



The View From Heifer Hill—July 2023



Watching Foxes in Troubling Times

TWO INCIDENTS in early June reminded me that our dystopian future is no longer in the future. The first, the deep frost in mid-May, hit the young beech trees in my woods especially hard. While other trees recovered, these saplings are still struggling to put out a few tiny leaves. Young beeches usually illuminate the understory with green, but this year, frosted leaves cling to the twigs giving the eye-level forest a brown wash. The second incident was the stalled low pressure that drew the smoke from Canadian fires across our damp landscape. When I went outside, I could smell the smoke from those distant flames.

Shortly thereafter, in a fog of sleep deprivation and gloom, I saw a gray fox trotting up the BEEC driveway with a dark object in her mouth. I switched windows and saw her turn toward the carriage shed thirty feet away—and then a popping corn of kits emerged from the dark space beneath the building. One quick little kit loped swiftly away with the quarry—an unlucky bird.

I spent the next several days sitting before that window watching the show. I fell deeply in love with those four (or was it three? Or five?) joy-

ful pups. The kits charged up into the lilac bushes, leapt down on their siblings, flopped on their backs to attack each other from below, and played mad games of tag.

While watching fox kits, I became aware of how densely inhabited that neighborhood is. A cottontail rabbit, many birds, and several chipmunks went about their lives within sight of that den of fierce little carnivores. One day, a woodchuck strode up the driveway, passed the entrance to the fox den, then paused, turned, and headed very deliberately under the building and into the foxes' lair. Within seconds, I saw another woodchuck head under the building in a different spot. Were the woodchucks ganging up to vanquish the foxes? I really did worry about all parties involved. Later, I heard a terrible squealing, and when I looked out I saw the dust rising over the tumbling ball of warring woodchucks. The skirmish was brief, with one fleeing. These were the two seen earlier, and they must have just been so intent on their territorial dispute that they considered a den of foxes of no consequence.

The wee foxes put me in mind of a favorite essay, *The Innocent Fox*, by Loren Eiseley. He introduces his own fox experience thus:

"I am not the first man to have lost his way only to find, if not a gate, a mysterious hole in a hedge that a child would know at once led to some other dimension at the world's end." Eiseley discovered his portal after a night, fogbound, on a beach. When the sun rose to dispel the fog, the sunlit ears of a fox kit revealed that he had spent the night crouched by its den. The lone kit was too young to know about danger, and invited Eiseley to play "with the innate courtesy of its two forepaws placed appealingly together, along with a mock shake of the head." Eiseley accepted the invitation, and for several minutes he became a fox kit, romping on all fours. There, on the other side of the hedge, Eiseley wrote, "The universe was swinging in some fantastic fashion to present its face, and the face was so small that the universe itself was laughing."

He gave the pup a final roll and then he sprinted back toward home. As I watched "my" pack at play, I reread *The Innocent Fox*. Eiseley described his tussle with the kit as "the gravest and most meaningful act I shall ever accomplish...."

My foxes moved to a different den after about a week, as foxes will. The lift they gave my mood stayed on. The beech leaves in my woods are still brown. Canada is still experiencing the worst fire season on record. This tendency to climb from despair may well be part of humanity's downfall. Still, whether this world ends in fire or ice, it has hosted fox pups and wonder.