

Bones.

Issue #1 from The City Fox

Screaming for **BLOOD,** *Crusts* **ANYTHING**

trembling featherless elbows
in the nest's filth.

- Ted Hughes, *Lineage*

June 2013

Edited by Kathy Halliday,
Vicki Bartram & Evie Johnson

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A note from the Editors...

It all started with a fox. It was lying in the garden one April afternoon in Hull, watching us as we watched him. I say *him* because he seemed larger, more weathered and perhaps a little rugged. A smaller one appeared a few days later, a daughter we thought. Having spent most of my life living in the Yorkshire moors, I've seen many rabbits and the occasional deer, sometimes a weasel or even an owl. Yet only once have I seen a fox.

I remember it being around 2am when the screaming started. As I lay beneath the open window, a sharp wail cut through, coming somewhere from beyond the ten-foot that runs the length of the houses. Again, another cry that sounded pained and alien amongst the shouts of revellers falling out of pubs along the avenue. At once, there was something beautiful and yet utterly devastating about the vixen screams. I couldn't settle after that. I sat up in bed and did a head count of our three cats, before closing the bedroom door, just in case.

I feared and loved the foxes in equal measure, and thus *The City Fox* came into being. I wanted to create a place in which intriguing, illusive literature that embraces the darker side of flora and fauna could be celebrated. I wanted to discover poetry and prose exploring the clash of our world with theirs. How do they adapt to a changing landscape they can't defend? How do we treat those whose world we encroach upon? What happens when the fox loses his role of hunter in the countryside and is forced to become a scavenger in the City?

So it is with great pleasure that we bring to you our first issue, **Bones** - an eclectic mix of flora and fauna inspired pieces with a sinister flare. Our contributors have harnessed their inner darkness to help define *The City Fox*, and we hope you'll enjoy their work as much as we do. We'd like to thank all of our contributors and friends for their continuous support.

Stay bright-eyed and bushy tailed,
Kathy Halliday, Vicki Bartram & Evie Johnson.
The Editorial Team



Men like Romeo

Rab Ferguson

Sometimes moving through the city at night
I look over my shoulder and see it
A sparkling knife cutting into London sky
They call it the Shard

I lived there once
When it was still hollow
Slept in a room with only half a floor
Ate scraps of dried bread and cold meat
The builders left behind

I remember
I used to stand on the edge
Where a glass wall was to be installed
And feel the cold dark lift from the city
Carrying its faceted scent
I stared down at the lights
Some stationary, some moving so fast





All against the black
Sights men like me
Were never supposed to understand

Now I steal my meat from bins instead
Sometimes it's still warm
I can't go back
I wouldn't want to
But sometimes
Just rarely
I wish I could see
What I once saw

*"A fox has been discovered living at the top of the UK's tallest skyscraper. The animal, named Romeo by staff, is thought to have entered the 288m (945ft) Shard building at London Bridge through the central stairwell."
(BBC News, 2011)*



A Dance in the Woods

Miles Salter

This story, it is alleged, can be found in a very rare 1873 Argentinian Compendium of Grimm's Fairy Tales. I have never seen it written down in any of the other Grimm collections.

~

Elizabeth lived with her family in a cottage in the woods. They lived on mushrooms and wild honey, and after years of this diet it had become repetitive and dull. Life was cruel, Elizabeth thought at night, as she lay in bed listening to the wind bending the trees all

around them. Her father had died when she was only small and she and her brother, Eduardo, lived with their mother.

Their mother was kind but never stopped worrying about the wolves in the wood, who would prowl around the cottage, sniffing and snuffling and keeping the terrified family awake. 'If we lived in the city,' said Elizabeth, 'there would be pest control units who would deal with this sort of thing.'

One day, the family went with to the town market, where they sold mushrooms and wild honey. A strangely dressed old man in bright clothes smiled at Elizabeth. He was missing several teeth and did not speak the local dialect. He pulled something from his pocket. It was a small wooden whistle, painted green and red. He placed one end in his mouth and notes flew out. The man began to click his heels and turn around, this way and that, as he played. He beckoned to Elizabeth and Eduardo to join in, and they began to dance, shyly at first, but soon with gusto. Their laughter spiralled into the air, and even their mother seemed happy.

