

Excerpt from personal essay “Var.”

By Jeff Yee

I wish I could say I always obsessed over canids, but that’s not true. More accurately, I might’ve been considered as a casual fan, say, of coyotes, wolves, and wild dogs, but I drew a line at wolf T-shirts; I’d never volunteered at a wolf shelter or adopted by mail an endangered wolf pup or anything like that. I never even owned a dog. The closest encounters I’d ever had with a wild canine, growing up in a forest-covered town outside of Boston, was hearing my neighbor who kept a chicken coop fire his rifle at coyotes for pinching eggs and chickens. That rifle went off often, and when I heard it I always rooted for the coyote, hoping it might outrun or otherwise evade the screaming bullet. But that was the extent of it: the coyote would enter my mind briefly and vanish as quickly as did the *pop!* of the rifle.

There is no single English word for a sudden obsession—an obsession that takes and then *holds*—besides *obsession* itself, but that word doesn’t meet my needs without additional qualifiers. *Infatuation* ends, often only weeks after it begins. *Fixation* frankly doesn’t seem hefty or healthy enough. *Flares* are sudden bursts of zeal; my obsession with wolves sparked much in the way a flare might from a sinking ship: there—suddenly—rocketing up and up, but in my case, that flare lit the whole sky on fire. *Addiction* is one possibility, enduring, never-ending; but I know the connotations feel obviously off when describing an “addiction to canids.” *Passion* is another, but these, too, fade.

My zeal for wolves has not wavered since it began. And it won’t. That’s why I call it a *consumption*. Obviously that word, in spite of its connotations and its dated interchangeability with tuberculosis, works in a multitude of ways. In this version, I’m not the agent of consumption, but the thing being consumed. My time is consumed, my energy is consumed, my mind is consumed.

Shortly after my ex ended our engagement, I moved into a studio cabin overlooking Lake Leverett in western Massachusetts. I was attending a graduate school English program nearby, and the venue seemed perfect for the last year of my degree—reading and writing. I'd been working construction and saving, and unloaded in one lump sum \$15,000 to secure the spot for a year. The land was wooded and secluded, right off of a long dirt road among the far reaches of Mt. Toby State Forest. Writer's dream.

It was here, a mere week into my lease, where I saw my first wild canine. I was returning home from campus at dusk when I heard something shift in the woods—crunching steps over dead leaves. I turned: a dog-like creature stared back at me; it had a wide, hard face, a pointed snout, and yellow-green eyes. Tawny-brown coloring. Teeth long and sharp—whole mouth dagger-lined and built for killing. This was no domestic dog. I thought I was face-to-face with a wolf and that surely this creature was to devour me. But the animal and I locked eyes and then a moment later, it let its tongue down, turned, and trotted deeper into the woods and out-of-sight.

Later that same night, heart still racing, I heard howls. I threw open all the windows in the cabin, laid down, and listened deeply, a woodsmen version of Charles Xavier, searching the woods for the creatures with my eyes closed. With dark fully settled, I heard a howl answered by several other howls—soon followed by a chorus of yips and barks ricocheting off pine trees. They must've made a kill. Or, maybe they just wanted everything in the woods to know they were nearby for their protection and ours. Too excited to sleep, I stayed awake listening for their calls. But as night marched on, they got further and further away until they disappeared altogether with sunrise.

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Like any self-qualifying millennial, I turned to the Internet when I wanted to learn more about the creatures inhabiting the woods where I lived. The Google Maps satellite view of my cabin showed nothing but forest, lake, river, mountain, and other small cabins and houses for miles in all

directions. Some research on the surrounding forests told me the wildlife I lived among. Of predatory note: eagles, owls, porcupines, bobcats, lynxes, fishers, foxes, raccoons, bears—and *coyotes*.

Though I'd never seen a coyote in-person, I knew what I'd been told growing up: that they were small-sized canines, a shade or two bigger than a fox. People told me I shouldn't be afraid of them; they're scavengers—skittish and unintimidating. This didn't add up to me. The canine I saw was rather large, at least four-feet long and maybe close to three-feet high. In all honesty, I thought I'd seen a wolf. And then those howls—deep in tone—they had to have belonged to wolves.

Research from the 70s showed that wildlife biologists, zoologists, and local Massachusetts residents alike were all puzzled and starting to question what these large wolf-like creatures were and why they happened to be so much larger than purebred coyotes (*canis latrans*). Wolves (*canis lupus*), often hunted in the earlier days of the settlers, were wiped out of New England by the 1900s, so it was obviously not them. The data of these earlier studies were essentially this: The further east and north one went in the United States, the larger the coyote. But that was the old stuff. The new stuff, published prominently throughout 2013-2015 alleged that New England and southeast Canada had their own special canine. This new species was called *canis latrans var* or “coywolf,” and, in New England, it was soon discovered, coywolves numbered in the millions.

The *var* appended to the coyote's Latin name, *canis latrans*, simply means *variation*. Literal translation: “howling dog, variant.” Like wolves, New England coywolves prefer hunting in forests, unlike coyotes of the west, which developed in the great plains. John G. Kays and Roland Gay are two of the more prominent zoologists researching the nascent species. In a short few days, I read every bit of peer-reviewed research written by the both of them. Kays's most recent report of the coywolf, published by *Biology Letters*, found wolf DNA from two separate subspecies of *canis lupus*—gray and eastern wolf. The genetic makeup of this New England coyote-wolf hybrid was roughly 50

percent coyote and 50 percent wolf and large domestic dog. When wolves were decimated by hunters, the few remaining wolves had no mates, so they mixed with whatever they could find.

The hybrid I'd seen when I first moved into the cabin was nearly twice the size of a coyote; it had a more wolf-like face with a large snout and more-rounded ears. Kays findings note, with their "larger jaws, more muscle, and faster legs, individual coywolves can take down deer." As a pack, they kill moose. "Even their cries blend those of their ancestors. The first part of a howl resembles a wolf's (with a deep pitch), but this then turns into a higher-pitched, coyote-like yipping."