nonfiction

This Tiny Enormous Life

Kelly Grogan

> *Coyotes move within a landscape of attentiveness. I have seen their eyes in the creosote bushes and among mesquite trees. They have watched me. And all the times that I saw no eyes, that I kept walking and never knew, there were still coyotes.*
>
> —*Craig Childs,* The Animal Dialogues: Uncommon Encounters in the Wild

I often wake at night to the raucous yips and howls of coyotes. Their eerie serenades ring haunted through the canyon walls, echoed with ghosts. In the silence that follows exaltation they creep closer, lurking just beyond the border of porchlight. Some nights I hear the quiet crackling of oak leaves beneath the pads of their feet, the whisper of an animal who knows its way through the darkness. I have seen the way their eyes flash, a primordial Morse code telling an ancient campfire tale of a ghost dog loping quietly closer, hungry, patient and sly. Some nights I hear them, but the coyotes are always there. *These hills belong to us*, they remind me. The landscape is theirs. I am only a visitor here.

Miko was her second name. The first, Scout, lasted only a week before it was deemed unsuitable. Choosing the right name was important. It had to hold all of her, somehow, in a sound. As a kitten, the runt of the litter, she was the size of a glove, tabby striped with long, downy fur and white velvet boots. As she grew older, Miko developed sounds of her own. An entire language, far beyond the plaintive meows of

an ordinary house cat. She chirped at birds that flitted through the trees; she opened her mouth and clicked staccato rhythms at insects that crawled on the floor; she growled like a little lion when my dogs got too close.

Cats, the saying goes, have nine lives, but nothing dictates the length of each life. Miko was almost ten, and in those ten years she'd traveled widely as I moved from town to town. I'd spent her first four years attending college in Maine, where she'd watched thick snow swirl beyond the window in wintertime. The next two years, she perched in the bay window of my apartment in Boston watching the busy city streets. After that, she boarded a plane with me and flew across the country to California, where she'd live for the remainder of her life.

Though I'd tried to keep her indoors, there were regular escapes in every place we lived. Miko loved to roam, a part of her still feral like her barn-cat parents. But it was here in California, with the year-round allure of scuttling lizards and riotous birds, that I finally surrendered. My house was too small, and Miko had grown depressed cooped up inside. She spent her days clawing at the door until the wood was shredded, yowling relentlessly. I decided she would be allowed outside—but only in the daytime. When dusk fell, I would lure her back inside with food.

The daytime was not without danger. One day, I came home from work to find Miko stretched out in the grass alongside a bobcat, both staring at me like I had intruded upon their gossip. Another, I'd rounded a corner carrying a basket of laundry and found her face-to-face with a coiled rattlesnake, its black tail chattering like teeth. I swooped Miko up, half-expecting to feel fangs sinking into my wrist, and sprinted down the hill while she wailed in frustration.

She may have been able to win her battle with the rattlesnake. Miko was, without a doubt, a lesson in ferocity. No matter the danger, she proved smarter and more agile. When strength wasn't enough, she knew to hide—she crouched invisibly in the toyon that crowded the canyon or lay camouflaged up high in the looping branches of the oaks. Miko kept herself safe from the dangers of the wilderness that encroached upon our backyard by learning its rules and blending into its patterns.

Coyotes, though, are a different kind of danger altogether. *Canis Latrans*, or "barking dogs," have prowled this landscape far longer than we have, staking out their territory nearly forty million years ago. After millions of years of lean, hard-won meals, modern residents' domesticated pets make for a particularly delectable, and readily available, treat. Drive through any neighborhood in Santa Barbara and you'll see poles papered with "Missing Pet" signs. For a cat, besting a coyote has nothing to do with agility, courage, or intelligence—the only way to outsmart a coyote is to avoid it altogether.