The old man took the whistle, winked, and placed it in Elizabeth's hands. Then he wrapped her fingers around it. Elizabeth did not know how to respond, because she had never been given a gift

before. She smiled and nodded. The man smiled and turned away. The family headed home. At the cottage, Elizabeth played whenever the work schedule allowed it. Within a few weeks she was playing sweet tunes of her own invention.

A few nights later, the familiar scratching and snuffling came at the cottage walls and door.

'The Wolves!' cried Elizabeth's mother, terrified. Outside, a howl rose up into the night, long and wild. Some instinct took over in Elizabeth, and, reaching for the whistle, she stood on the cold, dirty floor before the closed door, and began to play. The snuffling and scratching stopped, and all was quiet.

Life went on. Mushrooms were collected and honey was sold. The little family dreamed of a better life but, as they agreed with each other, it could be worse. They had sunlight and a ready source of wood for the fire. But one night, something terrible happened. It was summer, and Eduardo had been collecting mushrooms far from the cottage. Lost in his work, he set off too late for home. The trees cast long shadows across the ground and then the light was lost. He was a mile from home, listening to his mother and sister call his name, when a wolf began to chase him, its long tongue drooping from its jaws. From nowhere, several more wolves joined their

leader. Eduardo dropped his basket of mushrooms and ran as fast as he could for the cottage. With his home in sight, Eduardo cried out. Elizabeth, the whistle in her pocket, ran out to see Eduardo stumbling towards her. She pulled the whistle out and began to play. The sound stopped the wolves in their tracks, close to the cottage, their eyes trained on Elizabeth. She played slowly at first, but then her tunes gathered pace, and the Wolves swung their heads from side to side. Then, as she increased the pace of her jigs and reels, the animals started to lift a paw, then another. As the melodies flowed, the wolves danced and twirled, eyes flashing with glee. In the doorway of the house, Eduardo clung to his mother as they stood watching the scene, the wolves dancing in a circle, and Elizabeth, proud and serene, her fingers playing against the tiny holes of the whistle, her dark hair gleaming in the moonlight.

'Time to come in now, dear,' said Elizabeth's mother, tugging gently at her daughter's dress. But Elizabeth did not respond, move, the music coming steadily from the whistle, as the wolves swayed in the darkness.

Scarecrow Bones

Stephen Watt

It was wise to stay off his patch.
Frayed, thin threads on his back
fooled no-one, and the sagacious Scarecrow
kept a birdcage full of the rotting carcasses
of those who breached their contracts.

A murder of ravens plotted; hatching plans
to profit from crops which he guarded.
Young chicks had been prostituted,
bargained for under red, autumn leaves
near the farmer's smoking cottage,

while thieving magpies' jewellery heists
kept the Scarecrow suitably solvent.



Threats were issued.

A pole was planted, where a dead crow
dangled precariously like a bad attitude.

Reverend owls prayed, afraid to salute
a fallen comrade; in permanent servitude.

One day though, the Scarecrow fell.

A charm of finches put him under a spell
so that the hawks, the jackdaws,
and even a knob of wildfowl
could shred material with beaks.

Morsels of his pumpkin face, strands of muscle
were strained like tangerine lace and bronzed stones

while grain was greedily gulped down
between chipped flakes of the Scarecrow's bones.

The Gatherer

Lesley Quayle

He leaves no tracks
in fields laid flat by winter,
this way and that
over bare, black soil,
pulling his coat closer
to fend off the cruel wind.
He carries a dark lantern,
a blackthorn stick, a sack of bones,
slung lightly, rolled and tied
with sinuous twine.

He moves like fog,
quiet and cold, and each night
field mice, rabbits, voles,
freeze in his wake, hares shiver,
bats and owls retreat
to barns and steeples
as he steps into the air.

Old ones tell of the Gatherer,
come to rob you of your light;
he'll say he's a young man but,
if you dare to meet his sloe-black
gaze, you'll see what he's seen –
a thousand snows, a thousand, thousand
moonless nights, the wheeling stars
dissolving, bearing witness
to his harvesting eyes.

He's the ragged shadow
hung, fluttering, between
darkness and glass, shapeshifter,
night-visitor, come to steal day,
to erase the shining ledge of morning
leaving only endless sleep.



