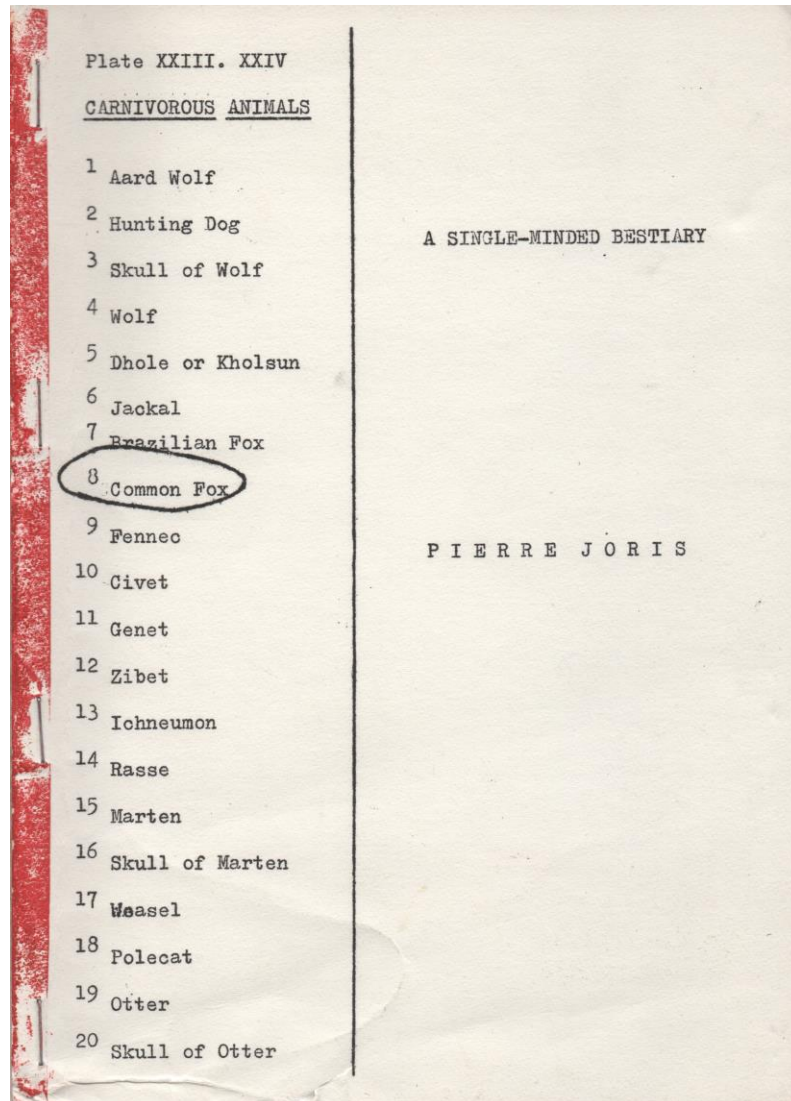


Pierre Joris



A BOOK OF FOXES

**Metambesen
Annandale-on-Hudson
2015**

A BOOK OF FOXES
is the thirty-fifth
in a series of texts and chapbooks
published by Metambesen.

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In Lieu of a Preface:

*The quick red fox
jumps
over the lazy brown bear*

This small book is a quick gathering of work dating from the early seventies for the “Single-minded Bestiary” poems, and from the early eighties for the “Retelling.” The occasion was given a few days ago by old friend and collaborator Jerome Rothenberg who wrote asking for “a line or two, or a sentence or two, from your poesie concerning Renard or fox as trickster, or fox as fox, to accompany a Lapp ‘fox poem’ in [the new, revised & enlarged forthcoming edition of] *Technicians of the Sacred*.” I located my one surviving copy of the “Single-Minded Bestiary” published as a mimeographed chapbook in 1974 by Mike Dobbie’s *poet & peasant* press, and the translation of a chapter of the medieval *Roman de Renart* which JR had in fact published in the second series of *Alcheringa* magazine.

