



Magical creatures

AN APPRECIATION OF THE FOX

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Yesterday, I came home to find my cat sitting on the back porch looking out into the garden, side by side with a small, red fox. They both turned to look at me, faces over their left shoulders like old Hollywood sirens. With a swish, the little fox bounded down the path and was gone.

Without meaning to, I've ascribed a personality to this fox in my garden. I've laughed at the two faces peering at me as though I'd disturbed them mid conversation. I am used to anthropomorphised foxes. I blame Roald Dahl. What seems to tie stories about foxes together is an overarching sense of the world not being as we really know it, of magical realism – as it is wont to do – offering explanations where rationality cannot. But what is it that a wiry, scrawny, urban fox is able to explain?

No other animal has adapted to city life quite so readily as the fox, but it's more than adaptation. Cities at night are full of foxes; foxes who will stare you down in the middle of a dark street, foxes who scream at the bottom of the garden all through the night, foxes who dig through rubbish bags to get at your leftovers. Foxes are thriving in cities, and this makes it easy for us to feel as though we share something with them.

Some UK cities host around 22 foxes per square kilometre, so this feeling that foxes are following me

around is probably not just a feeling. If anything, it's more a case of my following them. I text an amicable ex with cheery vulpine updates: "The hoppy fox has come back!" When I excitedly tell a friend about the fox I interrupted loping across London's Woolwich Common, she one-ups me with a fox sitting by her front gate. Maybe these stories, too, add to the feeling that we are sharing something; these urban spaces are not ours, and we are not the only creatures bold enough to stake them out as our own.

Foxes in art are portrayed as 'other', but never quite other enough. They're sly, cunning, intelligent. They have guile. Foxes are the bolder version of our own cowardly selves. They plot and plan, and encourage us to do the same. They thwart our efforts to constrict them; they refuse to be outfoxed by man. The idea that the fox is a trickster means that it is also capable of transformation, standing on another border; that of magic and reality.

We do not tell stories of badgers sitting on our doorsteps, there are not families of hedgehogs sitting on a grassy bank when we venture to the 24-hour supermarket at 3am. If someone told you they'd seen one of these things, you wouldn't believe them. But a fox? A fox is believable. They're both inquisitive and intelligent, and we see something in them that hides under our own surface; something not quite tame, not quite domesticated, not quite fully adapted to having left nature behind. 