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BREAKFAST WITH *CANIS LATRANS*

Ancient apprehensions stir in our bloodstream. From time to time – helpless to say why – we feel an ominous, all-but-subliminal sense of some lurking *thing*. Lying low, yet edging closer in this world where life is cheap and ruinously dear.

Just now, mid-January, my dawn mood is quite other. Against the mesa's snowy slope, which in the open shadow of 6:50 A.M. is still sky blue, sparse clumps of leafless twigs poke forth, forlorn and bleak against (as our ski resorts love to report) “ten inches of new.” So the slightest motion thus backgrounded by snow is a cinch to pick up, even that of a distant hunter whose guile has evolved a pelage the color of straw fields and dusk. And who, like me, is an early riser.

Through binoculars I follow its moves, watch lives taken and swallowed whole, though can't tell whether of voles or deer mice, just see that their bodies were big enough to need some real chomping before getting helped by convulsive gulps further down the gullet. Quite a process for the coyote doing the gulping. And for its prey. Thorax impaled by giant teeth, skull crushed till brain oozes from nostrils and eye holes. Eaten alive. Not a fate I care to share, except with an empathetic shudder. Yet points of view do transform us, the way a hand is changed in coming to rest on another.

This coyote's success rate soon has me wondering. “How many tries per kill?” During the thirty-five or forty minutes I follow its critter quest, every other pounce pays off. Slightly better, actually. Out of ten tries, six kills. Clearly, this particular *Canis latrans* is on a roll. And because survival skills vary within a species, I'm also aware of

watching a hunter who could give lessons. Most animals do. Last week I followed three young coyotes out hunting with an adult, doubtless their mother, and saw that she was the only one of the four who had any luck. Her progeny at least had a chance to study her moves. They better. They'll need them.

This morning, down past a swath of ponderosa well below the mesa rim, my lone-hunting coyote descends further, toward a likelier area, making alert sweeps – right then left, trotting comfortably through snow that brushes its long belly hairs and clings. The hunter then slows, raises a thoughtful forepaw poised like a setter on point. Head cocked, ears forward, eyes fixed on snow seven feet from its nose, using everything it's got: sight, scent, and hearing keen enough to detect under that snow a living morsel. Sometimes *Canis latrans* will place both forepaws on a boulder for a more elevated view, or stand atop one on all fours, so as to read what's written over wind-crusting snow. Often the page is empty. Other times, its scholarly gaze deciphers a text that speaks comfortably to belly juices.

Depending on the season, coyote scat may contain chokecherry pits, wild plums ill-digested, grass stems contorted but unchanged – I've even seen a Kleenex – but year-round its bulk comes from the hair of small rodents. Rain then sluices fresh scat down to tufts and twists of woolly stuff which, if on a trail, sooner or later gets flattened by hikers. Yet, few hikers notice it and still fewer could name its source if they did. As for me, I smile at coyote presumption in using scat to claim a trail made by humans, but also read there a fuzzy sort of world story. Between the need of coyotes to eat, and the need

of deer mice and voles not to be eaten, I find in those rather pathetic hair wads a scenario we suppose we're not part of. Three days ago, however, on one of winter's most blue-and-silver mornings, I was out hunting tiny lives myself.

An all-night wind, a west wind that really knew how, had packed earlier snows into what skiers call "breakable crust," the kind that holds your weight, then suddenly doesn't. On skis, such crust is a real challenge to your balance, but afoot can be fun to go plunging through. It was. Less than half a mile from my house, I felt like Nanook of the North. Everywhere around me wind's fluent past was evident as blown snow, still miming one-way, downslope currents of a night that roared. On the lee side of rocks, streamlined drifts made boulders small and large into stones meteoric, furiously speeding in place. Behind every squawbush, dead-fallen pine trunk, and clumped yucca, the whole mesa slope was plumed with flying white streamers now lying motionless. Above and to my left came a kestrel on its morning cruise for sustenance despite all the welter.