The problem is, geographically, there is no escaping the coyote. Coyotes occupy lands from the arid deserts of the southwest to the bustling streets of Manhattan, from the swamps of Louisiana to the snowy peaks of Montana, from the ice plains of Alaska to the grasslands of Panama. They prowl in the shadows of almost every single place in North America. Differences in ecology and habitat, and variation in climate and topography, prevent almost all other large mammal species from spreading into every space. Only coyotes, and us, have adapted to make a home anywhere.

The Manifest Destiny of the coyote is no less violent or perilous than our own, and the two became increasingly interwoven as settlers venturing west in the nineteenth century came across the scraggly dogs they called "prairie wolves." Humans who'd learned to fear the intelligent pack-strategy hunt of wolves considered their coyote-cousin to be a lesser, weaker pest, skulking behind their wagon trains at night to scavenge the remains of dead livestock. In his essay *Roughing It*, Mark Twain describes encountering the coyote and seeing a "long, slim, sick and sorry-looking skeleton," with a "despairing expression of forsakenness and misery, a furtive and evil eye."

"The coyote is a living, breathing allegory of Want," Twain writes. "He is always hungry. He is always poor, out of luck, and friendless. . . . He is so spiritless and cowardly that even while his exposed teeth are pretending a threat, the rest of his face is apologizing for it."

Despite the hardscrabble appearance of coyotes, they have proven to be remarkably resilient. For hundreds of years, continuing even today, national and local governments waged war on coyotes with increasingly deadly weapons. But while eradication methods

such as poisoned bait and hunting competitions proved successful in diminishing the grey wolf to near-extinction, coyotes continue to not only survive, but to expand their population to new reaches of the continent.

When the coyotes prowled the canyon outside and called to each other through the night, Miko curled up beside me. The rumble of her purring met my fingertips and she stretched her paws against my arm, kneading gently. "There are monsters out there," I whispered. "That's why you sleep in here, with me. I'll keep you safe."

Aside from hearing their chatter in the night or glimpsing the occasional loping silhouette at dusk, I hadn't thought about the coyote before I met Betty Fussell, a ninety-two-year-old author working on a memoir more than a decade in the making. This wasn't Betty's first book, but the collection of essays had been a challenge to pull together, particularly since she'd had to evacuate her residence, manuscript in tow, several times over the course of the Thomas Fire and ensuing mudslide disaster. This "manuscript" consisted of several filing boxes stuffed with typewritten pages.

"What's the book called?" I asked Betty, leafing through the stacks of paper and sorting pages into piles.

"It's called *How to Cook a Coyote*," she answered. Betty's writing career has centered on culinary writing, and the title is a nod to fellow food-writing trailblazer M.F.K. Fisher's book, *How to Cook a Wolf*. In both, the canid symbol is taken at first glance to be threatening, a devious predator best avoided. "But I say, as Fisher did of her wolf, invite the coyote in. Give him dinner. Make friends. I've subtitled it *A Manual of Survival*." Betty gives me a wide, coyote-toothed grin and laughs. "Surviving old age, and all that it entails. Until of course, one day, you don't."

For Betty, animals occupy the liminal space between the natural world and a dreamworld layered with symbolism and motif. The coyote is a totemic spirit that she at once identifies with and defies—a shadow-self. Betty sees within the coyote's golden-eyed stare an all-too-human predatory cunning, a gnawing hunger for living that necessarily portends an omen of death. Hunting the coyote was

akin to hunting mortality—an attempt to meet with the inevitable conclusion of her life before it reached her first.

It was Betty who introduced me to the ancient history of the coyote, before the expansion of white settlers and the corresponding population boom of these pestilent prairie wolves. For tens of thousands of years, coyotes roamed alongside Indigenous tribes throughout North America. In Indigenous mythologies, Coyote often plays the role of a trickster, a two-faced agent of chaos and mischief. But whether Coyote is full of cunning or cowardice, whether he creates or destroys, whether he deceives or is tricked himself, in all Indigenous tales the metaphor persists: Coyote is a mirror for man.

