

A watercolor illustration of a courtyard scene. At the top, dark purple leaves hang down. The title 'Hermeline' is written in a large, purple, cursive font. Below it, the subtitle 'to stay or not to stay' is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. The main illustration shows a two-story building with a dark roof and a chimney. The building has two rows of arched windows. In the center, a doorway is open, revealing a kitchen interior with a stove and a hanging pot. A person is standing near the doorway, and a cat is sitting on a bench in front of it. To the right, a person is pushing a cart with two large bins. A tree with red and white blossoms is on the right side. A bench is on the left side. The background is a light, hazy sky with a soft orange sun in the upper right corner.

Hermeline

to stay or not to stay

Anne Mercedes

First published (year) by (name of publisher)

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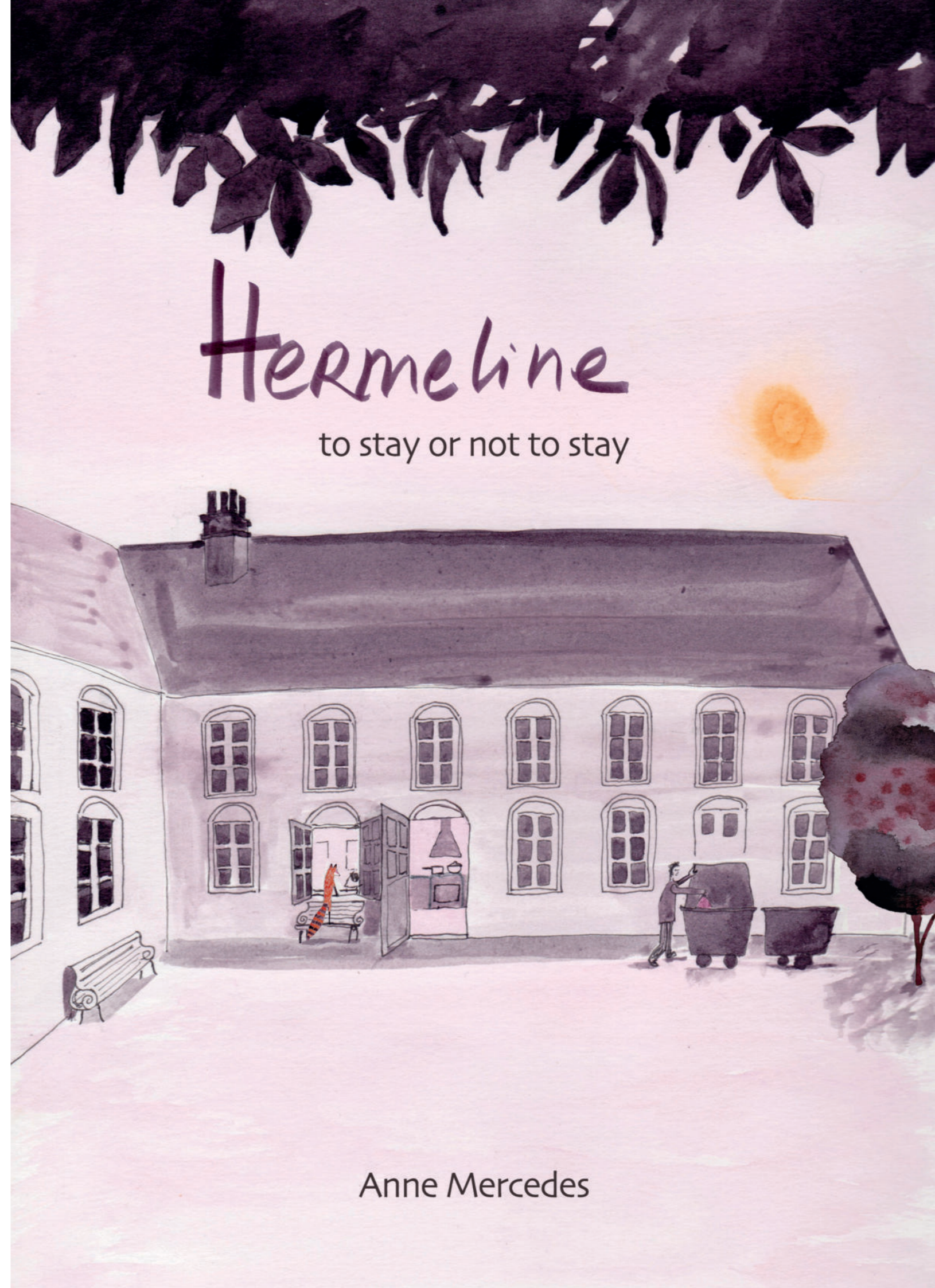
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Anne Mercedes



Hermeline was an urban vixen. Every morning she paid a visit to Mrs Cook's garden before hunting for her breakfast, and Mrs Cook would greet her from her bedroom window.




Mrs Cook lived in a little street on the outskirts of London. Often, she would place leftovers on a tray outside her kitchen for Hermeline.



Hermeline lived in the cemetery which backed onto Mrs Cook's garden,



where she would find all sorts of small creatures and, in the summer, blackberries.



In the park, next to the cemetery,
she would enjoy lots of different berries
and occasionally, a piece of cake
left behind from a child's snack.



She would sometimes rummage around the hotel close by. She was unable to open the outdoor bins, but the back door of the kitchen could be easily reached from the park, and Hermeline was bold.





One evening Hermeline did not see any food left outside Mrs Cook's house. All the lights were off. She found it strange. Mrs Cook was old and only left the house to go shopping nearby during daylight. She thought that after all, Mrs Cook was human and therefore not completely predictable. So Hermeline had a little tour of the area and ate berries from the front gardens along the street. Hermeline was very fond of berries.





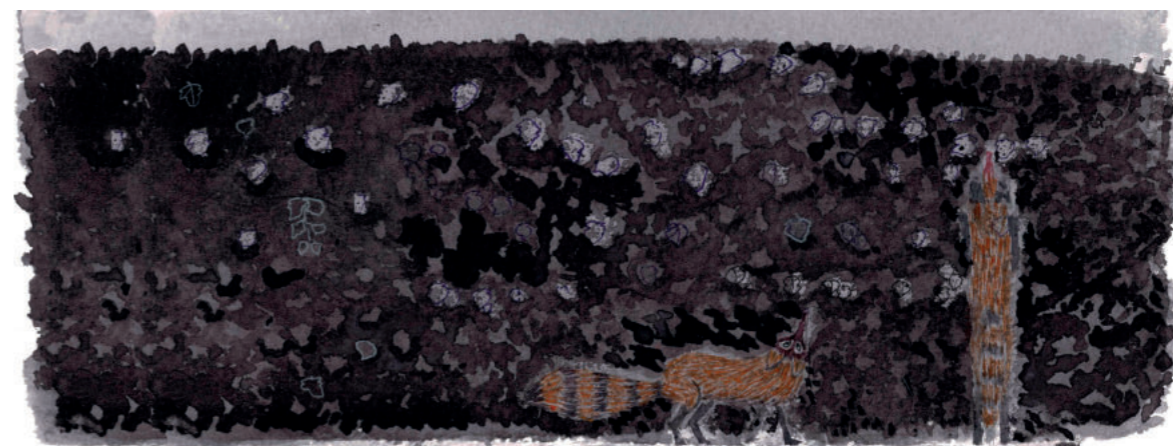
As the seasons passed, the house remained unlit.



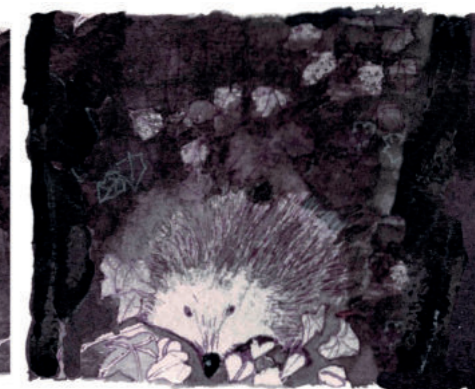
Mrs Cook was nowhere to be seen. Not at the window.



Not in the kitchen. Not in the garden.



