The truffles cast into the lifting mist a a fragrance fresh-plowed earth, roasting beats and coffee that had dried to the bottom of a pot. The fragrances danced and whirled before Bendigo, and shaped themselves a flock of oversized, elaborately plumed fowl.

Kutin and Bangle could see it, too. Bangle tried to summon the word.

“It’s a flock of …, of …”

“Wire crested piliated peasnipe,” said Bendigo. They were as described by Uncle Tennyson those many years ago. Upright speckled bodies similar to those of peahens. They walked on massive emu legs that terminated in wide webbed feet.

Bendigo gaped at the peasnipes and held his breath. He hoped they would not disappear into the earth by leaping high from their emu legs and diving beakward into it. They showed no signs of doing so. One of them approached Bendigo and wondered at him with with lemon shaped eyes that were the size of walnuts. Bendigo perked his ears and wondered back at the peasnipe.

The humans and the other animals not able to experience a second world through their noses could not see the peasnipe. But they could savor the aroma emanating from the pickup load of prized black truffles.

“They’re worth a fortune,” whispered Baldy. “The farm is saved.”

“We shouldn’t leave them outside,” said Buford, striding for the truck. “It might rain.”

Suddenly, as if at the mention of rain, the sky darkened and Buford heard drops falling on the tin roof of the barn. A drop landed on Buford. It was wet but it was not water. It was the milky white foulness of starling shit. Buford looked up. A mistake. Buford removed his hat and with it wiped at his eye.

In the sky above, a swarm of starlings blotted out the sun. Buford wiped his forehead. Countless brown-black birds assembled into a dark mass. Then a sort of orderliness began to take hold. Sections of the swarm coalesced into wheeling, whirling units. Soon it wasn’t sections, but the entire flock, together as a whole, whiling, banking, performing graceful pirouettes in the sky above the farm.

Bufford had seen starling murmurations before, lifting from the hardwoods or powerlines on the evenings of early winter to create remarkable formations. He stopped to watch when he cold. The display was glorious. But what he saw now filled him with a sense of foreboding. It was not early winter, and there was something strange about these starlings. They gave of a sort of magenta hue.

The pulsating nebula of starlings began to change, organizing further, forming shapes. A half-moon. A sickle blade. A billowing cloak. Two taloned hands formed at the end of the sleeves and within the hood there formed a great, ghastly human face.

Buford’s foreboding turned to terror. The peasnipe propelled themselves into the orchard on mighty legs that churned like pistons. The starling wraith made its hands into fists and lofted them over its head. It brought them down on the pickup truck. The truck shuttered, and from it scattered prized truffles, half eaten and befouled with starling shit.

Wes ran from the house toward the pickup truck. He had covered himself in Mosey’s quilt. Mosey came to the door and shouted, “Wesley Hooper! Where are you going in my … Wesley, no! Get out of there!”

Swatting at starlings with his hat, Buford started for Wes. But Wes quickly draped the quilt over the truffles that remained and fled. He disappeared around the corner of the workshop. This close to the starlings, Buford could see why the swarm gave off a magenta hue. Each starling had eyes that glowed as red embers.

The sky wraith worked at the quilt that was covering the truck bed. A corner of the blanket lifted here, another corner there, but the sky wraith, formed as it was from a mass of living starlings, lacked the dexterity to easily manage the task. Slowly, though, it made progress.

The Hooper assemblage watched from the shelter of the screened-in porch. The center of the quilt began to writhe with starlings that had made their way underneath. The starlings peeled back a quarter of the blanked and the center began to lift

“All is lost!” cried Tennyson Jack.

Then the clatter and bang of the farmall tractor starting up. It came around the barn with Wes behind the wheel. On the three-point hitch it bore the redemption device, hopper heaped high of hazelnuts. West positioned the tractor, and faced the redemption device in the direction of the starling wraith. He shifted to neutral. He applied pressure to the throttle leaver until the needle of the rpm guage rested in the position marked ‘PTO.” He engaged the clutch and then the PTO leaver. When he let off the clutch, the tractor shuddered with a mighty force and sent a volley of hazelnuts streaming into the starling wraith.

A cavity opened in the wraith’s chest and then closed again. The wraith turned from the truck and faced Wes. He fired again. The farmall shuddered percussively. Feathers fell. and the wraith’s head disappeared. The Hooper siblings cheered from the shelter of the screened in porch and jumped up and down and congratulated each other with high-fives and hugs.

Wes fired at it again, but this time, there was no shudder, no satisfying percussive recoil. Only a dull, impotent thunking. The hazelnuts were spent and the hopper now was empty.

The sky wraith reconstituted its head and floated menacingly above Wes. The Hoopers, inspired by Wes’s courage and compelled by his peril, emerged from the safety of the porch, whooping and waving their hands at the sky wraith. It turned toward them and when it did the Hoopers stopped and regarded each other uncertainly. They waited for a leader to emege, for one to run so they all could run or one to fight so they all could fight. Neither happened and the starling wraith drifted menacingly above them. Wes on the tractor heard two loud bangs and then a crash behind him. He turned to see the double barndoors swing open. The doors, strained these many months with the weight of hazelnuts piled high against them, buckled now under the force of a few sledge hammer blows delivered by Buford on the other side.

Bushels of Chestnuts poured forth and so too, Buford himself. He rose, bucket in hand, waded clumsily through the chestnuts and emptied a five-gallon bucket into the hopper of the redemption device.

“Keep firiing, boy!” I’ll keep ‘em coming.

Buford wheeled to retrieve another bucket and, to his surprise, found himself presented with one that was already full to overflowing. It swung at him with on hanging arms, and Buford reflexively seized it and balanced it on his thigh before it could lose momentum. He stared slackjawed. The arms that delivered the bucket of hazelnuts belonged to none other than Blind Marnie!

“Stop gaping at me, idiot, and pour it in that machine!’

This Buford did and when he had, found himself presented with another. And then with another. And then yet with another. A bucket brigade had formed. There they were, Blind Marnie and Tennyson and Deacon Dan the Godly Man and Ouincy Jane, and Gertrude, and Sam Bob and as many as four cousins whose names were Gator. Hoopers pious and carnal. Hoopers

Five gallon buckets full of hazelnut projectils were passed hand to hand from all at hand who were capable of lifting one.

The battle raged. Hazelnuts by the bucket rattled into the sheet metal hopper. Bendigo and Klutin and whilrled and barked and snapped at any fluttering bird that strayed near. Floydarina and the baleful Yowk positioned themselves back-to-back on the preening pedestal and batted their paws at the air. Mosey flapped her apron and shouted ‘skit!’ and ‘skit!’, and ‘shoe!’ On the hilltop above Baldy and legendary Nashvanooga Biting Possums Head Coach \* fired footballs from the puntomatic. The took turns. One turning the crank and the other feeding footballs into it.

“Thwaka, thwaka, thwaka”, went the redemption device. And the air wraith lost its shape. And the glowing red eyes of the starlings grew dimmer and ever dimmer until they were the eyes of normal starlings, and the air wraith lost it’s magenta hugh and dissipated and the sky over Clover Creek Farm again was sunny and blue.

They family gathered the truffles that were salvageable.

“It’s not enough,” said Buford. “There aren’t enough of them here to save the farm.