Through the ancient mythologies of Coyote as well as through the natural history of the species, we see that the qualities driving the coyote's survival are the same that propel our own—the parts of us that come across as scrappy, hungry, and wanting are the parts that keep us alive. We come to understand that we, too, are a living, breathing allegory of Want. We, too, are always hungry—hungry for land, for riches, for knowledge, for love. An unyielding, ravenous hunger for life.

At the end of my visit, Betty pulled out the pelt of a coyote her son had sent to her. The fur was bristly and coarse, yet oddly soft against my fingers. I noted a radiance of color—streaks of grey, white, and black, with a reddish glint at the tips. I told Betty that must be why coyotes seem to glow when I see them in our backyard at dusk. Holding the pelt in my hands, the skin of this coyote that had once paced under the moonlight, I felt a strange rush of thrill and foreboding. A primal shiver that did not completely erase my sense of awe.

"Do you see them often at your house?" Betty asked.

Coincidentally, I had just seen a coyote the day prior. It was dusk, the sky's color fading, yet still light enough to catch the yellow glow of two eyes watching. The coyote emerged six feet from me, crossing the stone path I walked upon. It looked at me sideways, head down and spine curved, broomstick legs paused mid-stride. I bent down to pick up a rock, to scare it away, but when I stood again the coyote had

already loped silently up the steep hill behind the house. It stopped there and stared at me, still as a statue.

"It wasn't afraid of me at all," I told Betty. "Wary, but not afraid. More. . . curious."

"Well of course he was unafraid," Betty said, laughing. "He was probably watching you for a long time before you saw him. He was *very* curious."

Encountering curiosity in the wild can be far more unsettling than outright aggression. Aggression indicates fear, and we expect a wild animal to be fearful. Encountering a curious predator, though, we are met with something more complex than instinct: calculated observation resulting in a deeper understanding. Curiosity leads to wisdom, hard-won though it may be.

What remains most troubling, though, is that the curiosity of a coyote dismantles a barrier that I have unconsciously erected between the animal and myself. An impassable line between that which is wild and that which is human. This is the myth of man, a soothing fairytale for our modern-day existence: there must be an inherent difference between us and the animals we encounter. Or at least, that's what I tell myself, nights when their howls wake me. The coyote is Wild. The coyote is Other.

This categorical separation between the coyote and myself reinforces another illusion: the place I inhabit is also distinct from the wild. Here, in a house filled with human comforts, I am removed from the food chain of predator and prey. Here, in the gentle embrace of my arms, my housecat is safe from the coyote's hunger.

But where does the wild begin, and where does it end? Does it stop at the line of my property, at the edge of my porch, at the doorway to my home? Is the wild a boundary between claimed and unclaimed landscape? And if my house is separate from the wilderness, why do spiders knit their webs in the ceiling, why do bobcats stalk through my yard, why do snakes coil on my porch? The animal world doesn't draw a line between self and other, between domesticated and wild. Nature does not draw this line. Only we do.

I share my backyard with coyotes who haunt these canyons, hoping they will stay on the fringes of the property. I plant gardens over hollow networks of gopher tunnels and hope that mesh wire lining will be enough to stop their feasting. I stomp through the chaparral listening for the maraca warning of the rattlesnake, hoping it will flee if it senses me first. I see hawks stripping lizards of their flesh, crows stealing eggs from nests, spiders wrapping butterflies in silk cocoons, and I soothe myself with the story that such deaths are small, necessary losses of a wild I am not a part of. Let the monsters stay outside. The coyotes can have their nights. When morning comes, I will reclaim my place here.

The same wisdom that speaks of a cat's nine lives also tells of it being curiosity, in the end, that kills the cat. Miko's ferocity was born of her curiosity. She learned and then tangled with the wilderness around her, every interaction a game to be won. While at night she lay beside me purring and docile, in the daytime she prowled the canyon hunting for more players. The lizards on our property seldom had tails, having lost them to Miko's paws in desperate moments of escape. She often met me on the walkway with a squirming rodent in her mouth, releasing it when it ceased struggling so she could catch it again. Butterflies, dragonflies, bees: nothing was safe from her.

