

Coyote on the Fence

By Glenda Goodrich

Thinking about whether or not I'd remembered to cancel the newspaper before I left home, I caught a glimpse of him out the passenger side window of our car speeding along the New Mexico highway, yelled out to my travel partner, "Stop. Turn around. Go back. There's something I want to see."

"What was it?" he asked.

"I'm not sure...but it's definitely worth turning around to see. I promise."

We circled around and drove back to a line of fencing along the east side of the two-lane road. I got out, side stepped my way down into a five-foot ditch and up the other side and through knee high brush for a closer look. He seemed to shape shift, first into a deer, then into a wolf, then into himself, coyote. Big for his breed, thick-furred and healthy looking.

There he hung on the fence, folded in two, his back haunch draped over one side of the barbed wire, the rest of his body—gut, chest and head—folded down over the other side, hanging free, his nose six inches from the ground, eyes shut, tongue lopped over the side of his lower lip in a caricature death scene.

It was quiet carnage with no sign of a struggle. A pool of blood beneath his nose left a red oxide stain, soaked into the dirt and dried in carmine splotches across yellow blooms of rabbit brush. Everything looked perfect. His lush fur lay in rich waves of color over his back and down onto his tail, paws clean, black toe pads round and plump, a taxidermy scene replicated to illustrate the dangerous life of a coyote.

Without any forethought I reached out and touched him, just in case. My finger was met with hard furry rigor. Solid. Dead for a while. I looked for wounds. None. No bullet holes, no sign of any struggle, just hanging there, lifeless.

At dusk he left his den and trotted along through bristled thicket, stirring up redolent sage, nose hovering low, picking up scent. Then, movement caught his eye and he launched into pursuit.

He saw the fence at the last minute, made a leap to clear it, but the barbed wire did its job and he was caught at the hip—the underside of vital organs, the back of his long strong body snapped to a stop, hind legs pawing with no purchase to free himself. The more he struggles, the deeper the piercing into his tender parts. He died quickly, didn't suffer long, his spine snapping in two from trajectory force.

My travel partner said, "Come on, let's go."

"No, wait a second. I want to check him out some more."

"It's just a dead coyote." He said.

"No, it's more than that. I don't know...it's not just a dead coyote."

My friend started walking back to the car. Staring at coyote, I couldn't turn away. I inspected the hairs of the fur, light tawny brown with dark brown tips; behind the ears and over the forearms the color changed to the red-brown of the New Mexico landscape. The underside of the body was white, the tip of the tail carbon black, all designed as camouflage to disappear into the variegated terrain.

It was the paws that got to me. One crossed over the other in a peaceful gesture, anthropomorphic in a dead man's pose. I wanted to cut off his tail and keep it, but I couldn't disturb the beauty. He was too perfect, so Christ-like in his hip belt of thorns. Christ on the cross. Coyote on the fence. I took a picture from two angles.

This is his territory to run free. How could he know a landowner set a trap to thwart his rabbit chase, a barrier barely visible in the dim evening light. Doing what comes naturally, he got caught in a gut snare. The whole scene was horrific, tragic, captivating and exhilarating. Exquisite wildness, hung up on the fence to die. Stopped in midstride.

Three times he came to me in my dreams. In the first dream I floated toward him, my feet not touching ground. I poked at him and he came to life, finished his jump over the fence and ran away free. In the second dream I was in an art gallery, saw a painting of the coyote dead on the fence, and wondered how someone could have witnessed the exact same scene. In the third sequence I walked up to him, he turned his head, looked me in the eye and, and said in a low whispering voice, "Do you get it now?"

Weeks later he is still with me. I show the pictures to friends. It feels good to revere something, love something, hurt for it. Coyote wild. Coyote ugly. Coyote love.

It's this same love I feel for my own wild spirit. I want to coax it out into the meadow before it gets sacrificed in a barbed wire trap of limitation. Last summer I could have worn feathers in my hair and joined ecstatic dance in the drum tower at Oregon Country Fair, could feel the rhythm in my body, but I reigned it in and held back. I was afraid of looking like a silly old woman, afraid I might embarrass my kids, myself. *Could have, but didn't.*

Borrowing words from my favorite poet, Mary Oliver: *I want to let the soft animal within me love what it loves*, and for coyote to call out to me in a blood curdling howl, over and over again, announcing my place in the family of wildness. Yes, I do get it.

We are never all one thing. Coyote on the fence left me spell-bound, disgusted and bowing in prayer that wildness may somehow navigate the many snares of this world and survive for future generations.

Today I will pay the electric bill and clean the bathroom, then go downstairs to my studio, set the appraising eye aside and try to coax something delirious out onto the canvas. Maybe I'll call my daughter and see if the grandkids can go camping in the mountains this weekend.