

He who laughs last

Once I fell in love with a family of coyotes. It was midsummer when I first saw them—a series of pale, still silhouettes arrayed at the top of the pasture. When I ducked and watched they became animated; five pups on a playful quest for voles. Mother, however, was suspicious. After a minute she decided to round them up and head for the shadows. One recalcitrant pup romped back into the meadow. Mother loped after him and herded him into the woods.

On most evenings their crazy music would ring through fields and forests, that comical mix of howls and yips. A few times I was able to get them started myself by playing a penny whistle.

One morning I noted movement across a band of evening sunlight on the far side of a neighbor's field. The low quick grace suggested dogs, not deer. Through binoculars the shapes became two of the pups, nearly full-sized, playing a mad game of tag around the juniper bushes. When their chase sped them past their indulgent guardian, she leapt forward and joined them for a few strides before resuming her regal watch.

Up at dawn one morning, I watched one of the adults eating pears that had fallen from the tree just outside my window. My two goats also watched from behind their electric fence. After five minutes, the coyote turned and trotted back to the forest.

That winter I followed the coyote tracks and learned about how they moved through the wild country around my home. I found a place where two had curled up in the snow next to each other and slept. I liked to imagine having that kind of portable comfort—the ability to curl up and sleep wherever drowsiness struck.

Then the coyote hunter targeted my coyote family. Did I mention that I loved these coyotes? Photos at coyote hunter websites show coyotes run to exhaustion by pampered hounds, and then attacked and killed. This is what I imagined when I heard the baying of the hounds. How could another human behave in a way that seemed to me so inhumane? I needed to understand.

The coyote hunter wasn't hard to find. To my surprise, he seemed like a normal, nice guy. In response to my question, the coyote hunter asked if I had ever seen a deer killed by a coyote. He said that he had photographs that documented one such gruesome event. So, he killed coyotes to prevent the suffering of deer. I wish coyotes could

live on nuts and berries, but nature doesn't work that way. I wondered if the coyote hunter would condone hunting down the lions of Africa to prevent the suffering of antelope.

I recently read Hal Herzog's book, *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some we Eat*, in which he explores humanity's complicated relationships with other animals. He concludes that humans justify the exploitation of animals by "constructing a moral framework based upon a mix of wishful thinking and logic."

I suspect that part of the coyote hunter's moral framework rests upon that biblical edict granting humans dominion over the beasts and fowl. This mandate has allowed us to label other species "varmints" and, with a sense of righteousness, to eradicate them. In this way Vermont lost its large predators 150 years ago.

Dominion has never really worked with coyotes, though. For the past century our federal taxes have been used in ways too gruesome to describe in an attempt to eliminate coyotes. Not only have their numbers grown, they have moved into all of the places where we exterminated the wolves.

Coyotes are well adapted to quickly fill habitat vacancies. Research has found that a minimum removal of 70% of the coyotes' breeding population is needed to consistently lower the population density. Every year.

Studies comparing hunted populations of coyotes with unhunted populations provide evidence that livestock are in less danger with a naturally regulated coyote population. In hunted populations, too few adult coyotes are available to care for pups. The adults are forced to concentrate on larger prey, and are more apt to choose lamb over mouse. Furthermore, coyote pups trained to hunt by a pack of experienced adults are most likely to subsist on wild fare. After a century of coyote persecution we are learning that guard animals and improved husbandry provide more effective predator control than coyote hunters.

I like to think that most Vermonters today have a better understanding of ecology than those that killed all of the wolves and cougars. Our moral framework has been reconfigured. Despite this trend, coyotes can be hunted all year in our state. There is no bag limit. This winter I expect the coyote hunter will join his fraternity for one or more "coyote derbies." Prizes will be awarded.

Hal Herzog explores a different blood sport in his

book— the clandestine world of cockfighting. He interviewed many rooster fighters and heard the stories that justified their participation in a sport that results in the death of nearly half of the avian combatants. Herzog concludes, “I liked many of the cockfighters I met in the course of my research, but, as was the case with slavery, their sport is a cruel and unjustifiable anachronism.” The same is true of coyote hunting.

I am sure that at least some of my coyotes survived. One night this week a jubilant chorus roused me from sleep. It sounded like they were in the snowy meadow just below the house but I couldn't see them. The goats stood behind their fence and listened, too. As the coyote laughter moved off into the woods, I offered them a nod of admiration and climbed back into bed. Coyotes, at least, will never humor any claim of dominion.