I didn’t find a “line or two, or a sentence or two,” but remembered Charlotte Mandell & Robert Kelly’s kind invitation to contribute to the *Metambesen* series. And so here it is: *A Book of Foxes*. I never wrote the epic (luckily though, I now believe, as it would have been too Gunslinger-esque — just hear me trying out Ed Dorn’s ear & moves in the “Prologue”) that was to follow said prologue and in which the fox, sent into exile by the Euro-Lion king, hops the caravel of one Chris. Columbus to make America as a stowaway — & meet up with his cousin coyote for a series of wonderful adventures.

The fox has been my totem animal since childhood (the first series of poems tell of this) and when — four years ago — my son Miles turned eighteen and rushed off to have his first tattoo, he had images of his family inscribed on his shoulder blade & I, of

course, turned up with a fox's head. In 1974, when I put the little single-minded bestiary together in London, Ted Berrigan saw the ms. and gave me the following *quatrième de couverture*: “What we have here is ANIMAL MAGIC. Pierre Joris is the fox crossing the water; he is the forest from which the fox came and to which the fox goes; he is the hawk circling above it in the sun; and he is the foxfire. He is also the grandfather clock watching it all from the corner of the room with an unwinking eye; both hands pointing up.” Not sure if the magic worked, but over the next year when I'd go from my place in Tooting Broadway up to Brightlingsea, Essex to spend time with Ted and Alice Notley, I'd drive across Tooting Commons at night & would often meet up with a fox appearing suddenly in the headlights, crossing the road & boogying into the bushes. Ah, I'd think, fox had not only returned (escaped?) from his medieval adventures in forests now largely pruned and pressed down & into acculturated human overreach, but has moved into the human polis, learning new ways. My “red one” was clearly on his way to become what the Luxembourg writer Michel Rodange described him as in his 19C epic *Rene'ert* poem: a “Fuus am Frack and a Maansgre'sst” — a fox in tailcoat, and tall as any man.

Sorrentinostan, August 29, 2015

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The First Fox Poems

*pour le Docteur Roger Joris
chasseur & chirurgien extraordinaire*

64. WEI CHI / BEFORE COMPLETION

THE J U D G M E N T
BEFORE COMPLETION. Success.
But if the little fox, after nearly
completing the crossing,
gets his tail in the water,
There is nothing that would further.

1.

 stare
the moon
in the eye —
 press
your thumb
 on
 it:
it will
ring
a bell,
 ring a bell.

2.

 from the in
 side to
 -ward the
inside circling
 hawk
 around
 the well
 —
 matters
 of
 eyes
 &

3.

the fox's tail's
on fire
(a fine story
looking
for a new
geography

4.

bone
meal meet
your fate: a
circling
dis-
solving
in an upside
down
hour
glass.

5.

a shaggy
fox
story:
 outside
my dream
he stood
in the dark
room's darkest
corner

a hairy
grandfather
clock.

6.

moon
-clock:
my god-
dess,
 your covering /
covering
 your face
(the white fullness
of it!

with your broken
off hands.

7.

fox, mother-
fox)
in a spring night's
last light
I watched your brood
play
with the torn off
wing
of a bird.

Fanning
the light.

8.

when I found you
howling at the new
moon —
 what were you
doing,
what were you missing,
my red one?

9.

Drunk
I was not.
you &
your broken leg
the only thing
we had in common
was the forest.
I turned
away from
the clearing

when they
clubbed you
to death.

10.

at a secret meeting
in the Green forest
you were accused
of disturbing
the Holy Grand Polis's sleep
by the less than
holy tongues of a
rainy Pentecost.

11.

not yet,
little fox.
you've nearly
made it!
hear me now,
don't drag
your tail
so close
to the
water.

12.

for success
therefore
carry
your tail
high
in the air,
which is not
high-tailing
it, but closer
to the essential
erection.

13.

cousin,
did you ever
spend time
at the emergency
ward,
say, 3
a.m.?

what struck me
as strange
(the first time)
was that they all
blamed you.

14.

you have moons
for eyes,
 I said,
& what
could you have
answered?

 had you
been here
 with or
with
out your seven
eyes)
lives)

15.

some silly
offspring of yours,
digging the kids
in summercamp
got all hung up
on human food
& wound up
in a zoo.

today the paper
said that
“despite a dehumanization
course
the animal still preferred
humans.”