As Children

Stephen Toase

Mothers tell us as children
The shadows will take your breath
Mothers say
Loosen your soul.
Mothers lie.
Here, the shadows preserve
Whispering
Linger
Linger within me and I will caress you
Take the heat from your marrow
Linger
and I will preserve you
Dress you in white finery
Like the web, and the brittle grass

Fathers tell us as children
That the woods will consume you
Fathers say
Teeth barked and ash stained
Fathers lie
Here, the woods shelter
Roaring,
Hide
Hide under bracken from prying hunters
Tuck twigs into your knotted hair
Hide
Burrow into abandoned setts
Past yellowed ribs for your farthingale
And moss to kohl your eyes

Sisters tell us as children
That there are monsters
Sisters say
With mouths of night earth
Sisters lie
Here, these monsters
Are our lovers

Smeared
In crossroad's dirt and panstick
Saying
Come
Come to bed
Come to bed and I will whisper sea shanties
With breath laced with cheap gin
And embrace you with mildewed, tattered
sheets.

The things families tell us as children
Are lies.





This Man Alone

Fran Slater

It's been two years since I buried the last one, late at night while clouds blocked the moon and the only sound was waves splashing on the shore. A few days ago some dog dug its nose deep in the sand, found first a rib, then the whole ribcage, places where the flesh still clung. The police descended. Dug up the entire site around the dunes. Now I wait for a knock at the door.

The deaths have hung over the town since the first one, the families walking the streets like zombies or lepers, everyone sorry for them but scared to approach. But talk was dying down. People had begun to believe that their questions might not have any answers. I was beginning to doubt that they'd ever know my name.

Not anymore.

The husband of those last bones owns the only café in town, serves greasy breakfasts in the morning, soups in the afternoon, closing at night to sit alone in his flat. I ate there before the urges. Before the first offered lift that led to a parked car, a slice with a blade, a hole dug deep in the ground. So I eat there still.

I've ordered bacon, a poached egg because I'm looking after my heart, three rounds of toast with plenty of butter. As the balding café owner scrolls my order on a notepad I look at the photo behind him. Her. Blonde hair tied up in a ponytail, a fine white scar between her narrow blue eyes. He has no idea that I've seen parts of her he'll never see.

After breakfast I walk to the site still cordoned by police tape. Kids can be heard down the beach, but by the dunes people are quiet, huddled in groups, arms wrapped around each other's shaking shoulders. Probably relatives of the first or the second, the third or fourth.

Someone taps my shoulder. "You left this," he says. It's the husband, his apron flapping, his cheeks made redder by the vicious wind. He's holding my mobile. The only numbers on it are my mother's and that of a brother I never ring.

"Thank you," I say, putting it in my pocket.

"Did you know any of them?" he asks. He's staring at the spot where only a few days ago a dog gnawed on a part of the woman he loves. "The women. Were any of them your friend?"

"Not really. I know your wife died; this must all be very hard for you."

He wipes his cheek with the heel of his hand. "That dog did us a favour. At least now I know she's never coming home."

I don't know what to say. His hand is on my shoulder and I can feel that he's trembling.

"Do you think they'll find who did this?" I ask.

"He's long gone."

I cough, dislodging something invisible that's stuck in my throat. All this time and the town still doesn't know who I am.

"He might be closer than you think," I say. But I say it quietly; I'm not sure he hears. He walks away with both his hands to his face.

On a sleepless night I take my camera from the drawer, flick through photos that have waited three years to be discovered. I leave it on the table, the last image showing. The light shines a beam onto the ceiling.

Walking to the beach through a field where the recent heat has dried the mud to desert-like cracks that shine in the moonlight, I try to picture each last moment but all I see is hers.

At the dunes there's a sound I wasn't expecting. Sobbing. Kneeling in the sand is the husband, his body rocking, the moonlight illuminating bumps in his skull. I think of stepping away but don't. I watch him. Thinking even if none of them know it, I did this, this is down to me, and this man alone, shaking pathetically, is only a tiny part of it all.

I did this.

I smile and take a step backwards.

That's when he lifts his head and his eyes meet mine.

