

SAM THOMPSON

WOLFSTONGUE

Illustrated by

ANNA TROMOP

'An edge-of-the-seat adventure.' — MEG ROSOFF



Illustration by Anna Tromop

Belfast, January 2021

Dear reader,

I would like to introduce my middle-grade novel *Wolfstongue*, which will be published by Little Island in May 2021.

Wolfstongue tells the story of Silas, a boy with speech problems who discovers a hidden world of talking animals. When he befriends a family of wolves who have been enslaved by clever, scheming foxes, Silas must face his own struggle with words to help the wolves win back their freedom.

I started writing the book for my son, who has speech difficulties and has always loved wolves. Wanting a wolf story for him, I found my way to the medieval fables about the trickster Reynard the Fox and his hapless rival Isengrim the Wolf, and I realised that writing about those characters was also a way of writing about speech and silence and the challenges of both. In the old tales Reynard always comes out on top, but I wanted to invert those stories and give the tongue-tied wolf a chance against the smooth-talking fox.

I hope *Wolfstongue* takes readers on a memorable adventure while helping them face problems of self-doubt, isolation and bullying that may be especially pressing for neurodivergent children and those experiencing speech difficulties, but that are important for everyone. I also hope the book offers readers a new myth: a myth about how language can both trap us and free us, and about how our human stories have power to shape the natural world.

I invite you to sample the enclosed proof. I hope you enjoy the book.

Yours faithfully,

Sam Thompson

**SAM
THOMPSON**

WOLFSTONGUE



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ANNA TROMOP

WOLFSTONGUE

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For Odhrán

For Sadhbh

For Oisín

You good wolves



Deep down and long ago, there are dreams in the clay.

*The clay lies deep in the ground. It belongs to a time
before living creatures. But the clay dreams of life.*

*It dreams about running and hunting. It dreams that it
will sing, and tell stories, and dance. The clay dreams of
shaping itself into creatures that will live and die and
dream that once they were clay.*

There are dreams in the clay, deep down and long ago.



I

THERE WAS a wolf on the cycle path.

Silas walked along the path every day after school. It ran beside a patch of woodland. It was not the fastest way home, but Silas used it because he liked being by himself, and the cycle path was always empty.

Until today. The wolf stood in the middle of the path, watching him. Its head was as high as his chest. He had never been so close to such a large wild animal.

He did not know what to do. He had seen wolves in a wildlife park once: they had been pale, silent shapes slipping between the trees, too far away to seem dangerous or even quite real. But this wolf was real. He could hear it panting. He could see its wet red tongue and its long white teeth. At the sight, a chill crawled all the way from his

shoulders to the base of his spine, and gooseflesh tingled on his arms. His heart beat hard in his chest.

He told himself he ought to back away carefully. He ought to run. *But if I run*, he thought, *the wolf might chase me. Maybe I should flap my arms and shout so that it goes away. Wild animals are usually nervous of people, aren't they?* But the wolf did not look nervous. It looked hungry. Its grey eyes were fixed on Silas, just waiting for him to start running. The narrow path was like a trap, with a brick wall on one side and a wire fence on the other.

He held his breath. He kept very still. And then the wolf took a step forwards.

Silas nearly ran. He nearly cried out in fright and fell over backwards. But he did not do this, not quite, because he had noticed something. The wolf was walking oddly. It was limping, barely touching the ground with one of its front paws. When it was almost within reach, it held up the paw as if it wanted to shake hands.

Silas knelt down beside the wolf. The paw was larger than both his hands together. It had thick grey fur, hard black claws and big rough pads. The smell was strong, but not bad: it was earthy and musky, and it reminded Silas of something. For a moment he could not tell what, but then he knew. The wolf smelled like the scent that rises from dry ground at the end of a hot day when the rain begins to fall.

He moved the pads apart and the wolf growled softly in its throat. Silas let go in a hurry, but the wolf whined and offered him the paw again. Being as slow and gentle as he could, he grasped the paw and tried to see what the matter was. Yes, he thought, something was lodged there. A metallic glint deep between the pads. The wolf gave a snarl as he eased the paw open, but it let him coax the object free. It was an old brass drawing pin, battered and bloody. It must have been digging into the paw at every step.

The wolf circled away and took a few steps along the path, no longer limping.

Then all at once it was alert, lifting its head and swivelling its ears as if it sensed danger. It prowled along the fence until it came to a place where the wire was torn at the bottom, making an entrance into the woodland. The grey eyes locked with Silas's eyes for a moment, and the wolf wriggled through the hole.

The patch of woodland had perhaps twenty trees, with the backs of houses showing through the branches. There was nowhere for a large animal to go. But as Silas watched, the wolf crouched in the undergrowth and disappeared from view.

Silas stood at the fence, wondering if anything else was going to happen. But there was no movement among the trees. It was as if the wolf had never been there. That

must be the end, he thought. It had been a brief, strange meeting and now it was time for him to go home.

