

Night Song

On the outskirts of civilization, the call of the coyote stirs divided sympathies.

I heard the coyotes again last night. The first cry, sweet and clear, rose from the wooded ridge across the stream from our house. Then other voices joined, lifting and eager. I lay awake and listened, feeling a prickly primal thrill.

Fifteen years ago, only a few months after my husband, Gregg, and I had begun our veterinary practice, 34 sheep were savaged in a hillside pasture only a half mile from our farm. Newspaper articles described in detail the scene of slaughter and speculated that a coyote pack had been teaching its pups how to kill. Local hunters used the incident as evidence that a coyote hunt was necessary. Game wardens and wildlife biologists, however, seemed divided over what had killed the sheep; some said it could have been a pack of domestic dogs. A neighbor who keeps her own sheep near that pasture said she loses a ewe or two to coyotes each year, but she pointed out that when sheep are threatened, they just stamp their feet—ineffective against predatory canids, wild or domestic. For that reason, she keeps a guard dog with her flock.



One early spring morning several years ago, after we had heard the coyotes carrying on for hours, Gregg and I spotted a small blond lump just visible in the mist along the far edge of our southernmost pasture. From the kitchen window I thought it might be Phoebe, my favorite Cochin hen, the one with the fluffy tan pantaloons. Gregg went to investigate. He returned carrying the limp body of Toby, our neighbor's cocker spaniel. Gregg brought the dog into the veterinary clinic to clean him up before calling his owner, an elderly lady who lived on the other side of our field. He thinks the coyotes were dragging the body back across the road to their den but dropped it when they touched our horses' electric fence.

Last October, our son's miniature dachshund, Snooky, vanished. We had let him out before bed, and he simply failed to return. We searched for him for days, walking the road that fronted our property, checking the ditches to see if he had been hit by a car. He was too ornery to have been stolen, and too old and pudgy to have run away, so finally we suspected the coyotes.

Not long after Snooky disappeared, Gregg and I spent the afternoon exploring a rockfall on the eastern slope of the ridge near our home. Large tumbling boulders had formed small caves, and we thought this must be where the pack lived. We found several dens, peering into them with flashlights. Outside, we saw scat and a few tufts of gray fur, but nothing else. We were half hoping to find Snooky's collar or what was left of his remains to bring back to bury, to have an answer.

Despite these incidents, I know that the coyotes are profoundly shy, coming around only at night, eating mainly mice and other small mammals. So they take a weak deer now and again, or an old ewe foolishly stamping her feet. I just can't begrudge them this. If coyotes hover ephemerally on the outskirts of civilization, I guess I have to ask: Who has encroached upon whom?

In the darkness of our bedroom, I listened as the coyotes' voices gradually dissolved into a chaos of discordant yips, and then, silence. I wondered if I had remembered to close the chickens' door. Finally, as I waited for sleep, I wondered about the coyotes themselves, living their mysterious lives on the periphery of human vision. In a strange, melancholy way, I like hearing them. The eerie exuberance of their voices reminds me of our life here in northern Vermont—intertwined with wild and domestic animals, with death and life, with a bittersweet blend of hope and truth. 🐾