16.

Great to see you
little red one
in a bad English movie,
you were the only
'real' character
in that technicolor
landscape,
standing there,
pissing
on the leaves.

17.

With a prize
on your head,
poison pellets
in your path
& the frothing
virus at your
mouth,

I nearly
doubted you.

18.

I'm waiting
for you
cousin,
waiting for you

to show
yourself
in my dream / to my dream.

19.

The sharp twist
 of beauty
gleams
along the fracture
line
of your leg.

Absorbed, you lick
the blood,
 oblivious
of him who set
the trap.

20.

as a grandfather clock
in a corner of grandma's
ghostly guest bedroom
I was quite scared of you
trickster,
 but when several
nights later looking
out the window
I saw you beyond the fields
at the forest's edge
under the cool moon
as a hairy
grandfather clock
— for a second
it nearly made me
laugh!

21.

today Victoria
brought back
a mass of old
plates of your
family members.

I don't know
Red,
but you got
some ugly
motherfuckers
among your kin.

22.

watch it!
baby fox
don't bite
your mommy
in the belly
she's sleepy
& if she wakes
she'll shriek
& bite
your head off
'cause she's a foxy
lady!

23.

the devil
take you
cousin!

I mean I
could've killed
myself
stumbling through
this dark forest.

You must have
blown your
cool,
cousin,

or a fuse
to wanna switch
the moon off

pissing
on it.

January / February 1973
London

PROLOGUE

to

BOOK ONE

of

THE BOOK OF THE FOX

fir de Michel Rodange

“Gebueren den 3.1.1827 zu Waldbelleg,
gestuerwen a Clausen, de 27.8.1876.”

author of:

DE RENERT / ODER DE FUUS AM FRACK AN A MAANSGRE’SST

“Et war esou om d’Paischten,
‘t stung Alles an der Ble’,
an d’Villercher di songen
hir Lidder spe’t a freh.”

I am the
fox
of the tale,
don't have to give
any other
name,
but would like,

here,
 (that is
inside the calm topography
of this wintry afternoon
to give you
an accurate account
of what some
will call
& rightly so
the random periploi
of these last years.

These years,
that is:
those years since.
As all of you
(these in-
vocations to the
final hypothesis
must cease!)
— & here I have to
apologize for inter-
rupting you by in

errupting myself —
& thus,
 as I said
back then or
am saying now

(I love the trceries
of my confusions,
meaning the confusions
I sow not those
sewn into the starry belt
of my psyche's
pelt)

thus, as all of,
oh, make that
a figure of
Olaf,
 for short,
will know

I was rather un-
ceremoniously ex-
pelled some years
in the other direction
of now
by that flat-footed
paunch-bellied
cat calls himself
the monarch (the absolute
fool!) of my
native geography,
who with un-
bending vindictiveness
sent me
on a histrionic
pseudo-historic (there-
fore un-
-ending)
quest,
 thinking

thin
due to the incessant
ministrations
of his majesty's mistrusted
companions
nevertheless I managed
a chuckle
into its tunnel,
though it made
my leave-taking a rather
hasty affair —
as some of my attitudes
seem to have wriggled
through the holes
at the elbows'
bends, reaching
the wrong ears.

To cut
a long tale
short,

I had myself
a hurried escape
& didn't stop
til what was formerly
the castle of that
treacherous fishwoman
(a secret friend,
if you don't mind
me mentioning it,
we being of similar
mind in the application
of certain methodologies,
though without any
actual contact
due to the fact
of some minor
& temporal
inaccuracies)
Melusina,
the bull's eye of
my native landscape,

was less than a
spot on my imagination's
horizon.

Here the fox
stopped & leaning
over
he intercepted
the bartender
& ordered another
round of double
Jacks.