Law vs. Art

William Doreski

Erosion reveals a skeleton
buried in the riverbank.
Almost fossilized, it's older
than New England puritan
culture, probably the relic
of a Pequot lost on a hunting trip.
We unearth without malforming it,
but when we tote it into sunlight,

it pops like a porcelain bubble.
Every bone reduced to shrapnel
no larger than a dime. You shrug off
this small disaster, but climbing
into the back seat of my Saab
you cough to hide your emotions,
as you always do. Let's donate
the fragments to the museum.



The curators will chastise us
for disturbing the bones but
they can't afford to sponsor digs
and would have let the river
carry away the remains. Why
do you always ride in the back seat?
Afraid I'll touch you while driving
and veer off the road in shock?

This year maybe we'll attend
the conference on Law Versus Art
and bring the exploded skeleton
to prove our thesis. Meanwhile
you hug your own skeleton
to yourself, padding it with flesh
enough to keep curiosity
from overwhelming our friendship.

River

Vicki Bartram

She used to run outside to catch the rain
on her tongue, plodding wellybobs through mud
and puddles alongside the rushing river.

On calm days she'd stay inside as the river
slid by, mourning the torrents of rain
yet to clag the banks in clods of mud.

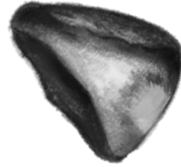
She was my love at only seven. Making mud-
pies we'd huddle in our handmade river-
den, trying to drink the sweetness of the rain.

Rain fell as we laid her under mud. Buried her by the river.



Epithalamium

Tanya Nightingale



This is the shortest season.
Untried girls parading their dresses
Shake themselves free before the night's over.

So spring snow falls from fruitless trees,
Lining the paths of Taylors' and Adventurers',
Heaped along curbs and in gutters.



I am Primavera:
Petals spill from my hair, my mouth.
An open carriage turns my corner.
The bridesmaids, billowing sky, catch real confetti,
And the bride starts her life with largesse.



The Color of Road Kill

Anne Woodworth

Flesh is not an easy color. Our furs
have peeled and left us bare,

exposed to eyes through years of blur
and unclear thought. Last week,

a white squirrel lay bloody-mouthed and dead
between the yellow stripes that split

the county road for those who would go south
and those to north. Pride of western Carolina,

he'd been as white as the crows that glided down
to him were black. Now skinned of almost all his fur,

and slack, too, the squirrel lay a simple grayish-blue,
and taste was all the same to the hungry crows

that pecked and stripped the corpse, and chewed.



