

**Foxes**  
**by Jamieson Ridenhour**

I saw a fox in London,  
standing stock still  
on the cobbled roadway

that runs under London Bridge.  
I had been walking too late,  
looking for London—the one Dickens

wrote, the one I crossed  
an ocean to find. It was late,  
after midnight, and the steps

beside London Bridge were old  
and steep and cooling—  
here Noah Claypole eavesdropped

on Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (betrayal  
and darkness and the river-mist).  
Earlier I had wandered the Borough,

found the old Marshalsea wall,  
laid flat my pilgrim hand—  
cool stone on my hot, hot palm—

but here I was, hours later,  
still walking, still looking.  
London compels us to walk,

forces us flaneur, voyeur,  
strings us along and shifts us  
somewhere in the seeing.

Deep in that labyrinth, our feet  
are quills in an urban inkwell,  
rewriting myth and memory

until sunset and skyline plunge  
us down rabbit-holes where  
we quicken into possible.

When I came down off  
Nancy's steps in the wee hours,  
feeling the lateness, the river chill

of a big foreign city, apprehensive of

course, but not yet ready to train  
it back to the B&B in the suburbs,

there was this fox. The cobbled  
street under his paws was a slice  
of Victoria, a pocket of time trapped

beneath the bridge, older than I,  
and grittier. The fox stood profiled  
against darkness, staring at something

off to my left. To my right leaned  
the smoking slope of a man,  
glow of cigarette, cap pulled low,

shabby and native and dark-inured.  
We three held the street. Tableauxed  
in the streetlight shadows, we

fellow travelers held breath,  
held potential until I took the last  
step into the scene, and the soft scrape

of my foot served a suitable  
spellbreaker and the fox vanished.  
I mean, of course, that it ran, sprinted,

into the darkness of the underpass,  
a dirty little fox with a grimy  
matted tail. I turned to the troll

under the bridge, overcame  
my fear because I felt the need  
to capture and quantify, to reify

the moment by saying something  
profound. I said, "Was that a fox?"  
and the swarthy face lit up

as he inhaled. Without looking  
at my question he barked a laugh.  
"Yeah," he said, "that's central London, innit?"

And I understood him. It was only later

I learned that foxes are a common  
urban blight, scavenging Soho trash bins

and thriving on rats and refuse. That what  
my Cockney Marlin Perkins was trying  
to tell me had nothing to do with wonder,

was more a knowing shrug about vermin:  
“What you gonna do? We’re overrun.”  
That I hadn’t stood for a moment

in a fairy tale, that Reynard  
hadn’t looked me in the eye  
before scampering off to commit

trickery and literature. And what  
I felt at this knowledge was not  
chagrin but disappointment

and confirmation. The world  
is solid and seeable and everything  
else is fiction. Don’t let them outfox

you—the writers—they dream  
and dream and can’t feel  
the concrete under their feet.

And then, eighteen months, four  
thousand miles away, I took  
the trash to the curb in suburban

South Carolina and stood  
barefoot by the big green bin,  
working my toes into the gravel

at the edge of my driveway.  
On the fresh black top  
of the warm soupy night

stood a fox. He was in front  
of the neighbor’s house, still  
and staring in the twilight.

And though I knew he was no trick  
of failing light, he seemed  
insubstantial as coal-smoke. I stood

straining my eyes long after  
he vanished, the gravel cobbling  
into the sole of my pawing foot.