

Think of a student beginning to write a report for school about the coyote, the prairie wolf, *canis latrans*, in the measured prose of her reference books. There are facts, maps, and photographs. She starts making notes and tracing maps as she had done many times before. In reading the entry in the Canadian Encyclopedia on coyotes by a professor of zoology, she is given pause by his concluding sentence: "They are considered, mistakenly, a threat to livestock" (Churcher, 1985, p. 235). This stops her cold. Something has gone wrong. Her father has lost more than 120 sheep on their Cape Breton farm to coyotes over the last two years. She has seen the slaughtered sheep laying in the field, spotted with blood, as she rides the morning bus to school, and she has seen the coyotes at dusk running free over the ridges of the hills on her way home. The killings have been written up in the newspaper, and her father had clipped the article out and stuck it on the fridge (Bruce, 1991). Feeling this break between these different versions of the coyote in both the facts and in her own feelings for the coyotes, she decides to divide the pages of her project in half. She reserves the top for the encyclopedic "facts" describing these proud creatures of nature, while setting aside the bottom of each page for a story of a Cape Breton sheep farmer whose life and livelihood have become a battle with a coyote pack. When her father notices one of the charts she has prepared which situates the coyote's indisputable role in the nature's web, he begins to wonder if the prairie creatures that have invaded this island are coming between his daughter and him. But for her, the whole project still carries an air of uncertainty to it.

The Cape Breton student working on her coyote project leafs through a stack of materials on the coyote, some dating back to the 1940s, which she obtained by writing to a number of provincial ministries of wildlife and game. There are bounty and warning notices, pamphlets on rabies and protective fencing, bumper stickers, copies of eradication and protection motions brought before the provincial legislature. With each decade, the state seems to have taken a different bearing on the creature, friend or foe. As she sorts through these documents, she catches the mournful baying of the coyotes moving about the foothills at the edge of the farm. She begins to imagine the coyotes' mottled coats as pages of print in motion. How is she to read them, as they circle round the sheep that form part of her life on that Cape Breton farm, as they slip through the trees, as they run free by the sea? She hears her father going for his hunting rifle in the back porch, hears the chains rattle of the leg-hold traps he gathers up, and it is clear to her that she doesn't know what to think of "the wily coyote." But she is beginning to see how the animal has been put together in many versions, some of which she can abide by and others she has begun to abhor. She re-sorts her papers and documents, playing with the order of them, watching how it seems to alter the meaning of them, as she hears the back door quietly close.

The deadline is approaching for the coyote project, even as this student of the creature is increasingly unsure of what the project should be about. She keeps getting drawn away from the given categories of the report -- description, habitat, range, food, reproductive cycle, and related species. First, there were the troubling facts in the encyclopedia, and now she has been thinking about the fading bounty notices for coyotes that remain stapled to fenceposts along the road. She had not paid any attention to the notices before, but now when she came across them, they riled her as rifle shots did when she was walking over to one of the neighboring farms. She wonders what else an official notice could say about the coyote as the government rules on life beyond the fenced perimeter? She considers creating a new set of notices with the computer at school, not to hand in with her project, but to tack to fenceposts and post at the store. What could they say? She considers excerpts from her favourite book, Jack London's *Call of the Wild*, bits from her story about her father's plight, notices from the animal activists on leg-hold traps. Suppose, she imagines, I could then video what happens when people see these new notices, this rethinking of coyotes. Could she hand in a report on her contribution to what people in the community were thinking about coyotes?)

She has been sitting with a group of her friends in the library watching a National Geographic Special on wolves. Her friends are very taken by the wolf cubs tumbling about the earthen den. But they drift into chatter during an interview with a farmer and his wife whose stock had been hard hit by wolves. She has been taking notes about the television program, as it carefully balances "the issues." But she gradually realizes that the way her friends are paying selective attention to the program was again telling her what was being made of the animals. She watches her friends' eyes, noting their comments in her book. She realizes that this scene could be added to the video that she was thinking of making, or at least the script for it. It was going to take something like that to weave together what she had learned about coyotes, encyclopedias, the province, her father, school projects into a kind of knowledge ecology that worked on tensions and contradictions to sustain its shifting web of meaning. She wondered for a moment whether it shouldn't open with a clip from the cartoon series, *The Road Runner*.

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