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Leaping from Shape to Shape: The Poetry of Coyote

Our Father who art in nature, who has given the gift of survival to the coyote, the common brown rat, the English sparrow, the house fly and the moth, must have a great and overwhelming love for no-goods and blots-on-the-town and bums, and Mack and the boys. Virtues and graces and laziness and zest. Our Father who art in nature.

—John Steinbeck

Elusive and magical, both silent and garrulous, both feared and beloved, Coyote is the ultimate paradox—an animal associated with wisdom and foolishness, cunning and buffoonery, resilience and fragility, solitude and solidarity, legend and physicality, invisibility and ubiquity.

Although Coyote tales and stories abound, coyote sightings are actually pretty rare—and attacks even more rare. Coyote remains mostly hidden until we suddenly notice her trotting alongside us, a squirrel hanging limp from her mouth.

Celebrated Native author N. Scott Momaday tells us, “Coyotes have the gift of seldom being seen; they keep to the edge of vision and beyond, loping in and out of cover on the plains and highlands. And at night, when the whole world belongs to them, they parley at the river with the other dogs, their higher, sharper voices full of authority and rebuke. They are an old council of clowns, and they are listened to.”

The notion of Shelley’s “unacknowledged legislator” comes to mind. Whether perceived as muse, demigod, nuisance, or kin, Coyote clearly bewitches poets, perhaps in large part because both Coyote and the poet refuse easy category, move indelibly between silence and song, and seem to be most at home on the back roads,

at the crossroads, on the spinning wheel or the turning page.

Poet Simmons Buntin likens the history of Coyote myth to a river:

I cannot follow the river of her myth.
Perhaps Papago, or Hopi.
In legend, she was born of the sharpest
cactus—the cholla—and spread her thin
roots into the desert soil.
She broke the underground river
and blossomed into life.

In her poem “Mohave Evening,” Virginia Hamilton Adair closes her quiet meditation on these mercurial creatures this way:

. . . we know the coyotes are off
into silver spaces,
their eyes coming out to hunt
like all the other stars.

Lois Red Elk, in her poem “Coyote Invisible,” notes:

Coyotes prowl the low ground, to understand
the process of potential maneuvers, or how long
it takes to become a tale.

Even the science of Coyote moves into mythic territory. According to Eric Gese of the USDA's Wildlife Services, coyotes are uniquely adaptable. Killing them does not rid you of them; when hunters cull too many coyotes from an ecologically balanced habitat, small mammal populations that make up their prey increase, and when this food source becomes more abundant, coyotes' litters increase proportionally.

Additionally, Coyote seems to know a trap when he sees one. It's said that when sheep farmers laid out animal carcasses laced with strychnine to kill off coyotes, wolves were killed in great numbers. Coyotes, however, wised up and avoided the traps. Lewis Hyde tells of another instance in which

. . . trappers set metal leg traps, which will catch muskrat and mink and fox and skunk, but Coyote only rarely. Coyotes develop their own relationship to the trap; as one naturalist has written, "it is difficult to escape the conclusion that coyotes . . . have a sense of humor. How else to explain, for instance, the well-known propensity of experienced coyotes to dig up traps, turn them over, and urinate or defecate on them?"

How Coyote learns to recognize a trap is a mystery, but one thing is for certain: a hungry coyote means business. Javier Zamora opens his Wallace Stevens homage, "Looking at Coyote," with:

among thirty dusty men the only wet thing
the mouth of the coyote

Joni Mitchell's "Coyote," whose hunger is one of sexual conquest, maneuvers through a series of difficult chord progressions before finally appearing in the flesh as the doppelgänger to her lover:

I looked a coyote right in the face
On the road to Baljennie, near my old home town
He went running thru the whisker wheat
Chasing some prize down
And a hawk was playing with him

Coyote was jumping straight up and making passes
He had those same eyes just like yours
Under your dark glasses
Privately probing the public rooms
And peeking through keyholes in numbered doors
Where the players lick their wounds. . . .

Nora Naranjo-Morse picks up the thread in her poem “A Well-Traveled Coyote” which ends:

Slick
 right down to his Tony Lamas
 Coyote
 I'd recognize him anywhere
 Copenhagen
 New York
 Gallup.
People say
you can dress 'em up
 but once a coyote
 always a coyote.

Here in the sticks in Western Colorado, coyotes come and go with the rabbits, the gophers, the frogs, the waters, and the seasons. And everywhere they go they tend to inspire wonder as well as wariness.

After his chickens were wiped out by a clever troop of song dogs, a neighbor sat out on his porch for a month, shotgun in hand, just waiting for the opportunity for revenge. Another neighbor watched a pack devour her dachshund in her own backyard. A third tells the story of a coyote chasing their puppy through their kitchen dog door.

Last year, the howls and yips were such that we were

convinced a large band of coyote had taken up residence in the arroyo behind our home. After listening carefully, I discerned it was a single pair. This is a common occurrence—a pair of coyotes can easily sound like a large pack due to their wide range of variations in vocalization. Add to that the tendency to throw their voices against canyon walls and create echoing effects, and we begin to understand that coyote trickery includes making anyone within earshot believe a single coyote to be a large and threatening pack. Such clever, shifty little beasts!