* * *

A RETELLING OF THE STORY OF RENART & THE SHE WOLF

that day Renart was cruising the forest as usual
he'd been at it for awhile when he found
a thick bush with a cave beneath
might be a good place to lay up he thought
better be on your toes though you never know
the ramp was slippery and sliding down it he bumped into a door
too late he realized he'd landed straight in Ysengrin's lair
behind the door four wolf pups were raising a ruckus
hanging on to their mother's tits
Hersant the mother noticed a sudden ray of light
she got up on all fours when she caught a flash of red fur and laughing she yelled:
"Renart what are you fooling around out there for?"
the fox was making himself small cowering besides the sill
"I guess people are right to call you a rascal
you never do the right thing you call me family
but you never visit"
Renart was shaking with fear but his mind was racing
"Well cousin may lightning strike me dead if it's any of my fault
you see there's a problem called Ysengrin
if I didn't visit on your churching it's because
that husband of yours and his cronies are scouring the forest
trying to do me in
don't ask why
I never did him no harm
but now he claims in front of those cronies

that I've got the hots for you
have you ever heard anything so gross?
I mean I never even dreamed of it
you know that”
now Hersant was getting into a hot sweat
“what? so that's what is old fart is jabbering about!
well we wolves have a saying
'he who takes vengeance for an imaginary affront
courts real time misfortune'
now let me make something perfectly clear
I've never even thought of making it with you
but now that rumor has me do it
I'm of a mind to try it
why don't you come on in & we'll have a ball”
Renart didn't believe his luck
nor did he waste a second
he sidled up to her kissed her felt her up
Hersant was getting hot and raised a leg
soon they were at it with a vengeance
but Renart was having trouble keeping it up
on account of Ysengrin who might come home
so he pulled out and turned on the pups
he shook them by the scruff of their necks
and threw them about the room before beating them up
then he ate their food and spoiled what he couldn't eat
calling them bastard babes of a cuckold and a whore
he finally pissed all over them and made his exit

Hersant now tried to cool her brood
“listen kids don’t be fools now
I mean there’s no need to get excited
better not tell dad what went down here
you understand?”
they didn’t
“what? for fuck’s sake mother
we should let that red bastard piss all over us
and not say anything?
we should let that scumbag screw you and not tell dad?
no way, José, we want revenge on that moth-eaten redskin”
Renart had been hanging around outside
and when he heard the pups he took off nose to the ground
now Ysengrin came home wiped out but happy
loaded down as he was with all sorts of goodies
he had been running and hunting all day
getting his kicks from ripping off those dumber than he
right away his sons let him know how
they had been abused their food eaten they themselves
beaten up called names and pissed upon
by the fox who first had had it off with their mother
Ysengrin was bursting with rage & facing his wife
he screamed like one possessed
“so now my sons call me cuckold
you viper whore snake cunt
I’m killing myself trying to keep you in food
& all you can think of is getting laid

you sure got a variable heart
letting that lousy stinker
that foul and greedy critter of a fox hump you
well don't expect any more favors from me
certainly not in bed unless of course you swear
total obedience henceforth”

Hersant wanting to cool down
her gruff companion tried another tack
“Sire your anger is misplaced
I'm willing to prove my innocence
by oath or trial may I be burned
drawn and quartered if I'm found
guilty you should know that I wouldn't
do a thing like that... furthermore
I hereby solemnly swear never to do it again”

Ysengrin was taken in
his rage abated he was ready
to forgive but not before
he had made her swear that from now on
she'd help him get revenge on Renart
whenever and wherever they might find him

believe me fox you better watch your ass

Now before the week was out Hersant and
Ysengrin who in their wolfish way knew
how to hold a grudge were out hunting
in open country in a field where peas
had just been harvested & the straw was already
all bundled up they caught sight of Renart cruising for meat
unable to control his temper Ysengrin started to holler
and Renart lit out of there like greased lightning
with the wolf and Hersant giving chase
a mile or so on Renart turned around
his pursuers were gaining ground so he veered to the left
& cut through the woods
Ysengrin never noticed & shot straight ahead
but Hersant coming up behind him was smarter and
sussing the fox's ruse she too veered to the left
keeping hard on Renart's tracks
who knew better than to try and sweet talk her
& made for the safety of his burrow with
Hersant snapping at his heels
Renart reached the bottom of a familiar vale
there he disappeared into a hole while she
following all too eagerly got in up to her waist & was stuck
Renart now calmly emerged from another tunnel
slapping her ass he jeered "Well now cousin what a lovely sight
it's bound to give a man ideas" stuck between the cold loam
and the hot fox Hersant kept her tail firmly wedged