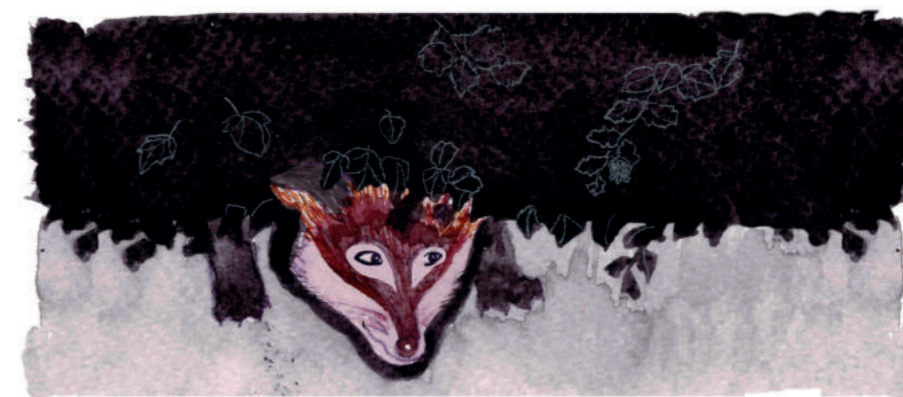
So Hermeline would sniff around the fence covered with ivy,



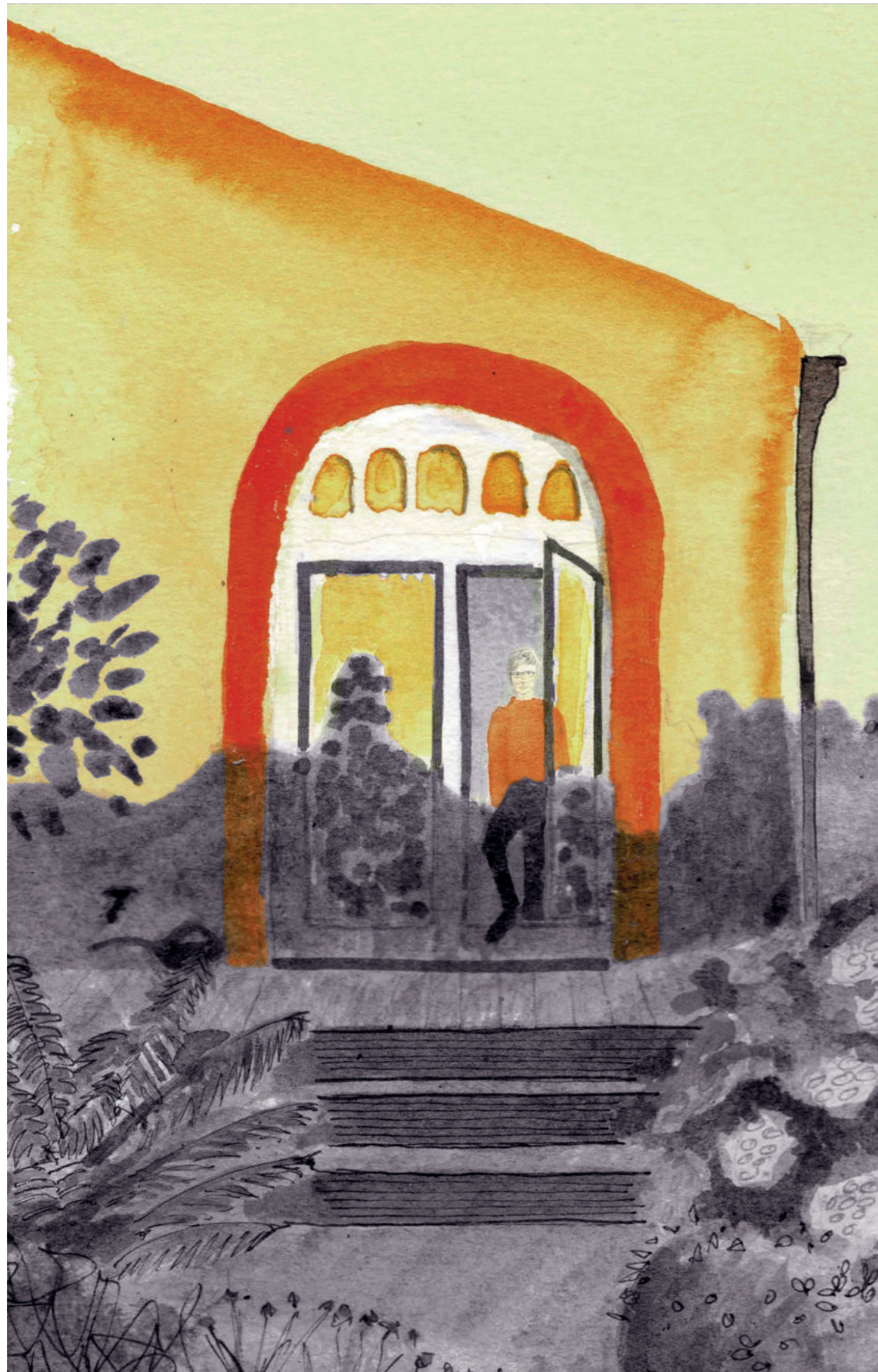
which was the dwelling to several interesting creatures,



thanks to the fact that ivy leaves never fall.



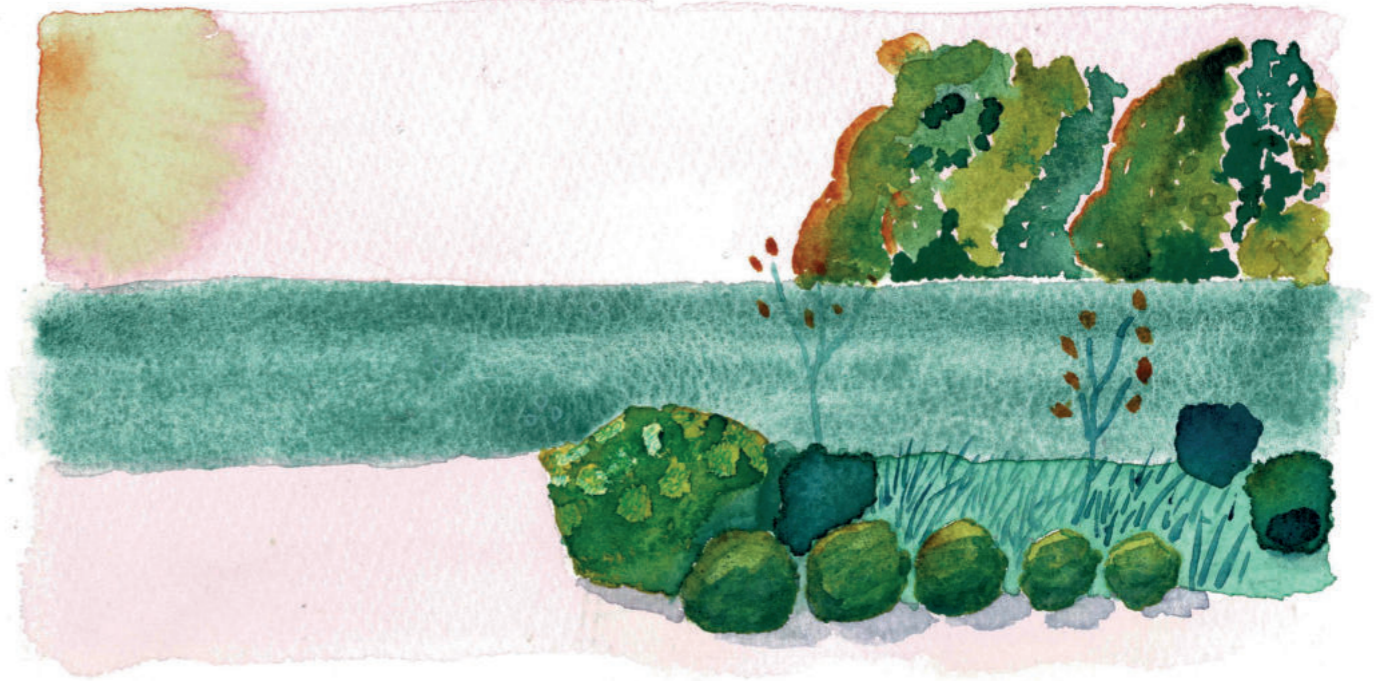
She would then leave Mrs Cook's garden through the same gap she had come in.



