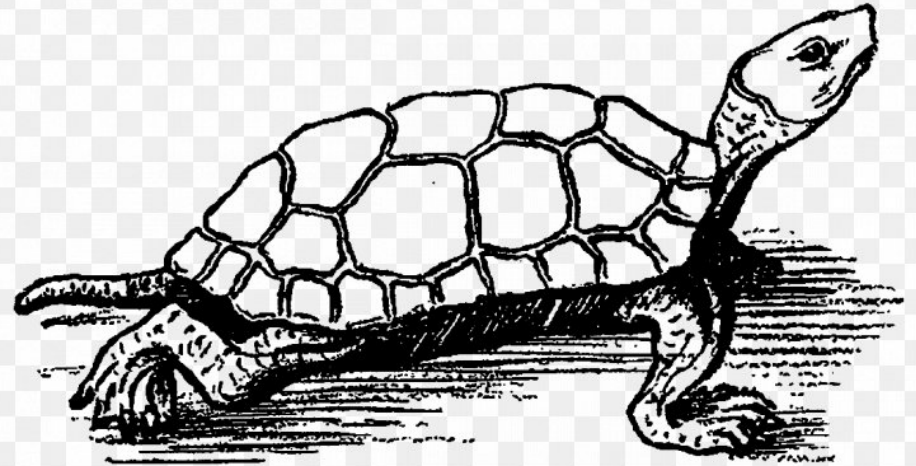
Rat and Snake looked nervously at each other,
but said nothing.



All eyes turned to Rabbit.
Breathing rapidly, and without looking at Raccoon,
Rabbit nodded.

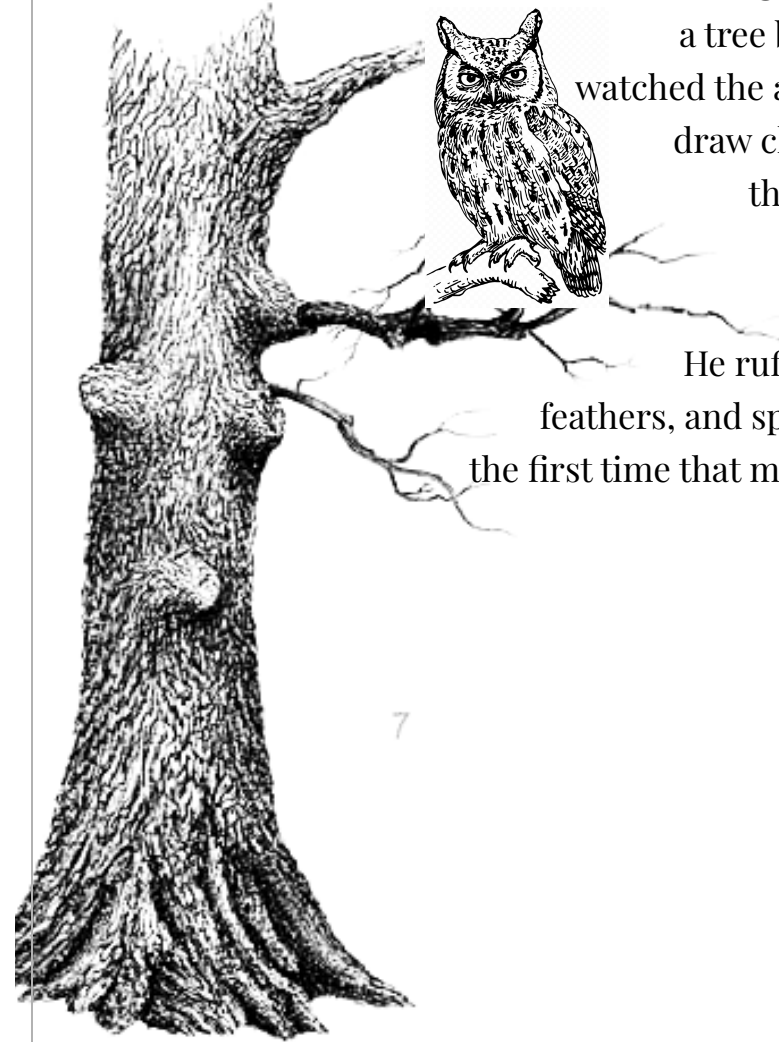
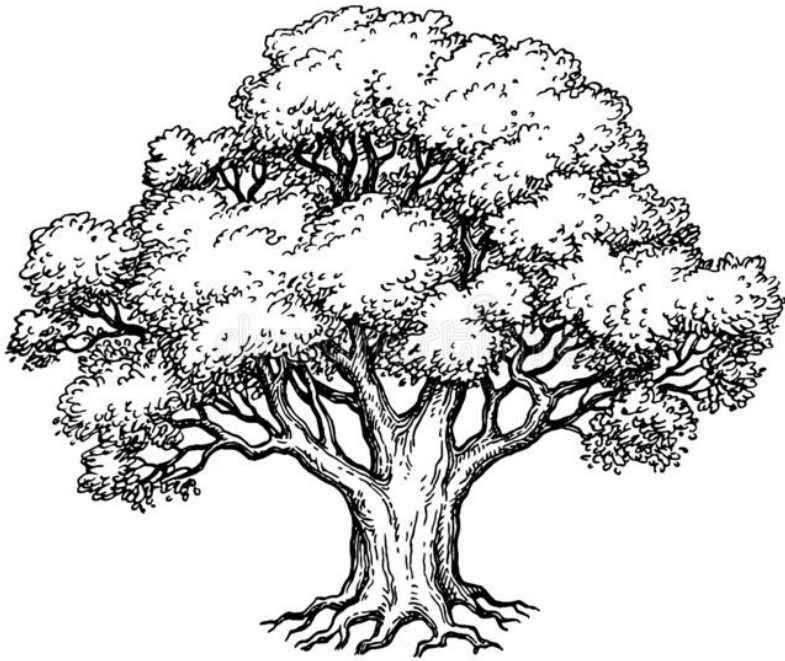


