

In this extract the writer describes the memory of an encounter with a fox

1. We all have myriad memories. Some of these look back at important or unusual events; some are connected to experiences we feel changed us as people or helped us to grow. Some memories, like the one I am about to share with you, feel like they capture a moment lost in time, when everything was different.
2. The first time I saw a fox that was not in a children's book or tv programme was in a place called Fox Cove Wood. You would think, perhaps, that the name might have created some anticipation in me, but I remember being startled to spot him – because foxes were always known as 'Mr Fox' by the farmers where I lived – skittering across the edge of a field. Imagine weaving a red-orange ribbon between your fingers and pulling quickly; this is how he looked skimming between the fence posts. The field was full of sheep, and he seemed dangerously close, taunting them even.
3. We were in the woods that day to collect conkers, for no real reason except that conkers are shiny and pleasing to hold in your hand. We cycled there for three days in a row and collected over a thousand. At home, we washed them in buckets and laid them in methodical rows in the garden, admiring the effect of the rich, deep brown against the sodden grass. It must have been October half-term, and I wonder now whether my next memory must therefore have been around the same time, although I recall the events as further apart in time.
4. I say October, because the sky was a consistent matte grey, with a slight smell of woodsmoke in the air and the cawing of rooks. I was alone at the back of the garden, which looked across a field to a small church. That morning, I do recall, I had seen the village hunt preparing to leave. This is where a group of people on horses take packs of hounds to hunt a fox. I have always found this barbaric, and it was banned by the government a long time ago, which suggests this memory must be even older. I know, however, that I was not thinking about this, but waiting for something to fill the empty stage of the field and the rest of my afternoon.
5. I was holding the top of the low fence in my hands and staring absent-mindedly when the fox darted through the field. I think I gasped, because he turned his head when he was immediately in front of me. As though we had arranged a meeting, he drew himself up, curled his tail around his paws and sat facing me. I almost expected him to speak. He was the most incredible glossy copper colour, the light and the dew glinting off his paws and snout.
Why was he running through the field in broad daylight? The urgency of the hunt suddenly returned to me.

'Come here!' I whispered as loudly as I dared, gesturing with my hand for him to jump the fence. 'There!' I pleaded, pointing at my dad's shed, thinking I could hide him until it was too dark for the hunters to see. I had a brief vision of horses and dogs crowding the garden, following his scent, and thought that this might get me in trouble. It seemed necessary to take the risk.

6. The fox continued staring at me as though he were evaluating my proposal. In my memory, he is the same size as me, although this cannot be true. In that moment I felt desperately worried for him. He seemed to find me amusing, a brief novelty, despite what I took to be the seriousness of the situation. I almost feel he smiled.
Suddenly the meeting was finished. He flicked his head and continued to run in a perfectly straight line, passing under the hedge and away. The field was empty again.

7. I live in London now and often see foxes trotting down the street, rifling through rubbish bins or playing on the edges of train tracks. They seem smaller and more dishevelled than the fox in my memory; poor imitations, far too accustomed to humans, a constant reminder of how different life in the city is to life in the countryside. For a long time, I wondered what had happened to that Mr Fox. I worried that I should have tried harder to persuade him to stay.

8. I found myself thinking this recently as I stared absent-mindedly out of my bedroom window, looking vaguely into my next-door neighbour's garden. A familiar snout poked under their fence, followed by the body of the small fox that sniffs around their garden and who occasionally, I have witnessed, jumps on their trampoline. He always arrives at ten o'clock at night via the same route.

9. Yet for the first time I recognised that certainty of purpose. My Mr Fox must have known where he was going. His straight line across the field would have taken him directly back to Fox Covet Wood, where the trees were too crowded for horses and dogs to chase him. His calmness was because he had done this – outfoxing the hunt – maybe a hundred times before.

10. I felt a sudden calmness myself, watching the fox below. Sighing, I stroked my hand across the window ledge. The smaller fox, hitherto occupied by checking the flowerbeds for food, jolted and turned his head towards me. We stood, him looking up and me looking down, appraising each other for a moment. He took a step forward.