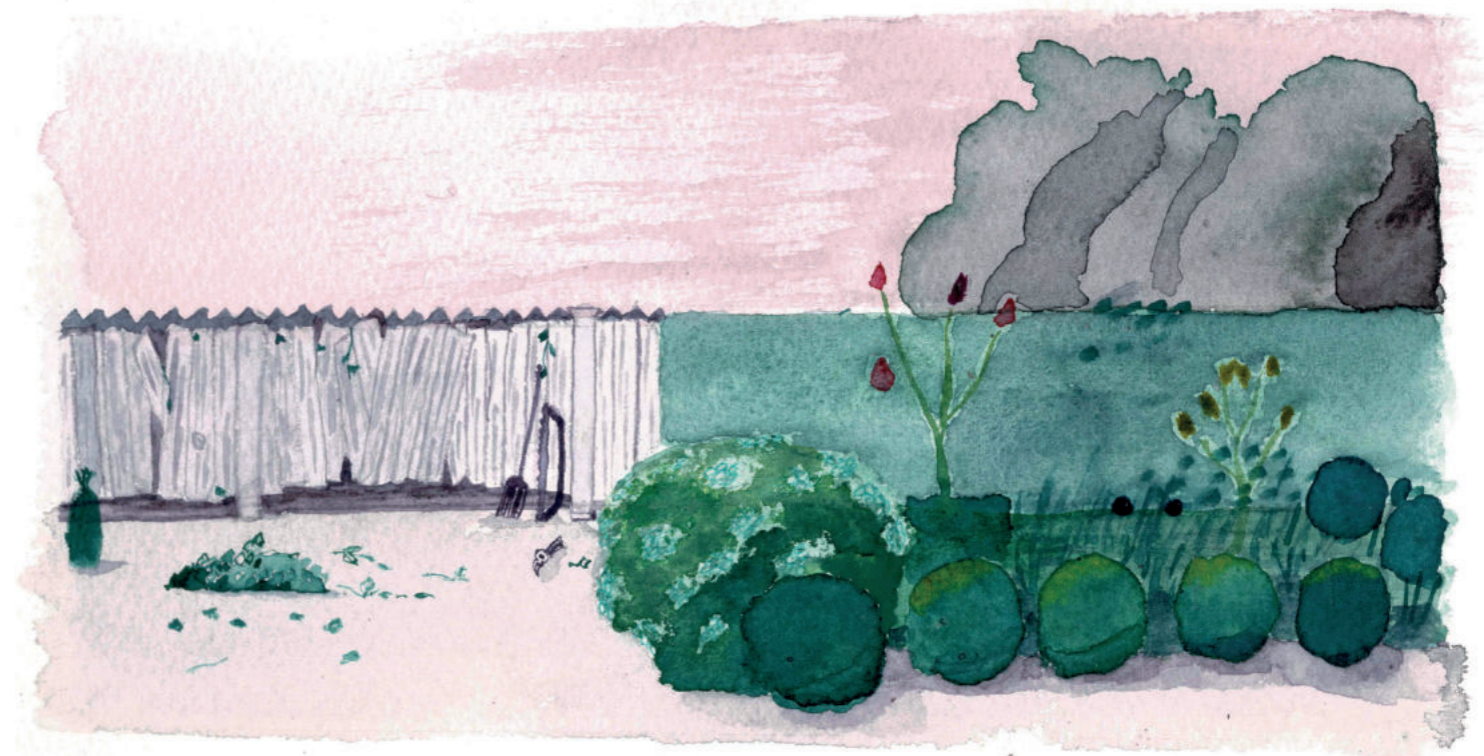
One morning, while Hermeline was hunting in the garden, she spotted a new face looking at her from the house.

When this unexpected person opened the door, Hermeline decided it would be wiser to disappear. She would observe this new lady for a while from a distance.

Hermeline checked, every day, if there was any food left outside. There never was. The woman certainly spent time in the garden: Hermeline never saw any withered flower. All the shrubs and the ivy covering the long fence were carefully trimmed and groomed. Occasionally, a leaf rake or another garden tool would be left outside overnight.



But one evening, at dusk...



Hermeline felt very upset.
The robins would not build their nest there anymore,
and as for the mice, well they had left already.

Also, the fence would collapse because the ivy had been
supporting it as much as the fence had been supporting
the ivy.

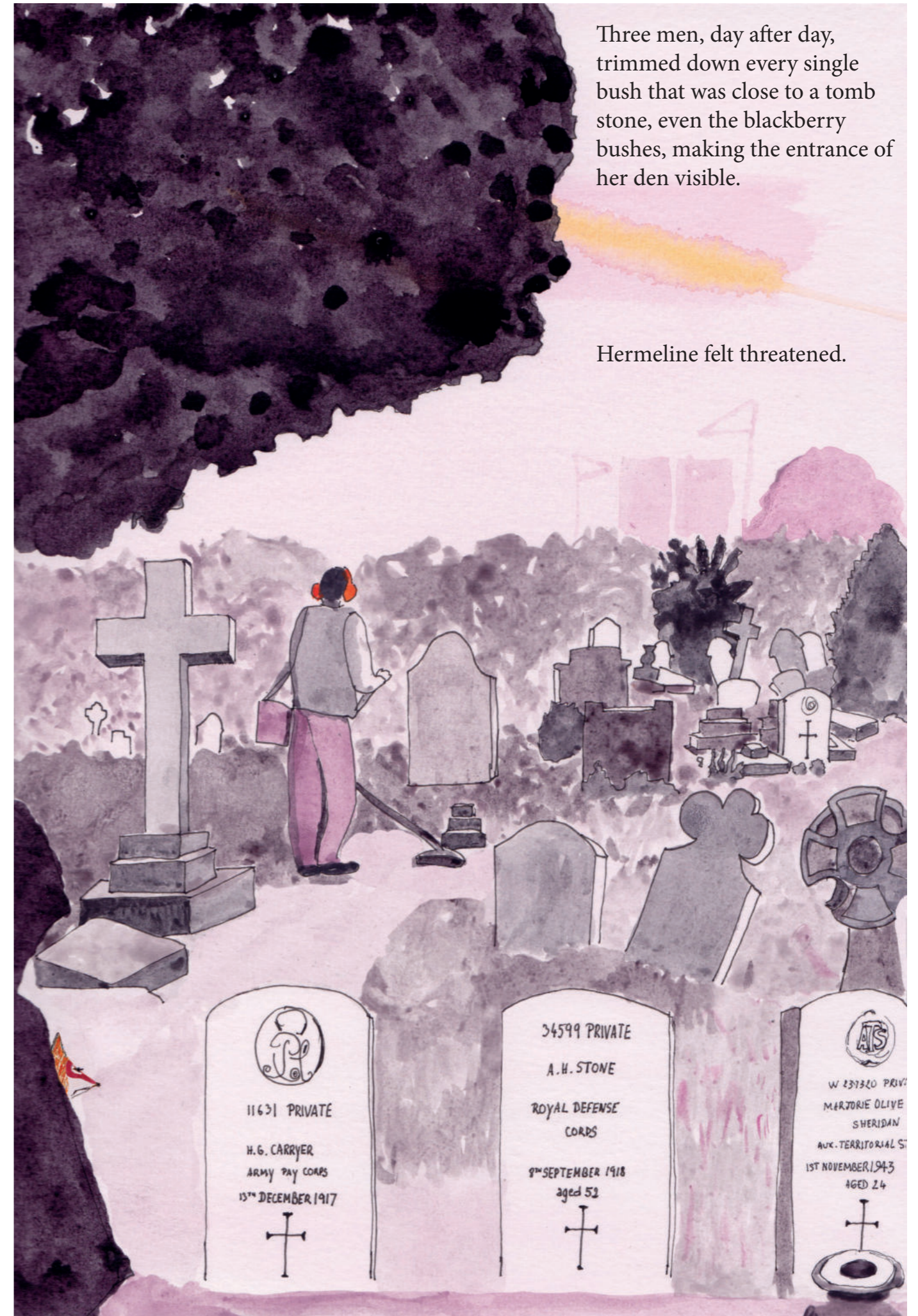
And if the fence collapsed, Hermeline
knew what would happen...

Soon it would be replaced and there wouldn't be
any gap for her to come in the garden anymore.





At dawn, sad and upset, Hermeline went back to her den to get some rest. But she had hardly fallen asleep when she was awakened by the hum of a lawn mower. The sound and vibration were disturbing. The noise carried on for the whole week.



Three men, day after day, trimmed down every single bush that was close to a tomb stone, even the blackberry bushes, making the entrance of her den visible.

Hermeline felt threatened.