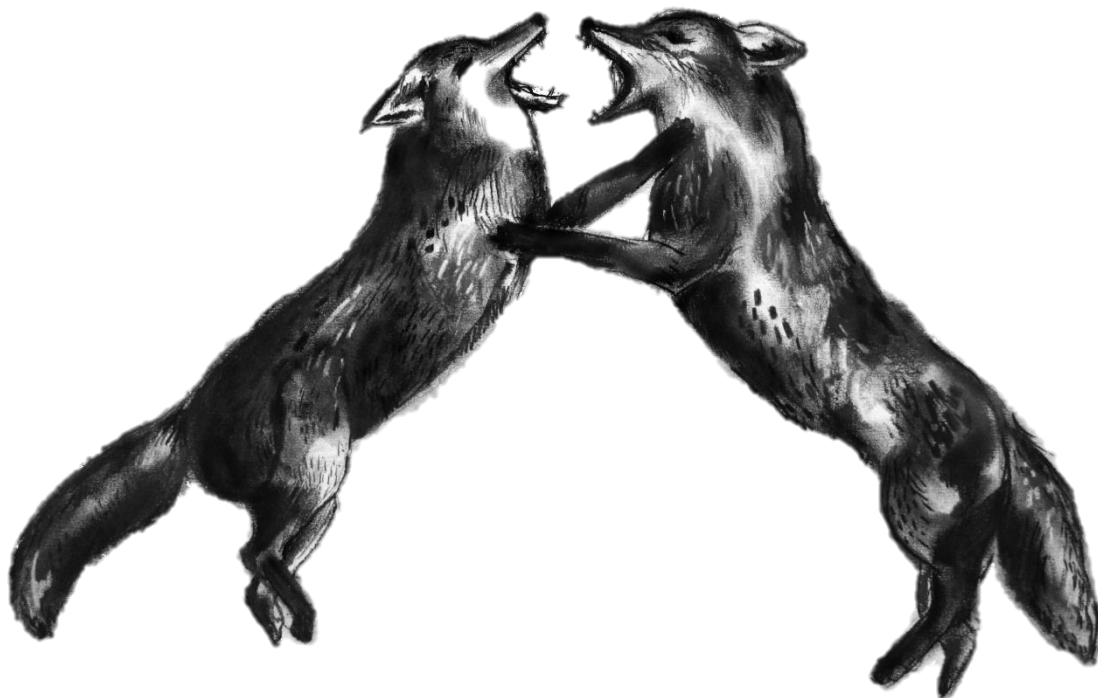


Deer, oh Deer

Anthony Ward

The only time I ever saw a deer alive was when I killed it.
It charged locomotive out in front of me
Wondering at what wolf with such feline grace had
lunged into it,
As if I'd punched dead a dancer across the stage-
Such a striking creature staring at me with bloated eyes,

I had to strap it to the bonnet and take it home,
Where I propped it upright in the living room
Hoping to capture the life out of it
As I painstakingly painted its sinewy smile...
Only to end up looking as lifeless as the real thing.



Captivation

Anthony Ward

We no longer listen,
Only hear what we want to hear,
With selective hearing
Tuning into transmissions.

Titillation and mutilation
Melding with marvel
Gratuitous images of exposed flesh
Mollycoddling us from the outside
world

Where vampire-like shrieks of foxes
in heat
And lycanthropic wails of clashing
cats
Are drowned out by the screens
That captivate us.

Metamorphosis

Gary Robinson

night and its
own fire, mute in
pockets of dark
robes

 behind
the boughs a bird
curls through a shape
of sleep, blood smoking
in low chants of minute
heart song

'seeing' all this on my
way upstairs for water
at 3 a.m.

 when a window
ignites the backyard there

is no fatal glance

for this world
has burnt a million times
released in a
fossil geometry of
black flames

until morning flares
cools with
first light,

footsteps



The Sow Bear and the Salmon

Kathy Halliday

Moss drenched solid mass
with lumping chest, savoured
a choice bite with teeth, held fast.

She was a forest devoured,
a fabled scavenger of old
that fertilized the flexing and enamoured

earth, welling in the mist of mould
that should be wild, could be tamed,
or left half eaten on the fold.





She of many forms, of many names,
that reforms tooth by tooth, begins to maul
with claw gutting gill, is forever framed

by a heaving outline against the falls,
that grunting, gathers in her fleshy haul.



Hutched

David Hartley

On the first day they buy the hutch. The latest design; impenetrable Perspex, wood-effect steel, scent reduction valves, waste siphons, feely-holes automatically airlocked into place when stroking and/or feeding is finished. Solar-powered lighting with one corner bathed in shadow for hiding. Metal rim charged by moonlight to deliver a powerful shock to any midnight fox looking for a meal. High cost but low maintenance. Nothing gets in or out; perfectly secure and a compact size to fit neatly into even the smallest garden. Optional heating add-on for when winter comes.

He forks out the money and two shop assistants carry it to his car - he shifts Easter eggs from the boot so they can fit it in. Only then do they go back inside the shop and buy a rabbit.

~

On the second day she is reaching in to give it a carrot and when her arm comes back out she starts scratching it. The rabbit, Flopsy, is the cutest one the shop had. Female, probably. Nicely patterned fur, twitchy nose, white bob tail, lopping ears. It looks happy to be safe now; secure and owned, snuggling into sawdust, like it would in the wild.

But she can't stop scratching, the girl, and by her bedtime her skin is red raw and breaking out in blotches. He pumps her full of drugs and keeps her indoors. She spends the night building up a furious resentment to her new pet, vows never to touch it again.

He, her Dad, checks the internet. He can get an add-on, apparently; a hypoallergenic

filter that layers the insides of the hutch and protects against the creature's fur whenever touching is required or desired.

He orders it for next-day delivery.

~

On the third day the filter is fixed in place while Flopsy wriggles in his arms. The girl watches from her bedroom window. It's a grey day so she won't come outside.

The delivery men take less than an hour to apply the filter and reseal the hutch. The rabbit seems happier now. It hops from one end to the other, sniffing. He slots a handful of carrots in for it, a big handful, just in case he doesn't get chance to feed it tomorrow, because of the football and that.