But the worst of the killings were the birds. Not just the occasional bird—Miko murdered birds indiscriminately, as often as she was able to snag them from the air. We found their fragile bodies lying curled on our patio or splayed wide-winged in the garden, feathers drifting over the ground. Finches, sparrows, oak tits, juncos, hummingbirds, waxwings—any bird that flew close enough for capture.

Miko was not alone in her rampage. A study published by the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute and the US Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that cats are responsible for the deaths of between 1.4 to 3.7 billion birds annually. Miko contributed to the tally gladly, with enthusiasm and pride, honing her instinct as the months and years went on and our backyard began to feel like a cemetery in miniature.

One day, returning home from work, I saw the smudge of a bird lying on the path, a splash of green and grey. An Anna's Hummingbird, wings tucked into its side, tiny chest fluttering with impossibly small sips of air. I knelt, transfixed, and watched the way the hummingbird's eyes flickered back and forth. Even then, I believed I might save her. As my fingers grazed her soft green feathers, the hummingbird shuddered and her eyes dimmed. I buried her under the blooming jacaranda tree, where the ground was carpeted with purple petals. That night when I carried Miko inside, I winced at the wild animal lurking within her.

Knowing we cannot tame the predator instinct of cats, people have tried to invent products to diminish their success. We bought Miko a collar with a mane-like swath of bright red polka-dotted fabric bunched around a cluster of jingling bells meant to alert nearby birds. Within days, Miko wriggled out of the collar and was merrily back to her old ways, leaving a small, yellow finch at our doorway as a prize. Next, we tried a fabric bib that hung to Miko's knees, meant to provide just enough of an obstacle to her paws that she would miss her kill. This, too, soon vanished, only now in a matter of hours. Miko returned to the house that night with a necklace of feathers instead.

The only thing we could manage to keep on her was a slim, pink collar with a single, tiny bell looped through it. As I listened to the music-box tinkling of the bell when Miko padded outside each morning, I hoped that the birds would be able to hear it too.

In the Blackfeet stories from the northern plains, the genesis of death occurs when First Woman stands beside a river with Old Man Coyote and asks if people will live forever. Coyote, having not yet considered mortality, takes a buffalo chip from the ground and casts it into the river. "If it floats, people will die for only four days and then come back to life," Coyote says. "But if it sinks, death will be forever." The buffalo chip floats downstream, but First Woman refuses the result and takes up a stone instead. She tosses it into the water under the same life-or-death terms, except First Woman adds a clause: "If it sinks, people must die—that they may always be sorry for each other."

Unsurprisingly, the stone sinks to the bottom of the river and Old Man Coyote introduces death to the world. This is not, as it may seem at first glance, a story about First Woman's foolish mistake, but rather a story about the capacities for living that the limitations of dying place upon our lives. With the creation of death comes another: the creation of compassion and empathy.

Old Man Coyote is the oldest recorded animus-god in the history of North America. What is it about the coyote that has tempted storytellers and mythmakers through history? What is it about the prairie wolf that catches our attention and haunts the corners of our dreams? In all tales, Coyote is a god made in our image, a mirror to view ourselves through. A god who, like us, is wise and foolish, audacious and apologetic, curious and cunning, mischievous and fallible. A god who persists in his efforts to create a world from the frayed edges of our place in the universe despite the violence that threatens creation—despite the death that ends all life. *Not despite*, Coyote says. *Because of.* Coyote is the creator of death, too. He can take a life at any time, for any reason or no reason at all. Coyote is a god closely resembling the wild nature we are intricately bound to.

