

Ten Stories About Coyotes I Never Told You

by Dan Holt

I. The White Fence

When our marriage broke up, I went home and painted the entire corral. I don't know why it was so important, but it was. I had to get home and grab a paintbrush and stand in the Arizona sun and paint the corral. I painted it white; so white you couldn't look at it for very long.

"Jesus, is that fence white," my father said.

"Whitest damn fence I ever saw," my mother said.

They stood, arm in arm, framed by a rose arbor. I wanted to cry, they looked so good. They looked so good standing there that I wanted to cry and maybe paint the fence again. After all, I had the time; another coat wouldn't hurt.

"That's true," my father said. "The chicken coop could stand a coat, too."

I heard a coyote yelp in the distance.

II. Morning Ride

There were partridges near the barn, and it was still cold enough that I could see my breath. I kneeed Poco's belly so that I could tighten the cinch. He blew hot smoke and danced away from me.

The desert was green that December, and the earth was a rust color, especially with the red sun coming over Hat Mountain throwing a tint on everything. At the end of the graded road behind the barn were two wrecked cars. They were rust color, too.

I took my hands out of my pockets when the sun started to warm me up. I thought that it would be nice just to keep riding, deeper and deeper into the desert. I felt so good about the riding and the sun that I wanted to glide in a walking trot all the way to Mexico.

I caught, out of the corner of my eye, just a flash of gray.

III. Coyotes Are After My Mother's Chickens

I hung around the house, standing in the kitchen, watching Mom wash the dishes. She was talking to me.

"How's your job? Are you happy? Are you going back to her?"

I was sticking a butter knife into the toaster.

"You know that's plugged in."

"What?"

"You know that's plugged in."

"What's plugged in?"

"The toaster you're sticking the knife into."

She was looking out the window over the sink as she said that, and suddenly she stopped pulling glasses out of the suds and leaned forward to get a better look at something in the backyard. She was standing on her toes and then she said "Shit" and ran to the utility room, grabbing a .22 automatic out of the closet, and ran out the back door.

I followed her and saw her fire three shots at a disappearing coyote.

"I'll get one of them yet," she said.

"When did you start saying 'Shit'?" I asked her.

IV. Chasing an Old Coyote

I was twelve when we caught a coyote in the open, four of us chasing a coyote across a dried-out cotton field. He must have been old or sick because he couldn't outrun us. So we kept him in the middle of the field and then tried to run him over until he caught a hoof in the side. He stopped trying to run from us and just sat down in the middle of the field. We kept riding around him, Indians circling a wagon train, but he wouldn't run anymore. I guess he just decided it wasn't worth it.

V. Poco Throws Me

I was thinking "coyote" to myself when Poco jumped sideways. He was jumping and bucking. I pulled his head up and kept him from throwing me, but he kept jumping, first sideways and then he lunged forward, the bit in his teeth. The leather cut into my fingers.

"Shit."

Poco wheeled on his hind legs and reared.

"Son of a bitch."

We went down backward. I jumped to the side; he hit, rolled on his back like one large rocker off a chair.

VI. Cheating at Golf

My dad wanted me to play golf with him on Saturday. The golf course was the only place where he could talk. There was something about sitting on a bench in a lime green cardigan, waiting for two or three foursomes to get off the tee, that really opened him up. He told me the story about the time he and Ed from the shop tried to hit a coyote on the fourth fairway.

I broke 100 that day but cheated a lot. We both did. If there was a tree in the way, we'd move the ball, or kick it out of the rough, or sometimes put the ball on a little tuft of grass so we could hit a wood. Sometimes, we'd even forget a stroke. All in all, we cheated about the same.

"I don't know if I want to go back," I said to him while we were waiting to make our approach shots to the eighteenth green.

"What do you mean, you don't want to go back?"

VII. Screams

He broke his leg when he went down. He kept trying to get up and kept falling down again. His wild eyes looked so large and white. I ran down the riverbed, not wanting to look back at him thrashing in the sand. I didn't know horses could scream like that.

VIII. Go with God

The Mexicans came out of nowhere, out of the desert, just appeared in the driveway. One had a red rag around his head; the other had a hat pulled over his eyes, and they were both soaked from a shower. I found out later that there were others, whole families, hidden not far away.

My father saw them first and walked out to talk to them, his hands stuffed in his pockets. I could see him shake his head and then point across the desert to the west. Mom was holding the .22 and checking to see if it still had bullets. And just like that, they headed across the desert in the same direction my father had pointed, walking under the "Vayas con Dios" sign over the driveway entrance.

"Who are they?" I asked my father when he came back to the house.

"They call them Coyotes," he said. "They bring people to the promised land."

IX. Canis Latrans

I didn't see them until I was almost on them. They were standing like gray plaster statues, so still. I remember thinking that only wild animals can stand that still. I also remember thinking that if I could get close enough, I could see my reflection in their eyes. I picked up a rock and threw it at the largest coyote. He moved just enough so that the rock missed and then he froze again. We stood a little longer: one specimen *Homo sapiens*, sub species of the order Primate and approximately twenty specimen of *Canis latrans* facing one another in a dry riverbed in a desert. Finally, they moved off toward the spot where Poco lay, exhausted.

X. Chasing Chickens

My parents stayed in the departure area until I was in the plane and the doors closed. I looked for our house and found it by looking for Hat Mountain and Winslow Peak, the red tile roof of the house drawing my attention. The empty corral didn't look white from the air. I imagined chickens running in circles in the backyard.