“So it is decided.” Tortoise said.
He was very glad everyone was being so agreeable.
This way,
the whole business was over before lunchtime!



All the animals, except one, started down the forest path with Raccoon, heading towards the Road on the edge of the woods.

One stayed behind.



Owl, high up on a tree branch, watched the animals draw closer to the Road.

He ruffled his feathers, and spoke for the first time that morning.

“We have been told that justice is a commodity one can purchase through retribution, a cost incurred by the individual alone. We have been told that crime is the result of



individual choices, free from the influence of social and historical forces. These are lies. Justice is what we make it, it is the function of our voluntary social contract. Justice is artificial; it is human-made, not a natural resource to be extracted and exploited. When justice is led by punity, chances for healing and redemption slip through our grasp, hands made oily with desire for vengeance. If we returned both victim

and perpetrator to their communities and contexts, ownership, responsibility and agency could be placed back in the hands of those who matter most. No one can heal or grow in isolation, and to bear the weight of grief or guilt without breaking requires support.”

These were lovely and important words,
but no one heard them,



for Owl stayed so very high in his tree,
and the Road was so very loud.

In this satirical short story, initially written for a course on life-course criminology, each of the animals represents an aspect of the debates over punitive and transformative justice. These debates are not new: Henry Fielding, an advocate for English penal reform, wrote in 1751 that if one can point to social inequality and survival as motivating the crime but the individual is still punished, then the entire justice system is called into question. Transformative justice asserts that interpersonal violence is mirrored and reinforced systemically, and aims to respond to and heal from harm by focusing on community accountability, victim support, and state support beyond prosecution. This continuity across centuries demonstrates that the underlying beliefs of transformative justice are present in many unexpected sectors of society, and punitive justice values are less entrenched than we assume.

What remains is finding how to communicate and build relationships. Transformative justice can be inaccessible or misunderstood when presented using elevated academic language, unfamiliar to those outside of sociology and social justice circles. Yet when transformative justice is presented to someone in terms they understand, the likelihood of them accepting it and viewing it as a tangible alternative to punitive justice increases. Stories like this one help overcome barriers to empathy and the initial unthinking resistance that meets transformative justice. Unobscured by cultural politics or academic language, transformative justice can be revealed to a broader audience as values like community, healing, and accountability are centered. With a little creativity, dialogue can be opened, and support grows from untapped sources, accelerating social change.

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