On the expectation that broad patches of wind-packed crust would be perfect for tracking deer mice, I had worn boots and gaiters, and – under sun half an hour high – soon found readable treks aplenty. Each delicate impression evoked a deer mouse's four, minuscule foot pads and teeny claws, all rimmed – in that early light – with the subtlest tinge of blue shadow. So far so good, but so good as to puzzle. Though I often find a few mouse tracks here and there over snow, this unusual variety of trails was a surprise. Why all the nocturnal traipsing?

Curiosity set me to reading the almost visibly timorous meanderings in hopes of an answer, perusing their wavery hither-and-yon with growing respect, even fascination. Each trail from yucca clump to yucca clump seemed daring, in direct proportion to the

distance covered. One powdery stretch made that span dramatic. After stitching their seam across drifts, the roving paw prints ended abruptly where disheveled snow read “owl,” whose “stealth feathers,” as I call them, had allowed it to glide with the soundlessness of shadow. Plainly legible on the snow, a pounce-mark evoked the owl’s sudden clutch of talons, dither of wings. Day’s blinding refraction of multi-faceted sunfire made a stark contrast to the darkness in which the owl’s low and wide-eyed night patrol had found its target.

Every now and then I come upon narrative variants: blood-speckled snow, tufts of rabbit fur tossed about. Other times, a telltale scatter of feathers, ones designed for speed, thus quite unlike owl plumage whose downy edges evolved for silence. Even eagles, hawks, and falcons need to be wary of them, because a raptor alighting to feed on a kill can easily fall prey to an owl’s beak and talons. Fair enough. A sort of retributive justice. But owl against mouse? Foolishly I felt it one-sided. Raptors aren’t into *noblesse oblige*, and Dame Nature’s no lady.

Yet the world we reason about isn’t the one we live in. As my boots plunged through white crust, I quit seeing those traces of deer mice as “cute,” and began reading even their fifteen-foot journeys as very nifty affairs. Longer travels – up to ten, twelve yards, sometimes more – became positively daring. Each trail emerged from the base of a yucca and, after wandering right, left, and even roundabout, disappeared into the base of another – for reasons known to anyone whose shins have been pricked to bleeding by a narrow-leaf yucca’s stilettos. Neither foxes nor coyotes care to poke a snout into such dense bouquets of pain, which is why, crisp as cuneiform, those mouse trails emerged from and disappeared into a yucca’s burst of evergreen spikes.

But why all those sallies out from cover into the dangerous open? Though the smallest animals keep busiest, what could those mice find to feed on? The tracks often veered as if aimless. Then I realized: seeds, of course, a main food for deer mice. From upstanding stems of winter-killed grasses, last night's wind had stripped seeds by the millions – which the fastidious forepaws would batten on like manna. There might also be the occasional bonus of an insect overtaken by late-afternoon chill-down and slowed to a standstill. Countless times in summer mountains I've watched birds feed at leisure on flying insects that have set down unwarily atop snowfields whose ice granules quickly induced the torpor that rendered them easy pickings.

So, seeds explained the journeying, while making mere hunger seem perilous. Amid crust so sun-drenched that my darkest glacier glasses felt like none at all, I began plunging around in search of last night's longest, death-defying mouse trek. Twelve yards had been impressive until I found and followed a twenty yarder. "Heroic," I thought, "a mouse Odyssey!" Then I discovered a trail of at least twenty-five yards. By that time, between a nine o'clock sun and the exertion of post-holing through drifts, I'd shucked my parka and stuffed it back into my fanny pack, even swigged from a canteen of herbal tea.

