

THOMAS WHARTON

AMONG WOLVES

IN NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA a wildlife biologist observing a pack of timber wolves is astonished to discover a coyote living among them. It has already been conjectured, if not quite confirmed, that coyotes and wolves are interbreeding in eastern North America, creating a new hybrid animal known as the “coywolf,” but no one has ever come across a similar phenomenon in the western wilds of the continent. The biologist observes the pack for several weeks, as winter gives way to spring, and eventually concludes that the animal in question is not a hybrid but in fact a true coyote that has somehow attached itself to the wolves and has, improbably, been accepted among them.

This is unheard-of, given that wolf packs tend to kill any coyotes they find encroaching in their territory. Although the coyote is clearly an adult male, it frequently displays playful, ingratiating behaviours, such as mock pouncing, hopping, and rolling around in the grass. These, the biologist surmises, are deliberate attempts to appear puppy-like and therefore harmless. The wolves, for their part, not only tolerate these antics but also seem to enjoy them. Sometimes they even “play back,” as if the coyote has earned its place in the pack by making itself a source of entertainment. The biologist finds himself enjoying the coyote’s games, too, and begins to refer to the animal as “Danny Boy” in his journal, after the comedian Danny Kaye, even though he repeatedly tells himself not to make it personal. “Don’t get attached,” he writes. Nevertheless, he can’t help imagining what that moment must have been like when the coyote found himself encircled by his enemies and made the choice neither to run nor to fight, but to put on an act instead—to disarm the merciless ring closing in on him with a show.

One day, when the pack brings down a moose calf, Danny Boy waits unobtrusively on the sidelines until the wolves have eaten their fill and abandoned the carcass and only then moves in, stealthily, to scavenge what remains. Another time, when an unknown coyote appears near the wolves’

main den, Danny Boy joins his fellow pack members in chasing the interloper away. At such moments it's clear to the biologist that the coyote's clownish demeanour is only an act—a strategy he employs to survive among the larger, stronger wolves. “His essential, wary, clever coyoteness appears at such times,” the biologist writes in undisguised admiration, then speculates as to why the coyote might have joined the wolves in the first place. Perhaps he lost or was driven away from his own pack and the need to be part of a group—even one made up of mortal enemies—was too strong to resist.

The biologist has to admit that there's another factor in this strange dynamic: himself. He knows full well that the wolves are aware of his presence. He understood, when he first arrived in the area to begin his observations, that it would be necessary for the wolves to become familiar with him for his research to have any value or authenticity. Only when the wolves no longer reacted to him as an intruder to be avoided—when they went about their daily affairs as if he wasn't even there—would he feel confident that he was observing typical lupine behaviour. And it should be easy to pretend he's not really here. He's done that around other people all his life. Out here in the wild he sometimes feels close to being nobody at all. He likes that feeling.

But the coyote has changed everything. The biologist is more aware than ever of the tight boundaries of his own skin and thought. He's never experienced such prickly self-consciousness while observing animal behaviour in the past, and he wonders whether his own disruptive presence has compelled the entire pack to start performing for *him*, a feigned naturalness that he's been picking up on without realizing it. Perhaps the wolves merely tolerate the coyote because the human in their midst is the larger concern. The real threat. Perhaps, he thinks, everyone involved—including himself—is playing a role, like actors in an unscripted theatre piece, ad libbing their parts, not knowing how the story will play out.

It is Danny Boy—the one in all of this most obviously performing—who becomes the main character in the biologist's journal. In playing the part of a wolf, and even turning against his own kind, it's unclear what the coyote has become or how long he can sustain the masquerade of goofy court jester before the lords of the realm tire of him.

When the pack's pregnant alpha female retires to her den to give birth, the biologist speculates as to what might happen when the young wolves grow up with a coyote in their midst. He wonders if Danny Boy might become a kind of big brother or babysitter for them while their parents go

hunting. It will be valuable data to discover whether the young ones accept him as one of their own, knowing no different, which could change the way the next generation of wolves from this pack react to other coyotes. However this turns out, the biologist thinks eagerly, he will be the sole witness.

One afternoon, while collecting scat in the forest for his study of the wolves' diet, the biologist finds the body of Danny Boy lying in a dry streambed. The coyote has been torn apart very recently and all of the signs indicate that the killers are wolves. There are no other packs or lone wolves in the area, so it must have been Danny Boy's own pack that did this to him. Perhaps the killing was an instinctual response to the recent arrival of the defenseless cubs, still mewling in the den and as yet unseen. Or the realization may have dawned on the wolves that *these* are their real young, not this clowning pretender. Or perhaps it's him—the human—whose presence has destabilized the situation. There's no way to be certain about anything. The biologist sees Danny Boy again in his imagination, hopping, tumbling, and frolicking desperately while the deadly ring closes in on him.

It's an unusually warm spring day. Swollen sacks of cloud have piled on the horizon and the air is growing muggy, weighted with the threat of rain coming soon, and lots of it. The biologist knows he should get back to his camp before the sky lets loose, but he stays with the body for some time to take detailed notes.

The ants have already discovered the bounty in their midst, and soon the flies and crows will, too. All of them will come to the body and take away some of its coyoteness, which will become antness and flyness and crowness.

"Danny Boy," the biologist writes at the top of the page, along with the date. Then he scratches the name out.