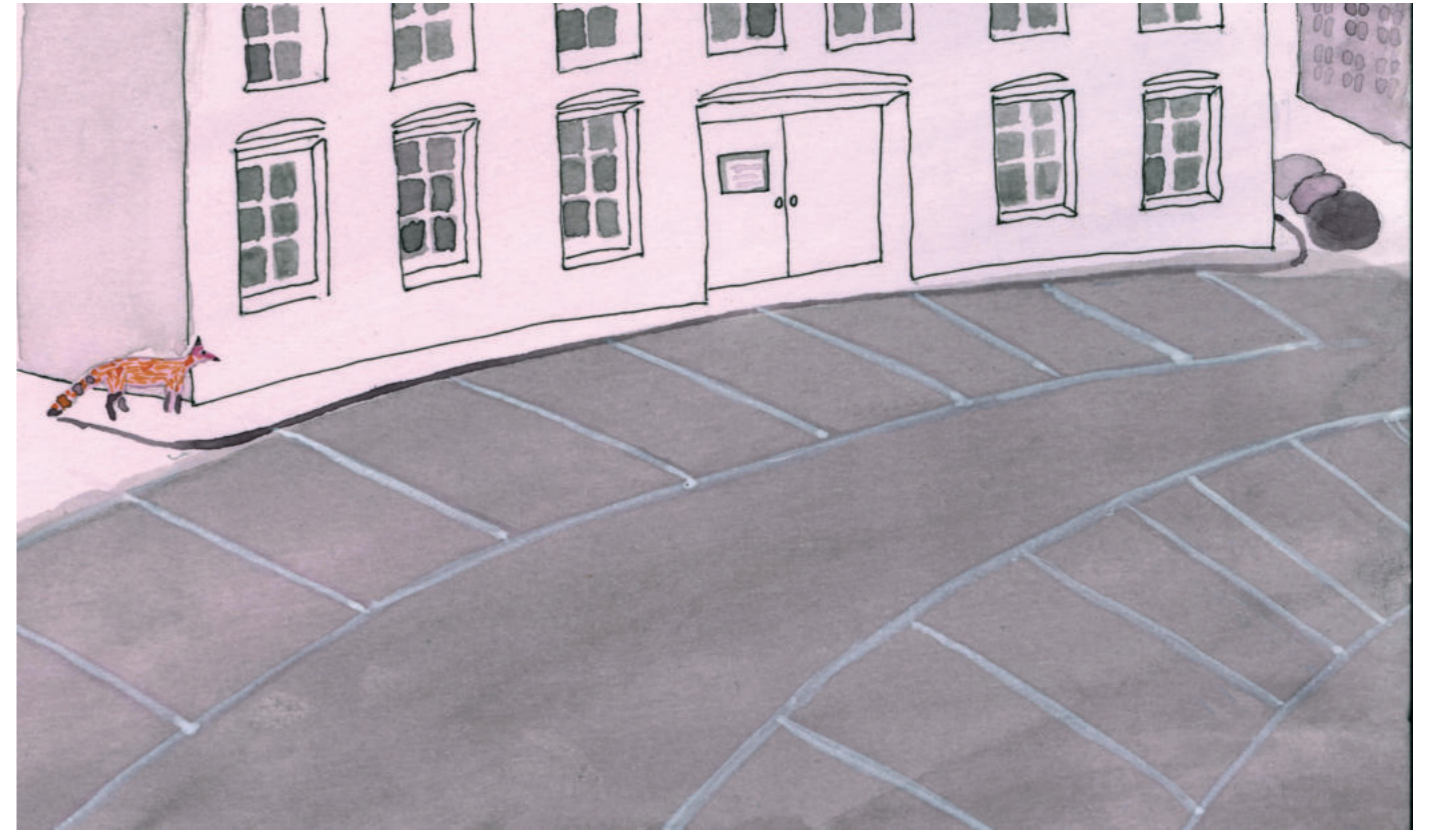
Angry but determined to find food, she visited some gardens she had not seen for a while. Most of them had immaculate lawns, bright flowers and very big sheds.



But they had very few bushes and almost no ivy for animals to live in. The only animals she could see living around were not easy to deal with.



At dusk, Hermeline decided to go to the hill where there were fewer houses and much bigger and wilder gardens. That's how, on her way, she came across the most unexpected view.



There wasn't a single car parked at the hotel. That was strange.



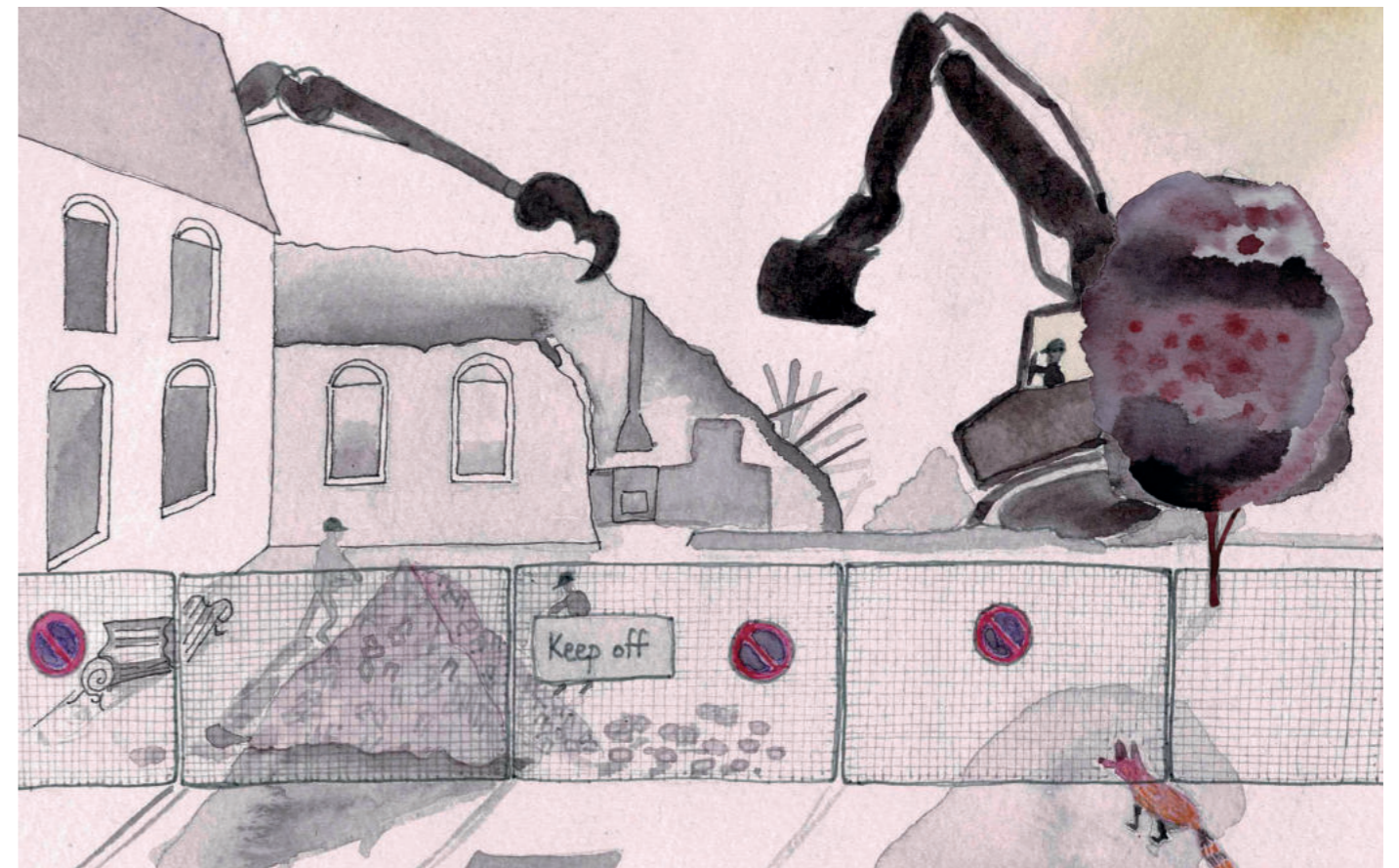
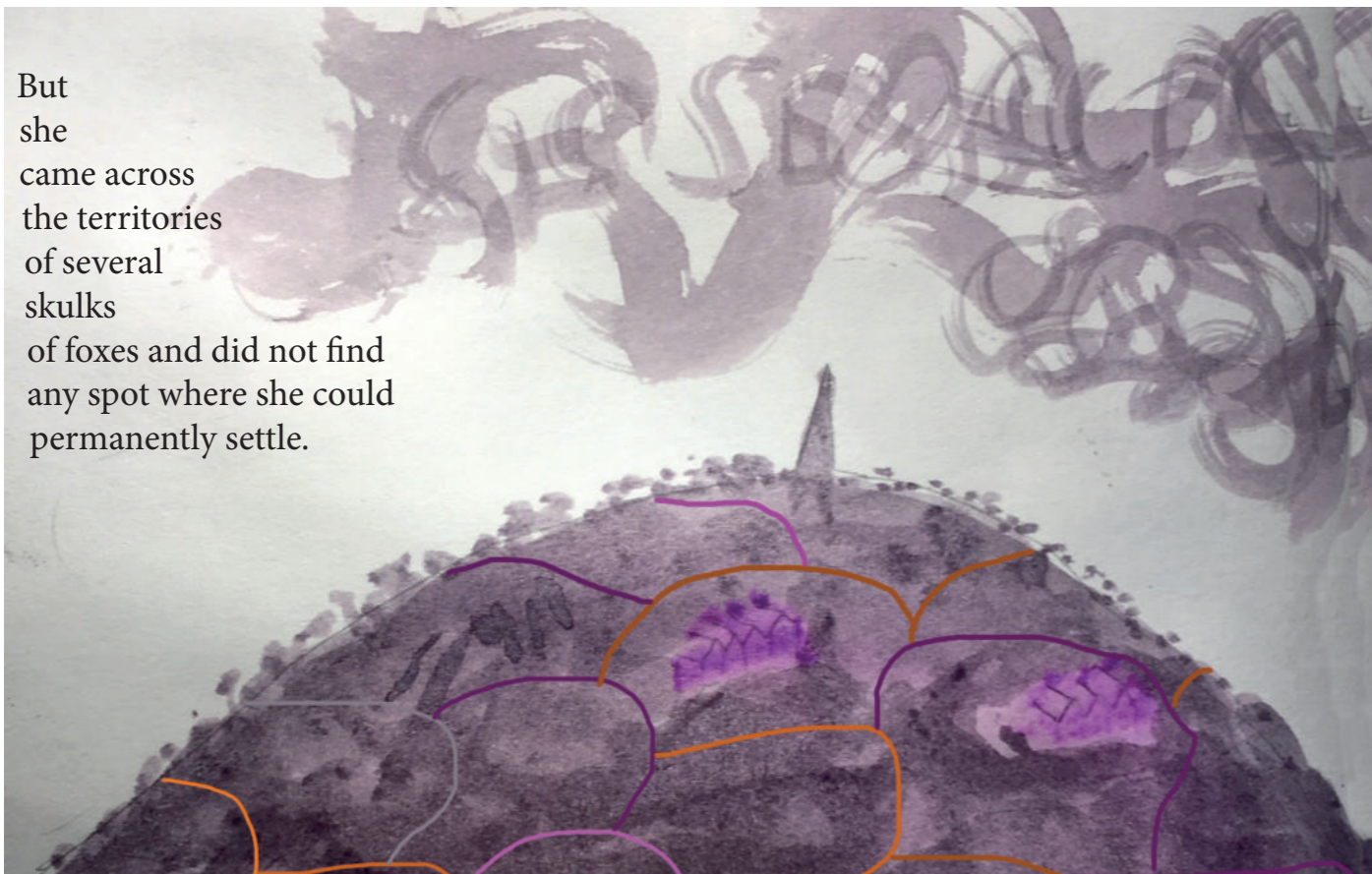
On the hill, bushes and small animals
were plentiful.
She had
a feast