~

On the fourth day it's the football. Flopsy spends the day alone.

~

On the fifth day, the daughter is persuaded back outside. She watches Flopsy

for a bit, tapping at the Perspex. Flopsy doesn't really respond. The rabbit spends most of the time at the back of the hutch in the shadow, hunched up and quiet. The daughter quickly gets bored, asks for a puppy instead.

The man says 'no' but thinks; maybe.

The daughter stamps back inside, angry, and the man watches the rabbit for a while longer while he mows the lawn. He slots in another carrot. Flopsy doesn't respond. She must feel overwhelmed by the size of the hutch, he thinks.

He checks the manual. There is a size reduction mechanism. He finds the control panel in the base and types in the required dimensions. The hutch whirrs as it reconstitutes itself.

Two hours later it is half the size it was. Much cosier. Flopsy seems happier now as she shifts herself to another corner and takes a bite from the carrot.

He watches her eat and checks the manual again. He can get an add-on that automatically feeds it that muesli stuff twice every day. He orders it for next-day delivery.

~

On the sixth day he fits the feeder and fills it with six month's worth of food. It comes with a free condenser that extracts moisture from the air so the rabbit can have a fresh supply of water every day. He fits that too.

He steps back, admires the construction; the organic whole of it. He reads up about the other add-ons. The heater. The CCTV. The vitamin mist. The hologram companion. The moult reverser. He orders them all, proud of himself for some indistinct reason. His wife would've been impressed.

In the afternoon, he takes his daughter to the puppy farm.

~

On the seventh day he fits a few of the gadgets while his daughter plays with Tyler, the staffie.

He doesn't notice Flopsy in the corner, the dark corner, the shadow corner, twitching her nose at him, her ears thrust forward at the sound of his banging, at the sounds of the daughter squealing, at the sounds of Tyler barking.

He switches the hologram on and an image of a wild rabbit appears next to Flopsy. It shifts through a loop of running, grooming, and sleeping. To Flopsy it looks like diffractions of seismic light, hazeform and spectral, unscented; a dimensional eruption slicing through the chrono-string to splay itself flat but distended somehow across the interior - intangible and silent. She can't make ear nor bob tail of it, but it is precisely what she has been waiting for.

Tyler spends hours watching her, slobbering. He gets a shock on his nose as the moon comes up.

~

On the fifteenth day, he checks on her and she is gone.

~

On the fifteenth day, she awaits the solar charge, a withered foot resting on the compacted chute of the feeder, ready to pull. She has rewired it into a circuit switch, shutting off the food supply. She has reconfigured the arm of the condenser also to redirect the water for engine coolant, sacrificed a third of her space in the hack of the resize mechanism to establish a power grip on the space-time grid. The weak October sunlight coats her eyes; she tries to breathe it in for strength. Her organs are failing her; a slow thumping heart, wilting kidneys. She can feel them shuddering their last against her bones; can feel the structure of her skeleton quivering

as it strains to bolster her frame. She focuses instead on the temperature, counting off each degree as the morning warms up.

Beneath her, diagrams and formulae she has etched into the hypoallergenic filter using her claws and teeth. The results dictate that she must hold on longer; just a little longer.

The conductors of the hologram hum as they take in the stores of electricity from the outer shell. She raises one back foot and thumps down the compaction of waste in the clogged siphon. It is the balance; the ballast she needs for accurate landing.

And she waits; eyes on the bedroom window beyond the Perspex, beyond the garden.

Finally, as the house itself begins to wake its stretching inhabitants, she can take no more. She flips the switch and the hutch disappears.

~

On the fifteenth day, the daughter wakes to a thumping heart as her wardrobe explodes and her bed collapses. For half a moment she is suspended in air and her stomach plummets and her mouth drops to a scream which is never heard because a hutch, all wires and smells and dried piles of faeces, appears and encloses her body and voice into a tight package and takes them both, in a pulse, to somewhere else; somewhere far, far away.

~

On the fifteenth day, he checks and she is gone.

~

On the fifteenth day, she lands face down in grass and the hutch breaks away from her and disappears into the ether, and then to nothingness. She sits up and looks. A wide field, stretching to every horizon, describing the curve of the world, fuzzing into the crest of the sky.

In between her and that distance, rabbits emerge from warrens, curious. Some creep forward and stand on their hind legs for a better look.

