

MARCIA ROSS

## Coyote Calls to Me

(in memoriam: for Joseph Beuys)

Before I met Coyote,  
I heard him.  
He was down by the river with his friends,  
wailing at the night train that came  
hurtling through the valley  
with its thrilled splitting whistle.  
I was a red fox,  
curled up in my bed in the foothills.  
I pricked up my ears.

When Coyote came grinning at my door,  
I politely gave him half of my dinner.  
Even with his mouth full, he talked  
of poetry, of music, and of  
his exploits, of course.

After that he was always alone.  
Or with me.

We travelled together. I hunted;  
he kept watch, pacing at the edges,  
pleased with what dainties I brought him to eat.  
He called me a good Methodist, which  
I denied although I had a hankering  
to smooth his scruffy grey coat.  
“Prance around, my beauty,” he said,  
“that I may watch you.”  
At night he told me stories.

One was about his stint in the city.  
 An artist hired him to live in a cage  
 for forty days. The cage was large—  
 a chain-link fence across some space, and  
 strewn with bales of straw. The artist stood  
 to one side, wrapped in a black cloak.  
 It was easy money, said Coyote,  
 but it made him nervous.  
 Afterwards he got drunk and went  
 from city to city, quite confused.  
 He thought he was a wolf.

In another story, having wandered  
 back into the mountains—far back—  
 Coyote swam a cold, swift river, then climbed  
 to a great height above a deep quarry pool.  
 He let out a cry—“like Cuchulain!”—  
 and let fly his body. Down he dove  
 and plunged, tearing open his side on a rock,  
 a rock hidden and sharp  
 beneath the pretty green water.

Later, he showed me the scarred gash.  
 He lowered his head and growled, and wept:  
 “The great thing Milton is saying about Satan is,  
 He’ll never again congratulate. You live alone  
 within your wings.” It was then I noticed  
 Coyote had lost his mangy coat. He stood  
 on handsome, manly legs, and bent  
 to nuzzle my furry neck, and nip  
 my flanks. His eyes were darkest amber,  
 his wings mottled grey and violet.  
 I too began to change.

Now that Coyote could fly, and I—  
 only a girl with green eyes—at best could ride  
 astride with his consent to distant hills,  
 our love changed. We quarrelled.  
 He often stayed away or snarled  
 at my tears and wretched pleadings.

"I am unrepentant!" he would boast.  
 "Watch me work!" And off he'd go, twirling  
 his moustache, to sell ladies' shoes in his stolen dark  
 grey suit, his wings stuffed close inside.  
 One night he came home hurt. A wing  
 was badly damaged, his face streaked  
 with blood, his breath a boozy fog.  
 He let me lick the scratches on his face.  
 "Nothing is sacred," he whimpered.

That night I travelled out alone,  
 a scout for someplace else to live:  
 "Else than this" was what my love had said.  
 And I believed.  
 I roamed the fields and woods  
 round about our den, worried  
 lest I lose the copper in my hair,  
 sprint in my step, and all that was fair  
 that kept Coyote coming back to me.  
 In the morning I returned with no report,  
 but found a note:  
 "Be right back."

So began the winter of my grief,  
 my searchings in the snow for prints  
 or shadows or mere droppings  
 of my canny one, so lost and gone.  
 Even the strong pines shuddered  
 from the shock, and bent their proud and loaded  
 boughs to mourn with me this terrible  
 turn. My fur grew back against  
 the cold, and I grew bold and game,  
 yipping at the sly north wind in broad  
 daylight. At first I sought an answering  
 reply, but soon I came to love the sound  
 I made myself, and in spring the rains  
 let loose such lush accompaniment  
 as any could desire, filling brooks to  
 overflowing torrents of swift rapture.

I learned to live alone again, in full,  
 it seemed to me. I gave congratulations  
 with my voice, and lay amongst  
 the purple summer flowers, dozing,  
 dizzy in my dreams of what would come.  
 In orange fall, one day near dusk,  
 I staggered to my feet.

A scent of something mild and damp and sweet  
 had carried to me news of company.  
 I swayed with smell and shook myself alert  
 and listened long, discerning every sound,  
 and scanned the compass of my fields.  
 Across the grasslands light was lying low:  
 low western hills in shadow, blue-black hills,  
 slow throbbing cricket music, whispers, peeps.  
 The cloud of fragrance drifted off somewhere, and,  
 sorting through my senses, I separated out  
 the sound that told the most to my fast heart.  
 It was a distant cry, a thrush or swallow song:  
 "Come here, my love," it said, "come one more time  
 to share the morsel of my find, and run  
 with me. Oh come and see!"

There was no other sign, no motion anywise  
 to tell me where to go. I trotted out  
 and sniffed the air, and stood until  
 the scent of pungent sweetness came again—  
 an odour now, with traces of ferment.  
 The smell became my guide and led me toward  
 the hills. Close at the base, I stopped,  
 afraid. The smell had swelled to stench,  
 then—vanished! Light too was failing fast.  
 I made slits of my eyes, dropped my tail,  
 peered hard at the range of repeated slopes,  
 and cast my doubts. Was this another of Coyote's  
 feral tricks—to lead me on just when  
 the club of loss had lost its cuff, and felt  
 almost nice? Were not those thrilling promises  
 transparent and reeking with excuse? Excuse

for what? Or had I listened wrong? Or lost  
the scent through overrunning it?

A trend of fatal air came roving out between  
the crevices and slopes of those dark mounds,  
and with a sigh pronounced another sound,  
so soft I almost missed the gentle pledge:  
“I am not here, or there, or anywhere at all.  
But follow me into the falling dark, and find the ore.”  
Two steps I took, then, willing fleet assistance  
to my feet, I gained the ground’s first crest.  
Below me dropped a chasm; beyond, dim  
banks, each higher than the last. To leap  
I thought was possible, but then another and  
another bluff packed back in staggering tiers,  
all grey and black. What should I do?

I slunk along the ledge, whining piteously.  
I crouched and sniffed and keened my ear  
for one more hint, and swung my head  
for one more look—all dark—then sat,  
mute in the pure and still and scentless night.  
The stars came out, pricked tiny points of gold  
that told the truth of some another place,  
and I lay down. Sometime that night, from all around,  
I heard the low and lovely words I waited for:  
“The gold of that land is good: there is bdellium  
and the onyx stone.” These were the last  
words of my love to me, lasting all my days.