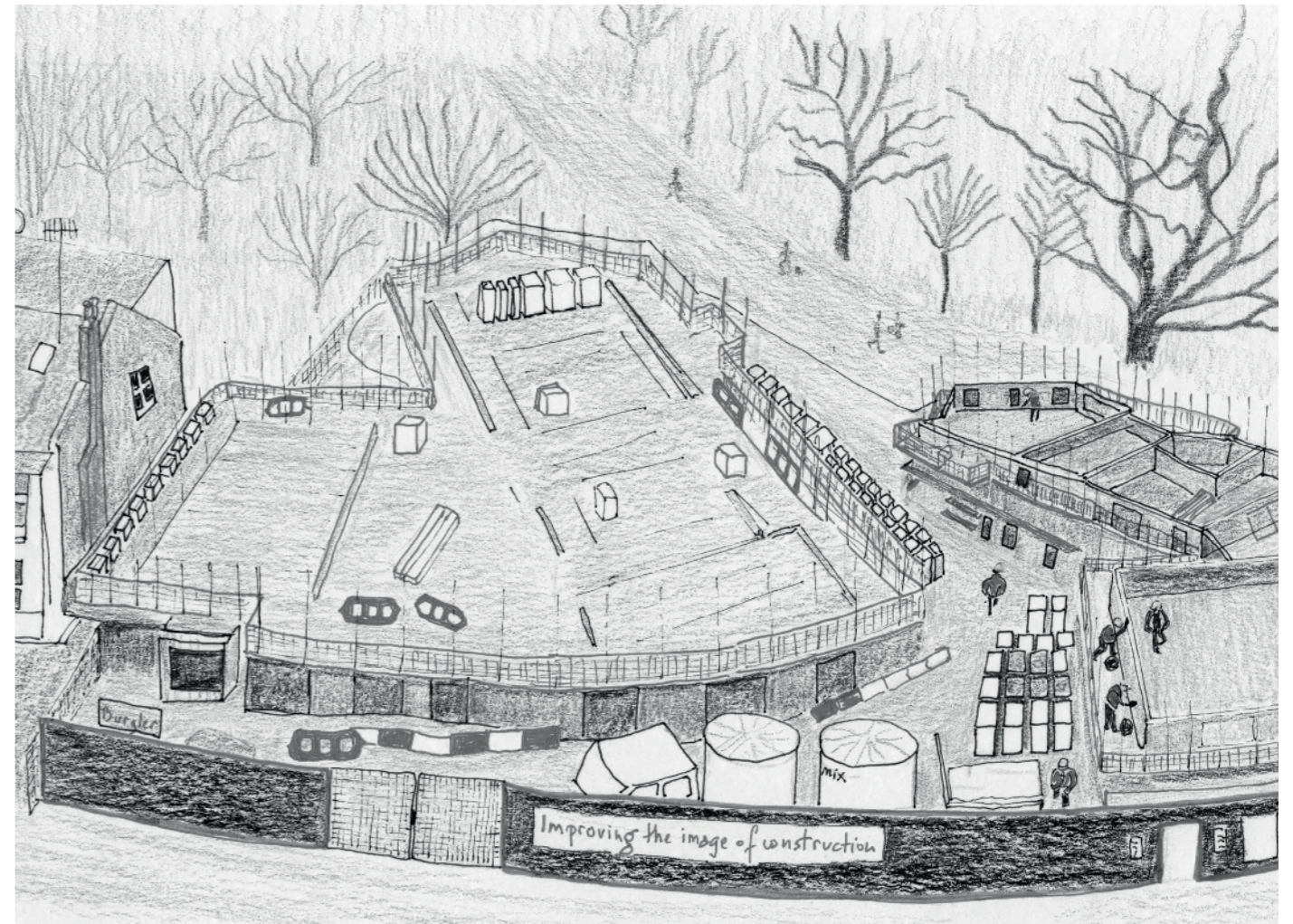
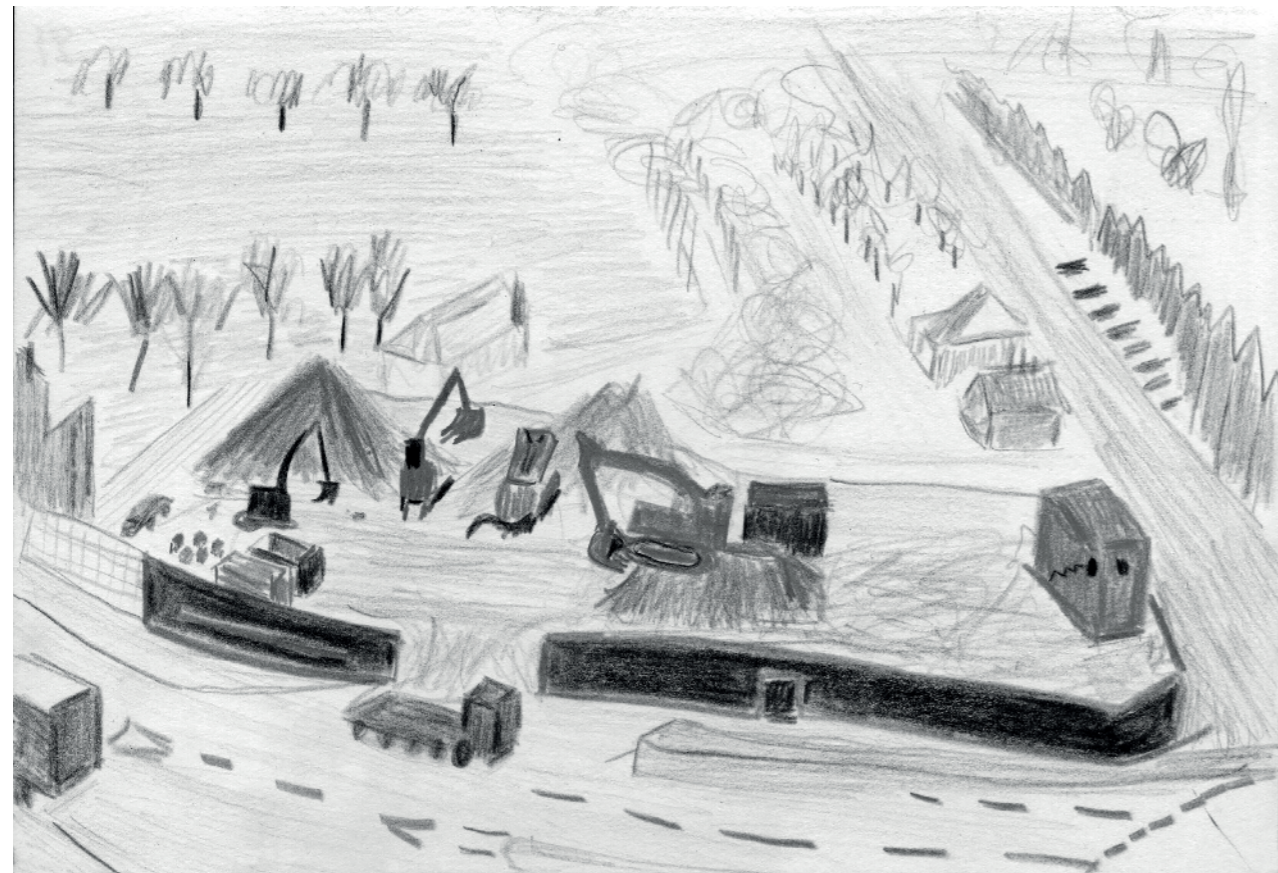
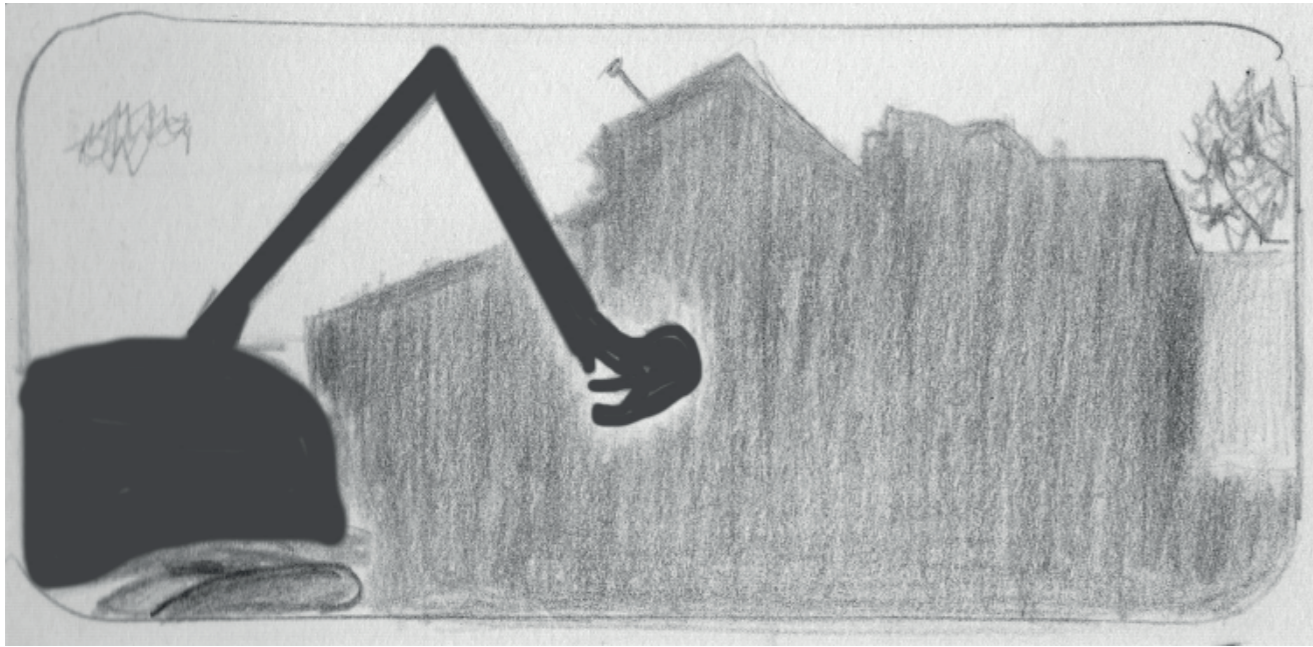