In Didi Jackson's poem "*canis latrans / coyote*," we are reminded there is no real separation between Coyote and the land:

They are the song-dogs; they are the contour lines;
they are the topography.

And Coyote isn't limited to topography. Colorado poet Danny Rosen tells us:

Twice last week on the ridgeline, a coyote
leapt into the sky and flew off an eagle.

In keeping with the theme, Tacey M. Atsitty entitles a poem "Coyote Sees Himself in Water" and describes how Coyote :

Averts his gaze: nare & lore, a body;
of water braided into itself: bone
of herring. . . .

This refusal to remain in any one consistent form is just more evidence that Trickster is nothing if not an agent of change, attentiveness, adjustment and adaptation. If you think about it, that sounds rather like the creative process. Indeed, I've come to think of Coyote as one of the poet's greatest teachers,

demonstrating the value of paying attention, of carefully listening, of inhabiting liminal spaces while hinting at new ways of seeing—all the while stalking us from the brush, reminding us, as Colorado poet Jack Mueller would say, to “stay solid in the mystery.”

I often wonder if the Trickster myths and sightings are challenges to our all too familiar insistence on binary perceptions. Is Coyote, among so many other things, a lesson in the art of bridging opposites? It seems to me impossible to consider Coyote in any kind of black and white or binary terms.

Contemplating coyote sightings in a New York subway and later in Central Park, Yusef Komunyaakaa was inspired to write his poem “Crossing a City Highway” in which

For a breathy moment, she stops
on the world’s edge, & then quick as that
masters the stars & again slips the noose
& darts straight between sedans & SUVs.

There she is, slipping sideways through the keyhole again. In some Native stories, Coyote has the power of creation. In others he’s a kind of superhero battling supernatural enemies. At times she’s a messenger, bringing significant information to the people. And yet at other times, he’s a clown outwitted every time by a bird-brained roadrunner.

Ah, Coyote, we hardly know you! Which, as Coyote knows, might well be the point of all Coyote glory and weird revelation. So slippery is the coyote myth, we mortals can’t even agree on how to pronounce the word *coyote*.

In Greek and Roman myth, Hermes, Puck, and Pan represent the archetypal and unpredictable Coyote. In Norse myth, we have Loki. In ancient Egypt, Toth. In chemistry and in the night sky, we have Mercury. In Hawaiian myth, we have the female trickster

figure, Mamala, who appears sometimes as a shark and at others as a beautiful woman. There is also the female Trickster, Inanna, of ancient Sumer.

In modern times, examples of the Trickster myth are found in such characters as Bob Dylan, Beetlejuice, Andy Kaufman, The Cheshire Cat, Jack Sparrow, Br'er Rabbit, the Doctor in *Doctor Who*, The Pink Panther, Rumpelstiltskin, and the Riddler. The pseudonym-happy and world-changing Benjamin Franklin might also qualify, in large part because above all, Trickster is an agent of change. Lewis Hyde, author of "Trickster Makes This World" argues that Trickster is a boundary-crosser. Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and Trickster is always there at that boundary."

But just being tricky does not make someone an archetype of the Trickster myth. There is something going on here that's entirely more complicated and stranger than that. If Coyote were a poetic device, he would be metaphor, caesura and volta all at once. He might also personify Emily Dickinson's advice to "tell it slant." The poet William Stafford, at the end of his poem "Outside," notes:

For all we have taken into our keeping
and polished with our hands belongs to a truth
greater than ours, in the animals' keeping.
Coyotes are circling around our truth.

The shapeshifter myth in Native culture and across continents often takes the form of the rabbit, the hare, the fox, the sandhill crane, the raven, the crow, the joker, the alchemist, the magician, the truth-teller, and fool. Most often and most notably though, especially here in the west, Coyote trots across our consciousness as the ultimate shape-shifter, always asking that we think outside the confines of our comfort zone.

Transition and transformation is the native tongue of the poet, and traveling the backroads seems to be our preference, so it isn't surprising that writing the coyote poem is a rite of passage for any poet living in the west. By design it seems, writing a good one is pretty hard to do. I like to think Coyote finds that pretty funny.

I'll leave you with a fine coyote poem in full, written by Colorado poet Art Goodtimes.

Roadkill Coyote

sprawls across the centerline
backleg broken * round glazed
eyes glassy as marbles
unwavering * unblinking
as the world rolls by
now unnoticed or maybe
all seen & thus merely
unremarkable * no fudge
or flinch of instinct * just
the cold last look of it all

i turn the car around &
go back to the body * drag her
off the road * steam rises
when i stroke her flanks
the jaw locked open * canine
teeth menacing even in death

i take out my knife * sing
a death song & thanking coyote
i cut off her tail
fur too beautiful to bury

& then pull her hind end
deeper into the rabbitbrush
beside the highway's shoulder

all the way home * down
the canyon & up Norwood Hill
singing her
back into the mystery.

“Roadkill Coyote” is reprinted in full with permission from the
author.