between her legs but Renart began to nibble
at that tail & lifting it up he tucked it on to her rump
stepping back he savored the vista then he fit himself
to her proffered ass drilling one hole after the other
Hersant felt like she'd been split right down the middle
“Renart, you're using force!” The fox shot back
“just because you claimed I never did it with you
I'm doin' it now
I've done it before & I'll do it again
I've said so before
& I'll say so again like
how about 10 more times?”
he fucked so hard the whole burrow
trembled finally as he was about to slump exhausted
over Hersant's rump Ysengrin came
blundering through the woods
“Hey there! Hold it nephew, what the hell are you up to?”
Smoothly Renart disengaged himself
“Do save your breath dearest uncle
you'll need it all to help your wife
can't you see she's stuck in a trap?
I've done my best to free her
but as you see my strength is spent
one thing though I can promise you
I never did as much as pinch her ass
& if you want that in writing
I'll oblige it might convince

some of your friends”

“You filthy traitor

I don’t believe a word you say

your crime stinks to high heaven”

“Come now uncle you better drop it”

“What do you mean drop it? Do you think I’m blind

I mean you were pushing her

when you should have been pulling!”

“Now now dearest uncle do let me appeal

to that finesse of mind you’re so famous for:

as you can plainly see — given that you’re not blind

your lady’s firmly stuck

I couldn’t budge her by pulling

but remembering that just beyond the narrow opening

the burrow widens considerably

I figured that if I could push her all the way in

that would do the trick

anyway once you get her out

she’ll prove me right

that is of course unless she prefers to lie”

somewhat confused by Renart’s rap Ysengrin wolfed

down his rancor & tried to free his wife

he grabbed her by the tail & pulled with all his strength

the pain was too much and Hersant let fly

covered in shit and piss her husband backs away

figuring there had to be a better way

& after a few hours digging up the earth

around her he finally managed to pull her
out of the hole
from inside, where Renart looked on laughing
Ysengrin now laid into his wife
“you patented whore you piece of filth scumbag viper snake
I seen you at it with my own eyes
he was humping you from behind
try to explain that one away!”
that was about all Hersant could take
still she figured it best to try & calm him down
“Sire it’s true he sort of screwed me but I promise
the pleasure was all his
let’s stop this stupid quarreling
and take the whole mess to the kadi
the king’s high court’s in session now it just
might work out better that way.
Ysengrin demurred and scratched his head
“You might be right at that I guess
I was somewhat overhasty alright
then let’s do it your way for once”
With that the pair disappears into the forest
leaving Renart to enjoy some well-earned rest.

NOTES ON THE RETELLING

The multifarious, not to say nefarious, deeds of the fox can be traced through the Indo-European cultural heritage as far back as the Indian *Panchatantra*. Their re-emergence in the fables of Aesop and the Latin *Phaedrus* thus already constitute occurrences of a well-established yet profoundly nomadic and multiply-ethnic (Indo-European as well as Assyro-Babylonian) matter. But the full flowering of the beast-epos had to wait until the European Middle Ages: following, and to some extent drawing upon, the slightly earlier Latin Physiologus, we have the *Ecbasis Captivi* (full title: *Ecbasis cuiusdam captivi per tropologiam*, (“The escape of a certain captive, interpreted figuratively”), an anonymous Latin beast fable that probably dates to the middle of the 11th century, and was likely written in the Vosges region of France. This was followed by *Ysengrimus* (completed in 1149 by Master Nivardus, a monk in Flanders). Between 1176 and 1190, the oldest branches of the French *Roman de Renart* came into existence, attributed to Pierre de St. Cloud. The *roman’s* impact may be judged by the fact that the name of the fox, Renart, soon replaced the old French word for the animal — goupil — as the common name. By 1180 Heinrich der Glichezäre (i.e. the hypocrite) had written his Middle High German version. An important adaptation into Middle Dutch can be dated to the late 13th century, and in 1479 a Dutch prose version was printed by Gerard Leu, on which Caxton based *his* English translation which appeared in 1481. For centuries the fox materials remained extremely popular so that, foreshadowing later Hollywoodian mores, there appeared in 1684 a work called *The Shifts of Reynardine, Son of Reynard the Fox*, which according to some accounts was one of the first print bestsellers. From the same century date La Fontaine’s morale fables while Goethe wrote his *Reineke Fuchs* in 1793. The latest full-blown version of the epic dates from 1872 and is due to the Luxembourg poet Michel Rodange who, while using Goethe’s structure, took the