In the following weeks, Hermeline's
environment got challenged in
many other ways...



But
she
came across
the territories
of several
skulks
of foxes and did not find
any spot where she could
permanently settle.

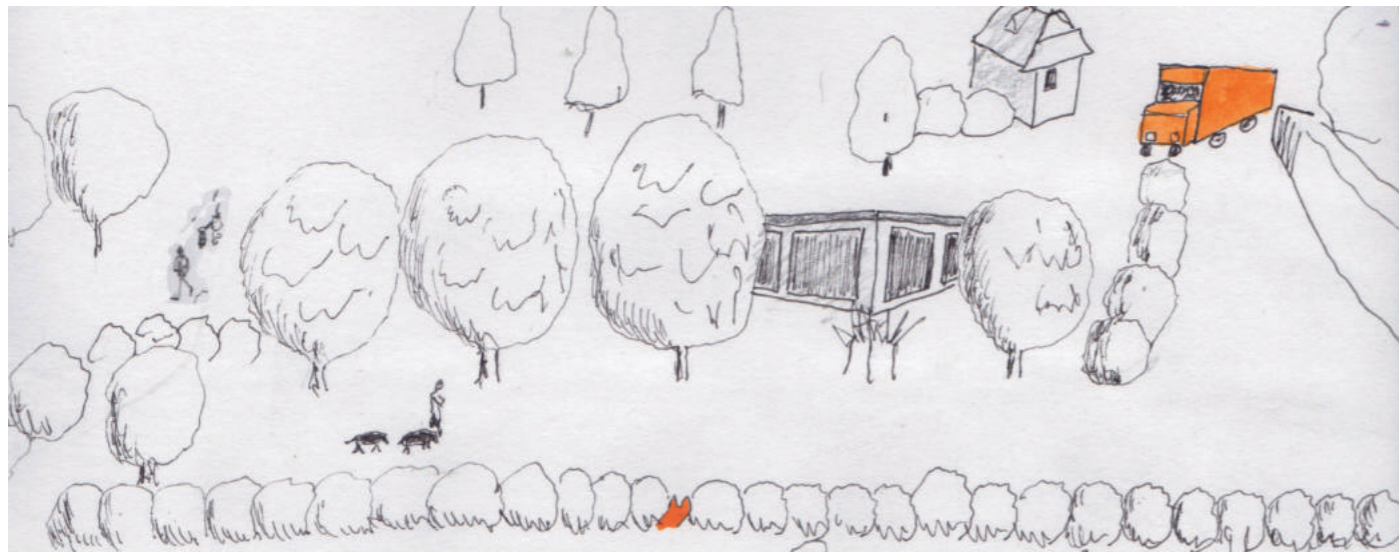




... and she became more and more insecure.



At last, one day, Hermeline felt something promising was happening in the park.