A curious coyote meets a curious human, and the two watch each other from their positions on the path. These are elements of story and myth, stepping-stones for action and consequence. The coyote asks that we remember the nature of nature. This perceived sense of control, the belief that my life and the lives that I love are somehow inoculated from the wild, is illusory. The coyote is here to remind us of the price of a promise. Such is death, that it comes to all. There is no escape, no matter how beautiful the life.

We lived in the canyon for four years and Miko came inside every single night. The routine never failed. I'd walk outside when the shadows grew long and call her, and she'd come trotting down the hill, hungry and talkative. For four years, the same actions, the same results.

And then, one night, Miko wouldn't come in. She refused outright. I chased her around the porch, crawled up the tree as she jumped down, followed her silhouette through the bushes, lay on

my belly and pleaded with her while she crouched underneath my car. Night fell and still I followed Miko, now with a flashlight and a can of tuna, trying to lure her close enough to grab. At one point, I almost had her—the tip of her tail brushed my hand and I started to grasp it, but I was afraid to hurt her. I let go, and she slipped away. I heard the tinkling bell on her collar growing fainter as she moved through the toyon.

When I woke the next morning, I saw through my window the slender shape of a praying mantis perched in the morning light, watching me with alien eyes. It was pale-colored, white with a milky translucence that reminded me of a ghost or the moon. That morning, my phone would ring and a neighbor from down the road would tell me she'd found Miko's remains on her property. "I'm so sorry, honey. It looks like a coyote got her," she said. While she talked, the praying mantis crawled along the screen, jabbing the air with its long-clawed hands, and after I hung up the phone I walked outside and cupped the insect in my hands.

The praying mantis crawled up my arm while I gazed over the canyon at the yellowing grasses and the sprawling oak trees, at the fog that crept out like fingers unclenching their hold on the night. I tried not to think about Miko's last moments. I tried not to count how many there might have been, or how few, tried not to wonder whether they stretched on in a slow-motion struggle or vanished instantly.

Even now, I can't stand thinking about Miko's ending. I can't bear to imagine her fear, her last breath. I can't bear to think of her like the hummingbird she'd killed—those last small sips of air, her soul shuddering away from her body. There is no perfect death, no easy ending. But this death feels worse than any other I might have imagined. The violence of it. This small murder in the middle of the night while I lay sleeping, believing I would wake in the morning and find my cat outside, hungry and ready to jump into my arms.

It's difficult to imagine, too, because it's impossible to extricate myself from the scene of the crime. I'd let Miko go outside to begin with. I made the bargain, and I knew the danger. And I'd given her a collar, a reckoning with the consequences of the first decision. It

was pink with a bell. A bell that, I cannot help but accept, the coyote probably heard that night. All of the things we could have done differently. All of the little decisions we make along the way. These are the ghosts we carry.

I knelt to the ground, placing my palm against the soil, and the praying mantis crept down my arm to meet the earth, taking one last jab at the air between us before disappearing into the wilderness of my backyard.

A month after Miko's death, I knocked on Betty's door and heard CNN playing inside. It took her a few minutes to let me in. "I'm watching the hearings," she told me. "Have you been watching? Isn't it fascinating?" The theater of it enchants her, the drama echoing Greek epics and Shakespearean tragedies.

I said I couldn't imagine how politicians clung with such resolute loyalty to what seemed to me to be transparent lies. To my surprise, Betty laughed. "You *can* imagine it," she said. "Of course you can."

"It makes no sense," I said. "The hypocrisy is so overt."

She gave me another toothy smile. "But you're a writer," she said. "You have to imagine it. Pretend you're on the other side, pretend you have to spin a different narrative. How are you going to do it?"

"I wouldn't be able to," I said, "because it's completely irrational."

Betty wasn't about to let me miss the point. "You would do it, just like they *are* doing it," she says. "You must imagine it, because that's the only way."

"The only way to what?" I asked. She didn't answer.

At night when the coyotes chattered, I closed my eyes and imagined hunting the one that killed Miko. I envisioned following it for miles along the sun-beaten hills, creeping over ridgelines and wending through chaparral. But this was not the same type of imagining that Betty was talking about.