Eventually I spotted – and with rising admiration followed – a far more epic outing. It veered about, and about again, past naked squawbush and hawthorn, past sullen boulders now dripping snowmelt, past the potential sanctuary of yucca after yucca to a length of fully sixty yards! Silly as the idea of deer-mouse heroism might seem to others, it didn't to me. Seeing how the pulsations of a heart small as a juniper berry had sustained those tiny paws on their long night of travel, my own heart filled with commensurate

admiration. Countless animals play out their roles in life incomparably better than do some of us humans, so attributing “greatness” to a mouse didn’t seem absurd. In any case, while tracking the longest set of paw prints, I felt myself following a better mouse than I am a man.

That’s why my floundering after the nocturnal ways of fellow mammals – ones weighing less than an ounce – didn’t feel at all frivolous. Rather, allowing for scale, it felt like reading lives fraught with mortal adventure. And still does.

Now, bushy tail held parallel to the snow’s surface – surely for maximum stealth – my coyote eases forward through tall grasses – big blue stem, winter-changed to brownish oranges – and stops. Freezes. Takes a single, carefully slow step further. Again holds *perfectly* still. Considering the stakes on both sides, that stance is quite dramatic. Then the leap – stiff-legged and high into air to pounce with forepaws and snout right on target. Although such a comic bound skyward amuses me every time, I’m not the munchable target at ground zero. As inscribed eons ago into the brains of small rodents, it must be the ultimate bad dream, which to realize is to share.

For some seconds the coyote's muzzle stays buried, frantically scattering snow, snuffling around after prey that somehow escaped. The head then does a fast scan every which way. Also a bit comic. Whereupon it launches upward, landing seven feet from that first pounce. No good. Once more the mouse or vole gets away. Again the scanning business. Having spied no clues, *Canis latrans* surprises me by casually trotting twenty yards west to assess a fresh surface.

There the very first leap pays off. And the next. And the leap after that. Each time, the coyote interrupts his or her moments of snuffling – worrying at, then jawing on and tenderizing its victim.

Abruptly the head snaps toward me. Steady gaze. I don't stir. Then it does a typical coyote scan all round, so as not to become prey itself. Mountain lions? Oh, yes. Bears? Those, too. *Canis latrans* is nothing if not circumspect. Only after several cautionary checks does the coyote again chew on the caught rodent until, nose to the sky, its convulsing throat encourages that latest prey – perhaps only half-dead – to go slithering down the hatch into warm acid.

Clearly, no predator can snap the spine of a live creature while still carrying one now defunct. So, after kill number five, my well-practiced coyote buries it and trots to a nearby stand of straw grasses as if scenting further prospects. But failing to score, it returns, digs up the victim put in cold storage a few minutes earlier, and has me talking to myself: “Just how many can its belly hold? It'll have to mouth-carry this latest catch, won't it?” Oh no. Down a pulsing gullet goes the latest kill to join the party in-progress. Whereupon my coyote trots toward a ravine way below me, and soon disappears into gray thickets of naked willow and hackberry.

How old is fear? Surely far older than humans. Innate as predation? Perhaps. And that would put it as far back as the Cambrian; thus, “awful old” seems a safe bet. In fact, as one plausible hypothesis has it, predation explains the so-called “Cambrian explosion,” when forms of animal life multiplied exponentially. If, indeed, such devouring and being devoured suddenly threw animal evolution into fast-forward by selecting for mobility –

vital to both hunter and hunted – every open mouth makes the predator/prey cycle a thought to get lost in.

As was this breakfast walk with *Canis latrans*. All the while, amid sky-blue shadows still sensuously long over snow which – elsewhere – the just-risen sun has turned quite pink, I couldn't help sharing both a coyote's survival moves and a small rodent's quivering, cowering role in this precarious world. A world you can get snatched out of at any moment – into explosions of pain. Our primeval past is nearer than we think.

Gradually, waking from a daydreamy meditation on the archaic source of our forebodings, I glance toward my house. My den. Centrally heated. Fireplaces to boot. Shelves with plenty of food. Well-roofed, insulated, insured. All of it sitting on land stolen by killing off Indians. Five minutes below me, there at the foot of the mesa.