

# A Fable for the End of the World

*In England, a symbolic war has long been fought between native and adored red squirrels, and invasive and hated grey squirrels. Violence against grey squirrels is permitted, as an “alien species<sup>i</sup>” whose presence has, it is thought, displaced red squirrels.<sup>ii</sup> In Cambridgeshire, a queer local phenomenon is threatening to overthrow these rodent ecologies: a mutation in the local squirrels has produced a black species. In this short story, a fabulist is trying to write their last fable when they meet these black squirrels.*

The fabulist, frustrated, chews their pen and stares across the landscape. More than four centuries ago, a group of wealthy men had drained the fens, to be replaced by the farmland the fabulist sees now. If the fabulist puts their mind to it, they can still recall the tall grasses, meandering waterways, and the danger – and excitement – of the fens. It was much easier back then to write fables.

Of course it was. Back then, the fabulist only had to walk a short while across these wildlands before an auroch or a wolf, a beaver or a great auk would present themselves with a lesson to learn. Even longer ago, the fabulist had brown bears and elk to commune with, and the stories spilled out. But now, the megafauna are long gone, the land itself has receded or been gouged away. A writing block is understandable, faced with the daunting task of drafting the final fable: the fable for the end of the world.

The chattering is ubiquitous and denies their any attempt to formulate thoughts and surroundings into a coherent narrative. No, refusing to teeter back into the centuries-long depression they’ve only just managed to crawl out of, the fabulist decides that the best thing to do, to be able to write this one last fable, is to get some air, to walk across the fens again, to try and

empty the past from their mind. Into an old satchel, the fabulist throws a notebook and their glasses, laces their shoes, and walks into the hazy, sunny day.



The signs aren't comforting. So many read some variant of PRIVATE or NO TRESPASSING. But the fabulist ignores these restrictions, passing through or over fences, nonchalantly strolling into walled grounds and gardens. A herd of grazing cows watches them go by, brown and black, yellow clips piercing one ear, declaring their fate.

For a time, they crouch beside a pond, inspecting the contents. The fishy inhabitants are glittering and vivid orange. Their speech takes a moment for the fabulist to interpret, not decoration, exactly – no, *ornamental*. These won't do as main characters; their story is limited to

a single sentence, plonked without ceremony into a weedy habitat they would have no chance of surviving beyond, their sustenance delivered from above, at the whim of a pink hand above the water—too contrived. Onwards then, out through the side gate, mirrored by a window reflection in the house's uPVC greenhouse.

In a leafy estate, a groundskeeper on a ride-on mower spots the fabulist wandering around on private property, despite them clearly not belonging here, and he decides to confront them about their presence. Halfway across the rugby field, the groundskeeper hesitates. In the same way he knows there's no sense confronting a hill or a rock, something in the fabulist's posture or atmosphere suggests they are in fact supposed to be there. In any case, it's a conversation he doesn't get paid enough to have.

As the groundskeeper heads back across the field, the fabulist clicks their tongue. The sound is something like a slowed down woodpecker, with aspects of the gathering sediment of a river as it changes its path over the span of several years. Someone has piqued their attention, and they venture further into the trees to investigate. Although a busy road sits not far from here, the noise is dulled by thick growth. On either side of the worn dirt path, established evergreens intersect the bright yellow light from above.

And there, at the foot of one, half-hidden by shadows from branches and huge roots that have breached the soil, a squirrel is pawing at the ground.



Just a squirrel, the fabulist sighs, and kicks up a clod. As their foot hits the dirt, the squirrel darts out from the shadow and throws a chastising look towards the fabulist. Can this... creature... not see that the squirrel is at work, sowing the ground with promises for the future?

‘What --’ the fabulist’s voice catches in their throat. Of course, they have seen squirrels before. In this land, the red and grey squirrels tell a tale that the fabulist has warned of, of borders, hatred, and misdirection. But this squirrel is neither red nor grey. They are, somehow, impossibly, black.

The fabulist quickly gets over their shock as their mind whirs with possibility. Perhaps this fable has a protagonist after all. Here, unbelievably, is an animal that they’ve never seen before... or a subspecies of one, or... something? Grabbing their notebook, the fabulist drops to their knees, aching towards the squirrel, desperate for their story.

It’s not a simple one, which irks the fabulist. Nothing is straightforward anymore, it seems. This is a convoluted and misremembered tale, branching off from countless interventions, mistakes, escapes, and adaptations. All the dark century before, while the fabulist had been absorbed in their malaise, wounds to the landscape were transforming. As they healed, the scar tissue took on brand new shapes. The old, simple stories were gone, it was true, but others had learnt to thrive in their place. Some were totally bleak and violent, yes, but others, like the story of the black squirrel, although carrying aspects of that darkness, covered so much time and space, and contained such a multitude of characters, inevitably, some of the narrative arcs looked like ones of hope. Not for a return to the ancient order, but for something else.

The squirrel has given enough and cannot spare any more precious daylight for the fabulist. Dashing up a nearby tree, the small black creature pauses halfway and casts their gaze back. They aren't used to being noticed and hadn't known that anyone cared about their strange colony. The others will be amused to learn of the stranger's absurd interpretation of that missing piece of DNA in their pigment gene, as if they sought meaning externally.

The fabulist continues to look upon the squirrel. That black squirrel, so intent on their work - on sowing their future into the ground, doesn't realise how everything has changed. They haven't watched the centuries wear on this place. These fens, ever since they were drained, have been hostile landscapes, life became a commodity, everything that once had thrived destroyed or struggling. There had seemed to be no stories left, until now. This one, subtle, transmutation was nothing short of a metamorphosis.

This fable brings with it a wave of relief. The fabulist's goal is complete, but the conclusion has an unexpected shape. This fable will not exist as imagined, as the world's dying words. This could be the start of a new creative direction. The fens, like places the world over, have known the smell of extinction at the hands of humans, and yet they and their protagonists persist, flourishing in new ways, insisting on continued existence. There have been countless awful losses in the process—this cannot be a story without grief, and there is inevitably more to come—but despite the strange colour and shapes any subsequent developments will take, this is, after all, not the end.

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<sup>1</sup> John E Joseph. 2013. Alien species: the discursive othering of grey squirrels, Glasgow Gaelic, Shetland Scots and the gay guys in the shag pad. *Language and Intercultural Communication*. 13:2. 182-201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2013.770866>

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<sup>ii</sup> John Gurnell, Luc A Wauters, Peter WW Lurz, and Guido Tosi. 2004. Alien species and interspecific competition: effects of introduced eastern grey squirrels on red squirrel population dynamics. *Journal of Animal Ecology*. 73:1. 26-35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2656.2004.00791.x>