So that night, as I lay in bed listening to their wild chorus, I stepped into the paws of the coyote instead. You need to *become* it, I told myself. To experience the view of ink-black hills at night, the shuddering of leaves in the wind. To lift your head and sniff the thousand crowded scents in the air. To swivel your ears and catch the

faint scuffling of a mouse in the undergrowth or the far-away tinkling of a bell. To feel your stomach twist with hunger, an insatiable hunger that governs every movement.

It took me a long time to understand what Betty meant when she said that imagining the other side was the only way. My cat was killed, and I fell into a black hole of trying to understand the thing that killed her. The species, the myth, the ecology, the history. Trying all along to make sense of Miko's ending. As though I could wrap death in knowledge and change the nature of it. Imagining was the only way to see through the story I'd created to soothe the pain of her absence. I had been hunting the coyote, chasing it over hills and mountains, but what I finally found was only a mirror. The same, ancient mirror we found ourselves within thousands of years ago. There is a hunger inside of me like the hunger inside a coyote, one that is never sated. I don't have to look too hard to find it—I only have to love and it appears.

In the Blackfeet myth, after First Woman casts the stone into the river and Coyote creates death, death takes its first victim. It is First Woman's child who dies, and his death is forever. Brokenhearted, First Woman begs Coyote to change the law, but he tells her he cannot. "Law is law," he says. Death cannot be undone. The myth ends with a seemingly simple, resolute statement: "That is how we came to be people."

With the increasing awareness of the feline impact on bird populations, scientists have studied the checks and balances provided by nature. Scientists Stanley D. Gehrt, PhD, and Chris Anchor from the Urban Coyote Research Project published a study exploring the impact of coyotes preying on cats. While cat owners understandably deem the effects of coyotes killing cats as negative, the scientists also discovered a positive impact. "Studies in California urban areas showed that coyotes reduced cats in some habitat fragments which then resulted in an increase in nesting success for songbirds."

Are there more songbirds, now that Miko is no longer here? I am certain of it. There are birds alive now who would have otherwise died. Almost every lizard I see scuttling over the stones has a tail now.

There are more mice than I remember, and more rattlesnakes too, following the food source. New life grows in every space. The wild always re-wilds.

When First Woman suffers the loss of her son and returns to Coyote to beg him to revoke the law of death, the story offers a powerful example of our own humanity. First Woman, like us, is prone to shortcomings. Bound to draw lines between herself and others, bound to make bargains with a lawless nature, bound to carry the ghosts of her past mistakes. It is the fallacy of our own curiosity, like that of the coyote, that leads us to wisdom, hard-won though it may be. And it is this wisdom won that re-wilds, eventually, the absence of what we lose along the way.

I still dream about Miko, even now. In my dreams, I hear her calling. She's always out of sight—in the foliage of an oak tree, beneath the patio, hunting gophers in the tall grasses. I never see her, but I hear her. I hear her calling, the sounds she made. I am most wild, then, in those hungry, aching moments of searching. That fierce, animal part of myself wanting desperately to find her. Wanting to take her into my arms, this tiny, enormous life once scaffolded so intimately into my own, wanting to take her back from the night and carry her home.

This is how we come to be people.

Kelly Grogan (she/her), "This Tiny Enormous Life"

Kelly Grogan writes fiction and nonfiction, teaches creative writing, and loves running around in the mountains of Santa Barbara where she lives with her husband and two neurotic dogs.
Website: authorkellygrogan.com

Grief makes everything small seem suddenly enormous. What started out as a simple essay about the loss of my cat quickly turned into something tangled and immense, and it took me more than a year to wrap my arms around everything that emerged. In hindsight, I see that's because this is more than an essay about grief—it's the process of grieving itself, laid bare. Not only grieving the absences that pocket our hearts with holes, but the isolated grief of our willful separation from the wider, wilder world we are intimately connected to.