'Alice … can you still see me?’

‘Do you recall that mischief of blind mice screeving with a box of coloured chalks on flags at the Winnats?

‘We were convinced they were pimps … drawing entirely with their left hands … we decided they must have lost the use of their right … being struck by lightning, not once but twice …’

The mice were tall and stout, with narrow, acute faces and long features. Intelligent, good manners with large animated eyes, they were dressed in black, and the absence of shirt collars round their bare necks gave each a stained and spare appearance.

Alice wears a clearly marked Lost and Found box reminiscent of her days as an erstwhile curator at The Fictional Museum of Drawing. Her predilection was to exhibit drawings of small brown birds and, of course, mice. Occasionally she prefers to dress in diamonds and pose as a pantomime sheep, not unlike her sister Emily. Their current position is anonymous.

‘Do you remember how we met?’

Alice rummaged in the box …

‘I was drawing and juggling with a score of monkeys in the open air. I had names for them all. They would quarrel. You were passing, working hard not to disturb the chalk and reassured by my benevolence and patience.’

Alice emerged gesturing with a right handed impotent pencil and what looked to be a candle …

‘We rode out in a chariot drawn by a bird … we gave it any name that came into our heads … rather you than me … it hitched to a small wire harness … you admired it very much … another joined in full uniform, he erased the dust from the flags and would sit on the chalks when you sounded your trumpet … yet another went up the stick, as if climbing for a leg of mutton … the prize at the top, as they do at fairs, and when he got to the top he answered …’

Alice quietly wrapped the pencil in Michallet paper, squeezed it of graphite and pickled it in an earthenware jar with honey, fiction and phrases. Then it was either dried in an oven with sage or laid out to dry in the sun during The Dog Days of August. When the pencil was ready, she added punctuation and hair before it was dipped in wax so that it could be lit.

‘I acquired a taste for cutting out ornaments … we were walking around the fair … you spotted a young man shivering … he told you that a profile-cutter in the fair wanted an assistant, and you thought I should do it … I had to tout … mount the likeness on card … Step inside, ladies and gentlemen, and have a correct likeness taken …’

Alice lit the pencil.
‘You built us a small booth … we’ve done up profiles … do you remember the writer without hands … I think he was also born without feet … just the ankle and heel … his father was a farmer … taught him to write in an old-fashioned hand … Alice I'll chop the wood’

Alice at the sight of the burning pencil is rendered motionless.

‘I'll get some milk …’