**Coyote Ugly**

Madison Christian

 The canid materialized from the brush and onto the fire road in front of me like an apparition. Until he emerged into the clearing, I hadn’t noticed him. He moved invisibly through the gray-brown chaparral, his muted coat the perfect cloaking device for one whose existence depends upon stealth and surprise. Standing perhaps twenty yards distant, he was large and lithe as coyotes ought to be. I immediately paused when I saw him. Not out of apprehension, but instead awe and admiration. Coyote yelps, barks, and howls are commonplace in this place, but the boisterous culprits usually prefer to remain anonymous and unseen.

 The coyote briefly paused too and looked my way. Not out of awe and admiration, but instead apprehension. The hoots and hollers of humans is commonplace in this place, but those who make the racket are rarely bashful about being seen. To the contrary, they seemingly like the attention. Or maybe they resort to comfortable sounds as a defense against fear, a means of bringing the known of the indoors into the unknown of the outdoors.

 We briefly stood there on the dirt road eyeing one another before the coyote began trotting away. The rebuff was dispiriting. I had hoped for a more meaningful encounter, to make some sort of connection with this revered and reviled creature. So, I started following him as he climbed a steep slope carpeted with chamise, sage, and yucca. Occasionally he’d look back as I struggled to keep pace, but he never permitted me to close the gap that separated us. He didn’t appear particularly panicked, but he remained tentative and distrustful.

 I once met a frantic woman on the trail near this same spot who had called out to me for help. When I got to her, she was tearful and trembling with fear because three coyotes were following her. I never actually saw the coyotes she spoke of, but as I escorted her off the trail, I couldn’t help but think how fortunate she was to see three of these handsome beings at once. Her coyote aura must have been pure. My aura has been irreparably damaged since my youth. It repels instead of attracting coyotes. The coyote I was now following could sense that. He knew of my wretched past and the crimes I committed in Idaho.

 When I was perhaps twelve or so, my dad bought me a .22 caliber rifle with a scope. He had his own collection of firearms, and we’d frequently go shooting together at the local gun club. One time, we traveled to Burley, Idaho to visit my dad’s brother John and we brought our guns along. Uncle Johnny was an enthusiastic hunter and he had promised to take us out to the sagebrush steppe to shoot rabbits, marmots, and anything else that moved. My dad wasn’t much of a sportsman; so, I had never hunted anything in my life. As a result, I was eager to finally experience something that was so rooted in western culture, tradition, and masculinity.

 It must have been late autumn or early winter when we went out because I remember it being cold and breezy. On the plains, we wandered through the scrub without rousting anything before climbing a lava outcropping where we could gain a vantage point and conceal ourselves from our quarry. Uncle Johnny had a game call that mimicked an injured rabbit, and he began blowing it to attract a coyote. Then we sat silent, waiting and watching.

 It didn’t take long for Uncle Johnny’s treachery to yield results. As we secreted ourselves away among the black, basaltic boulders, a solitary *Canis latrans* came loping across the flatlands toward what it must have imagined was an easy meal. When he was perhaps twenty-five yards distant, I raised my .22, located him with my scope, and squeezed the trigger. The coyote dropped. A single shot at a moving target from twenty-five yards. Uncle Johnny and my dad were both impressed and congratulated me on my fine marksmanship.

 As we walked toward where the coyote had fallen, I was feeling quite jubilant and self-satisfied. I found shooting at something other than a paper target to be quite exhilarating. Then we came upon the downed coyote. Either my aim was not what I thought it was or the caliber of my rifle was insufficient for the job, but the coyote was not dead. He was lying on his side between the scattered sagebrush panting heavily, mouth agape, and eyes open wide with terror. I immediately regretted what I had done. Even at that young age, I understood the utter senselessness of it. But that realization arrived too late. The despicable deed was already accomplished. As we looked down on the injured animal, Uncle Johnny approached with his semi-automatic rifle and shot him three or four times in the head. His feral eyes went dark as his life-force departed. Then we walked away, leaving his bloodied carcass lying on the ground to have the eyes plucked out by ravens.

 Back on the trail forty-five years later, I reached the crest of the hillock where the ground leveled some. The coyote I was following lingered on a distant ridge waiting for me. As I stood there regaining my breath, I wanted to confess my prior transgressions to him. I wanted to tell him that sadness, regret, and guilt have weighed heavily on me for four-plus decades. I wanted him to know that a piece of my soul died with his brother on the Idaho prairie that day long ago. But what I desired more than anything else was absolution. A sign that he understood and was willing to forgive. The coyote refused to grant it. He just stood there staring. Then he turned his back on me, dropped over the ridgeline, and disappeared from my sight.