Then he heard a voice behind him.

‘Good afternoon,’ it said. ‘This is a fortunate meeting.’

A fox was sitting on the path: a neat creature with a sharp face and dark red fur. It gazed up at him. Beside it sat a second fox, larger and paler, with green eyes set close together. As Silas watched, more foxes appeared on the path behind the small dark fox and the large pale one. Soon there were twenty foxes sitting and looking at him.

The dark fox spoke.

‘My name is Reynard,’ he said. ‘This is my sister Saffron, and these are our sisters and brothers, and *you* are a very lucky young man. You see, a dangerous animal is on the loose. We’re tracking it down, to make sure no one gets hurt.’

The dark fox had large golden eyes. His voice was friendly and calm: the kind of voice you want to trust.

‘I have a feeling you’ve seen the animal we’re searching for,’ Reynard said. ‘And I have an idea you’re going to help us.’

Silas did not answer. He was a little surprised that the fox was talking, but not so much as you might think. A talking fox did not seem so strange when it was here in front of him, gazing up with friendly golden eyes. Hearing

words come from a fox was really no more strange than hearing them come from a human being.

He wanted to answer but the words would not come. This often happened, especially at school. People spoke to him and waited for a reply, but the words he meant to say got stuck. It had happened today. All through break time Richie Long from his class had followed him around the playground, loudly asking him what his name was. Several other children had joined in too. They knew his name, of course, but they thought it was funny to make him say it. In the end he had tried to tell them to leave him alone, but something in him had seized up, and the words had not come out. Richie Long and the others had laughed and called him the names they always called him: ‘Ss-s-s-s-Silas’ and ‘Silent Silas’ and just ‘Silence’.

Silence, he thought. He could not deny that the name suited him. He never tried to speak when he could keep quiet instead. And now, in front of Reynard the fox, his words failed again and he said nothing. The pale fox with green eyes snarled and crouched as if she might spring.

‘Now, now, Saffron,’ Reynard said, ‘I’m sure this young man will be only too glad to help us once he understands the situation. You see, young sir, we’re searching for a wolf. He doesn’t belong here. He’s much too big and wild. He’s lost, and we only want to help him. So, please: won’t you show us where he is?’

Reynard glanced into the woodland, as if he already knew where the wolf had gone. Silas wondered why the foxes were not just pushing under the fence to search among the trees. They seemed to want his help. They wanted to make him part of what they were going to do.

But he did not want to help them find the tired old wolf. He did not understand what was happening between these animals, but he knew that he did not want to see the foxes catch their quarry. He tried not to look at the torn place in the fence. Perhaps he could trick them. He could tell them he had seen a wolf running away towards the other side of town.

He opened his mouth to speak, but it was no good. The words would not come, and all he managed were a few stupid-sounding noises. The pale fox called Saffron showed her teeth. The other foxes looked at one another, as if to say: *What's the matter with this one?* Even Reynard was looking impatient.

'I don't expect you to understand completely,' he said. 'But believe me, if you're wise you will do as I suggest. So now I'm asking one last time. Give me the wolf.'

Silas took a deep breath and tried again to reply: *I don't know where he is, and I wouldn't tell you if I did.* That was what he wanted to say. But no words came. A couple of the foxes giggled.

Reynard twitched his tail.

‘This child is of no use to us,’ he said.

He lifted his nose, and all the foxes got up.

‘Not yet, anyway,’ Reynard added, as his followers vanished along the cycle path.

The last fox to leave was the one called Saffron. Before she went, she walked over to Silas, like a pet coming to sniff at his knee. He looked down to see what she wanted.

The next thing Silas knew was pain: sickening, searing, frightening pain. It began in his left ankle and burst through his entire body. The fox had bitten him. He was too astonished to react. The thin blades of her teeth were still buried deep in the sinew above his heel. As she bit down, the fox lashed her head from side to side. She kept her eyes on his face as if she wanted to know how much it hurt.

‘Saffron!’ said Reynard. He was standing some way along the path. ‘Come along.’

The pale fox rolled her eyes and let go. She followed Reynard, licking her jaws.

Silas was alone. Crying and shaking with the pain, he sank to the ground, grasping his ankle. His hands were covered in blood.

2

SILAS TOOK off his shoe and gently peeled away the blood-soaked sock from his wounded ankle. The pain was quite different from a scrape or a cut: it throbbed up his leg as if some burning substance had been poured into his veins. This pain was telling him that real damage had been done, that something was wrong deep inside and would not easily be put right. Forcing himself to look, he saw the blood welling from a ragged tear in his flesh. His foot and ankle were turning an ugly purplish black and already beginning to swell, the skin stretching smooth like the surface of a balloon.

Silas gritted his teeth and tried to wrap his handkerchief around his ankle. It did little to stop the blood and it hurt more than he could bear. He tried to