latter's classical language back towards a more orally viable incarnation, using as he did the various spoken dialects of his country.

The question as to the origins of the fox material remains a matter of debate. In 1834 Jacob Grimm, basing himself on the Germanic origins of many of the animal names, suggested that original beast-epic existed among the primitive Germanic tribes, and that this epic had been carried over into the French areas by Frankish tribes, later to be borrowed and expanded by French writers. His analysis was still current when in 1893 the French scholar L. Sudre did a comparative study of the *Roman de Renart* with animal stories and fables from Scandinavia and India, pointing out many parallels that backed Grimm's claims. But since that time, and in keeping with the general perception of the origins of literary works, most critics have considered the *Roman de Renart* as an individual literary creation, notwithstanding some borrowings from prior written sources, by the learned clerk Pierre de St. Cloud. Current French commentary still follows this path, but — given the present sense of the achievements, importance and range of oral literature — the time might have come to re-examine the question. Although since the 12th century written versions have dominated, there can be little doubt that the fox material has always had a parallel, oral existence, feeding from and back into the beast epos. My own acquaintance with Renert, as he is called in Luxembourgian, was of that order: it was on my grand-mother's lap, when I was 4 or 5, that I first heard how Renert had to go to court for mistreating and conning the animals. The moralistic aspect of the tales might not have stuck, but the poems and tales, and before all, the figure of the fox are still with me today. The tale offered here in a modern retelling is closely based on one occurring in an early branch of the *Roman de Renart* — & if those adventures aren't the best-known that's solely so because their explicitly sexual nature had them banned from the corpus quite early on.

There is obviously no getting rid of the fox: again & again he appears throughout the European area, from Lapland to the Mediterranean, from Celtic mythology and Scot songs to Russian tales. The beast epics are but one incarnation of the material. Here is the fox as psycho-pomp in a Celtic myth: a young man goes in search of a talisman to cure his sick father, succeeding where his elder brothers have failed. Out of pity he spends all his money to give burial to a dead man. Soon afterwards he meets a white fox whose counsel helps him in his quest. Then, once the goal of the quest has been reached, the fox explains that he is the soul of the deceased and disappears.

In the early 20C he reappears in Luigi Pirandello's *Favole della Volpe* (Fox Tales, 1905) to reemerge in Prague where he lent some of his features to a beast that haunted Franz Kafka: "It is an animal with a big tail, a tail many yards long and like a fox's brush. I should like to get my hands on this tail some time, but it is impossible, the animal is constantly moving about, the tail is constantly being flung this way and that. The animal resembles a kangaroo, but not as to the face, which is flat almost like a human face, and small and oval; only its teeth have any power of expression, whether they are concealed or bared. Sometimes I have the feeling that the animal is trying to tame me. What other purpose could it have in withdrawing its tail when I snatch at it, and then again waiting calmly until I am tempted again, and then leaving once more?" (Kafka, *Dearest Father*, translated by Ernst Kaiser & Eithne Wilkins, quoted in Borges' *Book of Imaginary Beasts*).

In 1950 he was well and alive, though obviously affected by the tide of barbarism that had just swept over Europe, and reappears in *Favole della dittatura* (*Tales of the Dictatorship*) by the Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia: “The fox was poking fun at the raven’s black color. ‘If only you could see the effect when I alight on Minerva’s white bust’ croaked the raven. The fox knew nothing of Edgar Poe, but deep inside he felt something like ice breaking.”