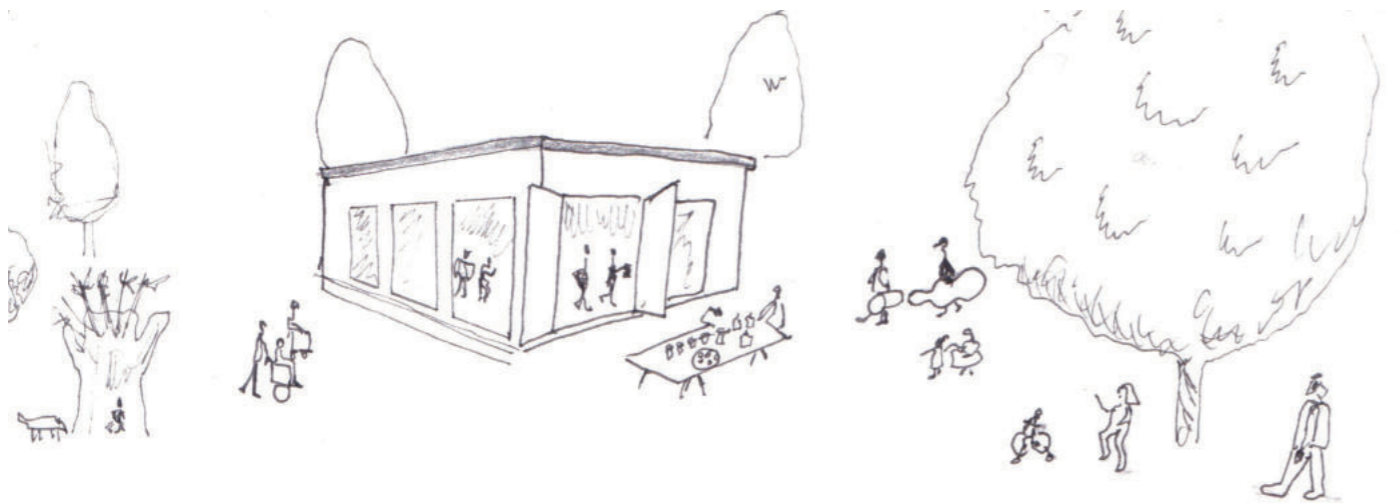


But when everybody was gone, a man brought plastic bags to huge bins, and left. Hermeline hardly found a crumb on the premises.

She visited the new cafe surroundings every morning and every evening, showing herself at a distance so that the people opening and closing it would spot her. Maybe they would leave something for her? Well, as she concluded after a few weeks of this routine, they could not care less...

The construction of this cafe had caused the removal of several bushes, but had not brought anything in exchange. Should she stay in this area, or should she leave?

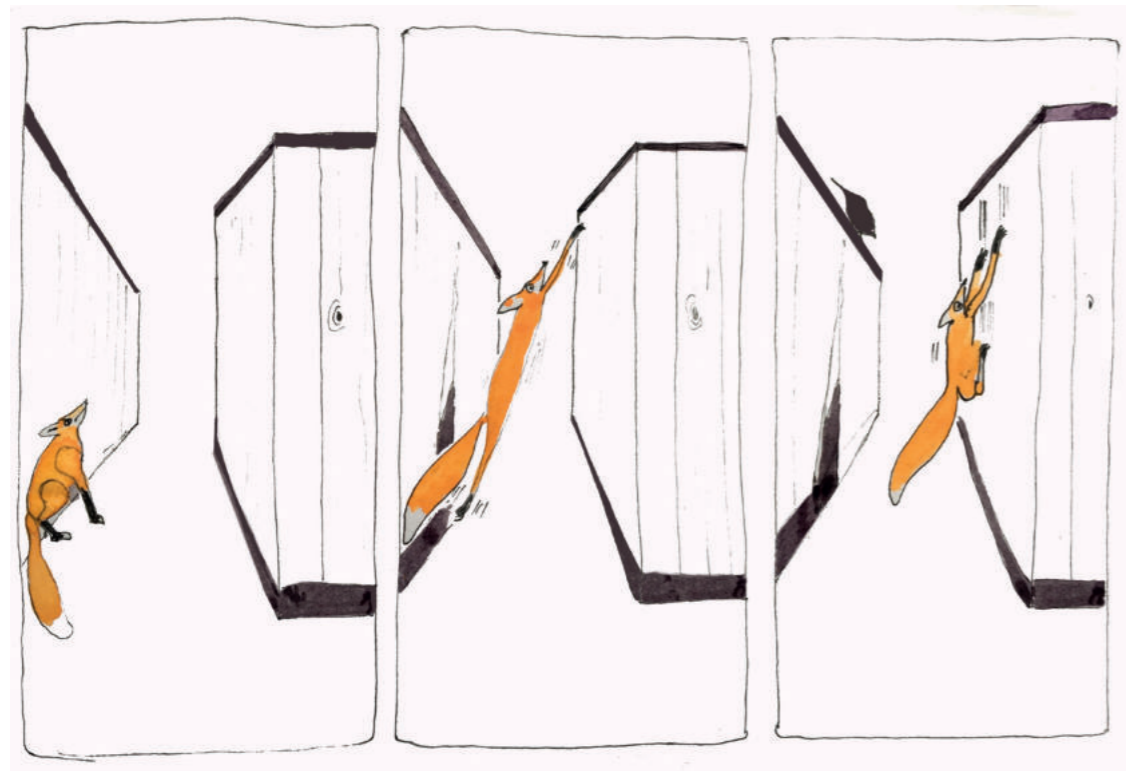
Sad and even depressed, Hermeline headed to her den, wondering how she would survive in the winter without going to the city center: of course there was always food to be found in rubbish plastic bags on the pavement there, but it's on their way to these attractive shops and restaurants that her partner and later on two of her children had been hit by cars and died. She'd rather avoid it.



However, once in the cemetery she heard shouting from the gardens. She was immediately struck by an unusual smell, sneaked under the fence....



... and found herself in the narrow path running all along the back of the gardens. Once in front of the much taller second fence, with no way through from the ground, she became impatient.



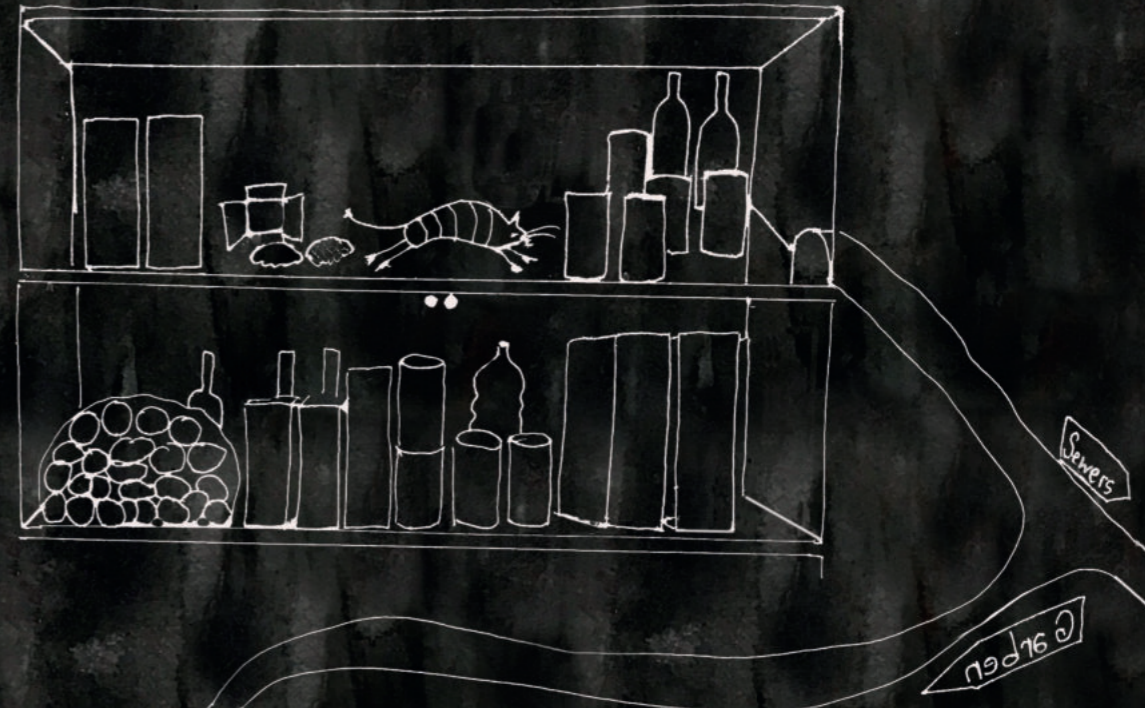
By the time she succeeded in climbing onto the fence, all had gone silent in the garden she was interested in. Still following the smell, she came across unequivocal traces.



She froze behind a bush and waited.



She went on waiting, until the lights of the houses were off, until even the leaves seemed to sleep.



“What’s that?” shouted the man.

“A fox!” echoed the woman.

