

The Vanes of Foxes

by Natasha Whyte

I followed a few lengths behind you trying perhaps not so desperately to keep up. I saw you just over the hillock on the dune-side slope[1] and I looked at you and thought you were a red fox stain on a blue hill[2]. I wanted you to slow down, to move at a playful speed and coast for a bit before steering north. I know that north means uphill and I have wished for a bit of west. I am a red and white fox; I cannot always go north and neither do I want to. I have tried and am tired by north. I am guided by Zephyrus; I am a creature of habit; I am repetition; I am dehydrated; I am drunk on your pheromones; I am the single precious moment the poets tried to call life and you are a fox. If you are a fox then I am also a fox.

Your red mouth is a great cave laughing into the sky that is open and begs for your songs[3]. You were engineered to be nothing but a fox that sings to the sky and to me. You were born with a knack for sending me to and often over the edge and born with a feel for keeping me on the scent that hauls me back again. You nose around in the dark night and take sleepers and eat them and hide the feathers. You circle and loop and double-cross me[4] although I know, I know of it all and I have seen the words of songs that made the crying sky forgive you and I have also forgiven you because you are a fox.

Hawks are city animals, like foxes. You are full of sly iniquity. From the grove in which you had lived for three years you broke through the hedges into Chauntecleer's yard[5]. You cannot stay out of the city but you can only fool the cock, the cat and the ram for so long[6] before they send you, naked, to a cul-de-sac where you will be forced to remain until you cannot sing like the hawks that circle above. I will help them strangle you until your black coat and tail falls to pieces around your paws if ever you forget that you are a fox.

My mother saw a fox, behind a church, headed north. Scraggly, the thing was. He didn't, no, he didn't look very good. I don't know if it was the same one, he was looking scraggly then and I doubt that

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he would have lasted this long. My grandfather says that a fox has already died once he begins to look like he's dying. This is because foxes are vain. Don't ever forget, that you are a fox.

If a fox dies in the woods and maggots eat his corpse, the fox has multiplied and become domesticated. Silver foxes are monogamous from December to April. According to the Kinsey Report, every average fox you know much prefers her lovey-dovey to court when the temperature is low[7]. Foxes hire babysitters when they have large litters; you cannot watch kits — you are too intent on going north. You are not part of our leash. You are not a good fox to us. You are a kitsune[8]; the raven and the fish are idiots compared with thee[9].

Belyaev taught you to sing[10]; he taught you to guide the notes that spawn in your lively throat in a beautiful succession or call it a progression from belly to tongue that floats into our fox ears. I did not want to know your name because I knew you were a fox on the run[11]. You are a carnivore and you are not tame, no, you are not tame. You are not the initial experiment — you are the final product. And I know foxes mate for life because they're in love; don't let the pups have ideas because they might want a real life[12]. You cannot always go north because you will often be alone. If you do go north alone you must be wary, Harasta has set traps that the kits have mocked and I have seen[13]. You, with sharp ears, may have fooled the badger out of his home but you have not dug a foxhole big enough for both of us to sleep in and you have not seen the bear claws that tear tender flesh from black, subtle paws. You cannot go as a white fox from that place, you can only go red.

I am still learning how to be a fox. I am several lengths behind you today. You're pulling ahead and I don't know if I can keep up or if I even want to because you're trying to be faster than me. This game you started cannot be stopped now it has begun because I have too much to learn. You're trying to pull ahead. Maybe I'm stuck on a jog, maybe I can't push into a canter, maybe I can only sniff through patches of moss while you dig holes beneath the limbs of trees and focus pricked ears on the distant sounds the mistral

carries to you, though I am stuck on the west wind, looking always to the sun, I move across the Earth in lines my mother carved, the vixen of her time, nose smudged with green and black, peeking through or around and sometimes over the summer flowers. She knew the sharp, hot stink of fox[14] and so do you but I am still learning. You are a classic case and you run politely to our earth[15] past the animals in the country, waving an erect tail in delight at your own agility.

Hevelius was certain you are always eating goose[16] but I am certain that instead you are simply plucking feathers methodically with your tongue, teasing each from the porous skin of the poor bird and rolling her between your teeth. I know this because you cannot have the grapes that are just out of reach on the vine[17]. You know as well as me you cannot have them — you want them still and must settle for the goose. You keep her eternally in your mouth and she is part of you and you are both heading north for the bragging rights. You are not Catholic - you cannot teach this goose to be Catholic[18]. Outside your old foxhole, an apple core, a chicken bone and a goose feather[19] sit in a pile to remind you why you left.

You are my fox affair: what does it show? It is autumn sun, that precise and lazy keeper of space and time[20] and this I know because I have seen you on your spurious deathbed waiting to bask in the lap of three luxuries[21]. For you I'm only a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, we'll need each other. I'll be the only fox in the world for you[22]. You are a fox and therefore I am also a fox and I am only a fox for you.

I will not sleep in the foxhole with you tonight. I cannot share this hole with you because this hole you dug for both of us is big enough sometimes only for you. When you go north do you dig other foxholes or do you steal into the holes of other foxes? When you go north I sleep well and silently until the dawn and am not disturbed by the wind.

But I am not well without the sharp, hot stink of fox that you know and my mother knew and now I know because you have taught me to be a fox. Everything that makes you a fox also makes me a fox.

You are a fox and I am a fox and we might run in different directions and sleep poorly when we sleep together but we are foxes and we are vain creatures so we insist against the wind to sleep in the same foxhole. But I laugh when your whiskers are tangled and I laugh when you hop playfully across a stream and fall into the water sometimes on purpose but usually by accident. I have fox ears to hear the songs your fox mouth sings and I have fox fur to feel the closeness of your fox body when it is pressed against mine when you return from north. We have only vanes and vanity to guide us and we beguile because we are foxes.

[1] From Cleopatra Mathis' poem "Dead Fox".

[2] A reference to Robert Lowell's poem "Skunk Hour".

[3] A reference to Anne Sexton's poem "The Double Image".

[4] Adapted from Carl Sandburg's poem "Wilderness".

[5] Adapted from Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales*.

[6] A reference to Stravinsky's opera *Renard*.

[7] From "Too Darn Hot" sung by Ella Fitzgerald.

[8] In Japanese culture, a kitsune is an anthropomorphic fox, often a woman.

[9] From the Grimm' Brother's story "The Sea Hare"

[10] Dmitri Belyaev was a Russian scientist who single-handedly engineered and bred an entirely new breed of domesticated foxes based on gene isolation and behavioural mating strategies.

[11] Adapted from Sweet's song "Fox on the Run"

[12] Adapted from Born Ruffian's song "Foxes Mate for Life"

[13] A reference to Leoš Janáček's opera *The Cunning Little Vixen*.

[14] Reference to Ted Hughes' poem "The Thought Fox"

[15] Adapted from Margaret Atwood's poem "The animals in that country".

[16] The constellation Vulpecula (Latin for "little fox") is thought to show a fox with a goose in its mouth. Johannes Hevelius was first to create a depiction of it.

[17] A reference to Aesop's fable "The Fox and the Grapes".

- [18] In the 14th century AD, the Catholic Church released propaganda to the public which depicted foxes dressed as monks or priests preaching to geese as was outlined in *The History of Reynard the Fox* compiled and edited by Henry Morley.
- [19] From Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr. Fox*
- [20] Adapted from Lajos Parti Nagy's poem "Fox Affair at Sunset"
- [21] A reference to Ben Jonson's play *Volpone*.
- [22] From Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*