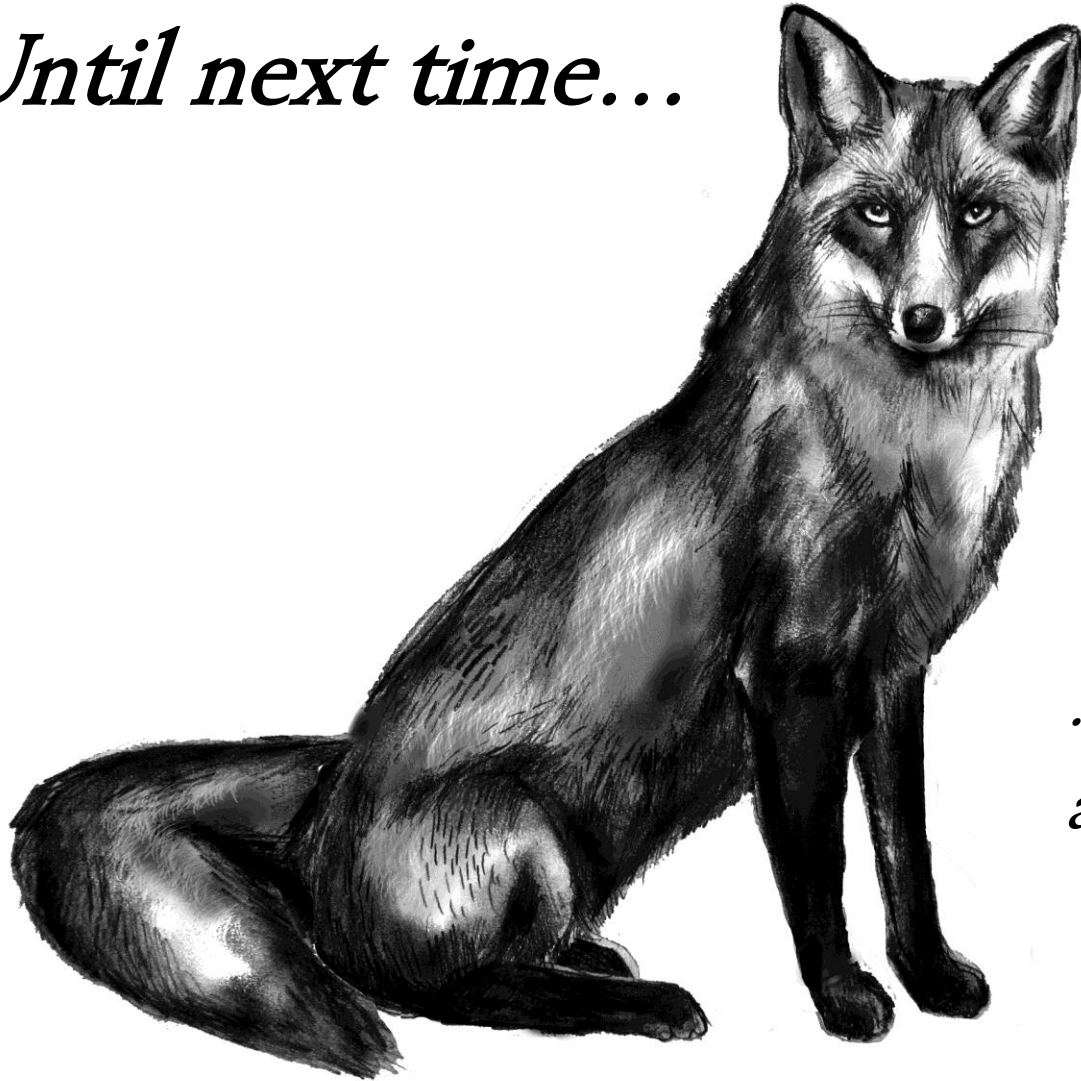
She watches them watching her watching them.

Some start the morning's forage, others thump out messages to companions, but their activities are muted while this new presence sits observing them like some hunter or rival, some kind of threat, some kind of foe.

But it doesn't move, she doesn't move, and as the sun reaches its peak, the rabbits return to their warrens to sleep through the heat, leaving her alone.



Until next time...



*...Stay bright-eyed
and bushy tailed!*