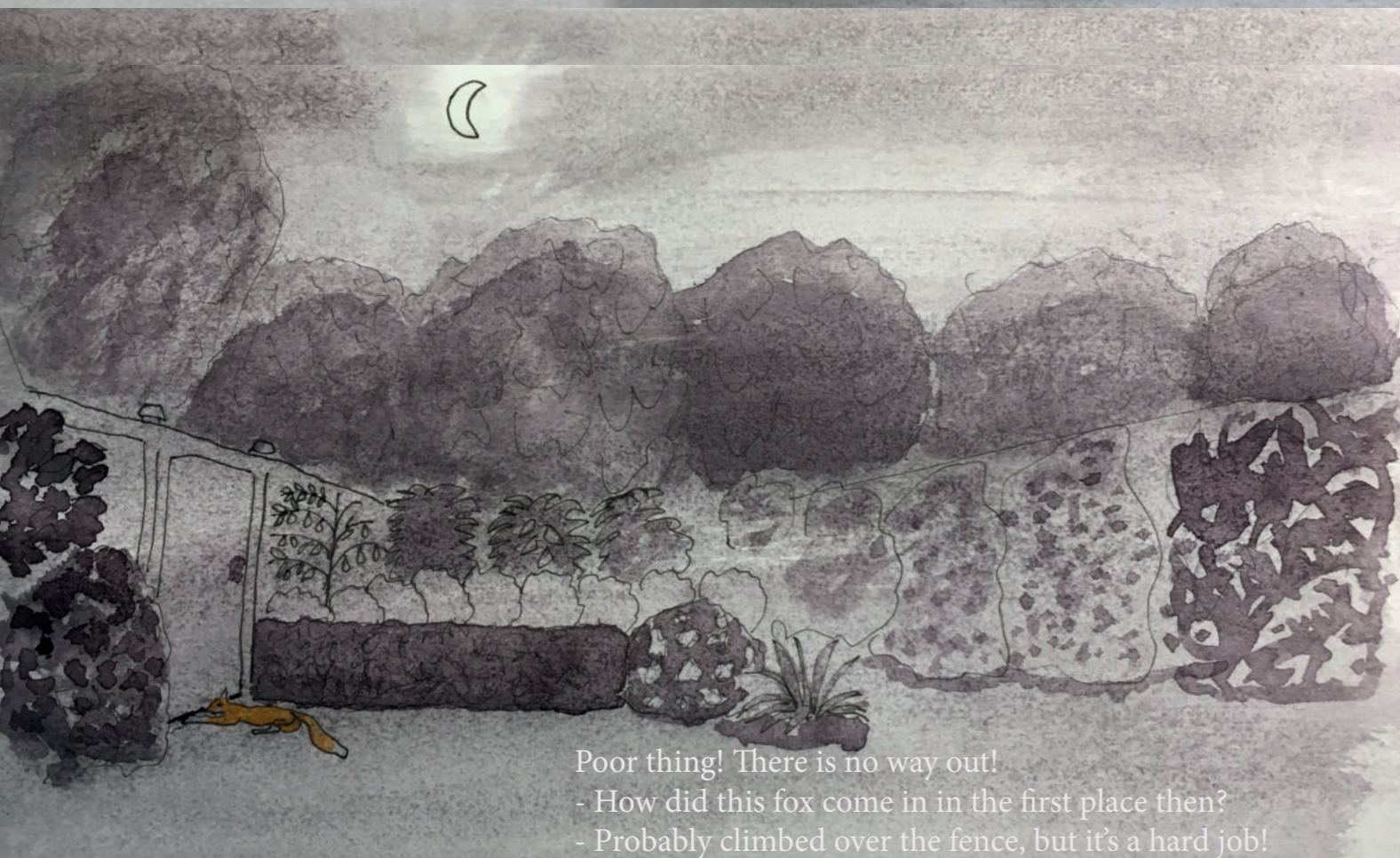


Hermeline stared at the couple, ready to run away.
But they smiled.

“Wow! That was a jump! So elegant!
- And so fast!
- I would be pleased to see this beauty
more often in our garden.”



Hermeline blinked at them and slowly
reached the door of their tall fence.

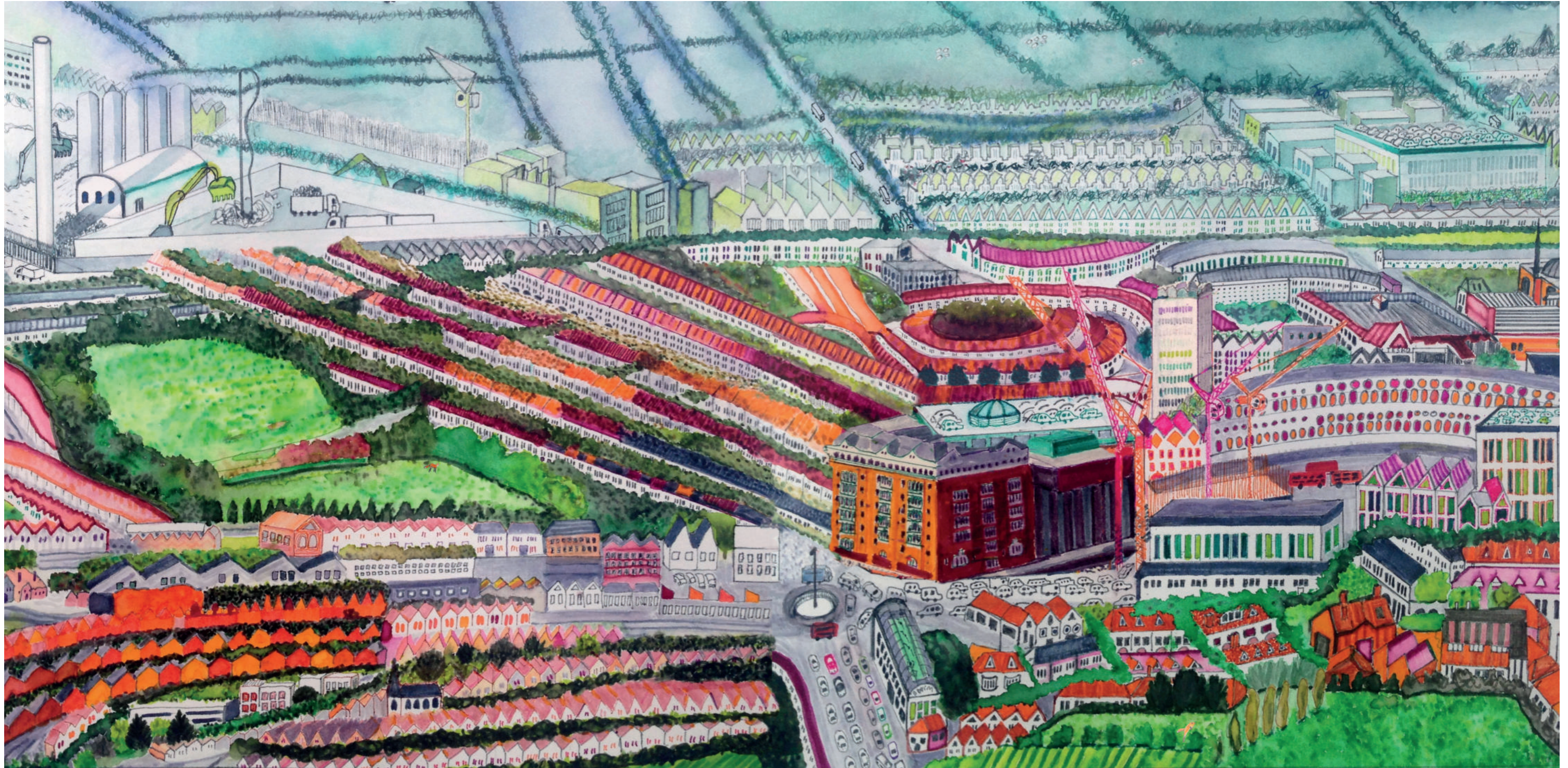



Poor thing! There is no way out!
- How did this fox come in in the first place then?
- Probably climbed over the fence, but it's a hard job!



That's how
Hermeline
secured new food
providers, for the couple
were grateful for her solving
of the rat infestation and always
happy to see her at dawn or dusk.
They went as far as arranging an opening
in the fence to make her visits easier.

For the time being, Hermeline decided to stay in the area where she had been living for a long time. She kept exploring the neighbourhood and beyond. And she never ruled out going back to the hill in the countryside - if there still was any countryside left...





Hermeline's environment is disturbed by a new neighbour and the frantic construction of new buildings.

Will she succeed in finding new sources of food as the balance between green spaces and buildings is changing so fast?

