



ARTICLE

An Obituary For a Coyote

Golden Gate National Recreation Area (<https://www.nps.gov/goga/>)

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"Resting peacefully in the shade of a Coyote brush, her grayish-brown long torso was cradled by the wetland grasses of Muir Beach"

Yakuta Poonawalla / Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy

December 2020 - At first look, we couldn't tell if she was a dog or a Coyote. (Pardon my biases and assumptions, but I have this habit of using the she/her pronoun when I don't know, and the maternal instincts in me often show up strongly in my communication with the non-human world).

Resting peacefully in the shade of a Coyote brush, her grayish-brown long torso was cradled by the wetland grasses of Muir Beach. The left eye, half open, the whitish fur of her left big ear exposed to the sunlight, the bushy tail curled up like a caterpillar, hiding the hind legs. The front legs looked as if they were carefully and gently placed, one on top of the other, reminding me of how a new mother swaddles her baby before putting her to sleep.

I went closer, and looked for movement, a breath, a widening of the eyes, or a wagging of the tail. Nothing. No wounds, no signs of human caused harm either. Just a few flies hovering around her long face, confirming our doubts of a life gone by.

A and C, both took quick photos of her, following the park protocols and sharing the responsibility of reporting it to our park wildlife biologist. I, on the other hand, was wordless, unable to move or take my eyes off her, unable to get my tools and backpack, and get going with the weeding tasks at hand for the day. We were a team of three women on habitat restoration duty; I was to spend the whole day solo, removing an annual grass called purple velvet, and A and C would spend the day around the periphery of the nearby frog pond, looking for a mint plant that needed to be removed. A line of willows and other coastal scrub separated me from them, and now the departed Coyote lay right in the middle.



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In the Dawoodi Bohra community I grew up in, the last rites known as 'ghusl', and the funeral, known as 'janaza', are both an elaborate process. First, the body is taken to the 'kabristan', the cemetery, where a group of men or women (women perform the rites when a woman dies; and men perform them for a man), bathe the body with holy water as a way of cleansing all the sins and preparing the body for the world on the other side. The body is then wrapped in a soft, white cotton cloth, called a 'kafan', and taken to the lands for 'dafan', a burial. Verses from the Quran are recited by a male leader of the community, and only silent grieving is accepted. Fresh roses are placed on the temporary soil cover, and a permanent and simple tomb is built at the one year anniversary mark. The first three days after the death is a time of

mourning and reflection and it is believed that the soul finally departs on the third night.

While in search of purple velvet grass around Muir Beach, I thought of these acts of preparing a body for life after death, and how there would be no ceremony or last rituals performed for this dead being next to me. No cleansing with rose water, no 'kafan', no 'dafan', no mourning. I couldn't concentrate on the weeding. I wanted to go back to her, perform a ceremony, recite a prayer, and wrap her furry body in a 'kafan'.

The winter sun was shining brightly that day, and I wasn't sure if it was the sun or the heaviness in my heart due to the loss I had just witnessed, that was making me feel so tired already. I had observed death and loss closely in the last eight months. The dying of humans due to covid and the religious and political intolerances, the dying of birds and wildlife due to fires, the dying of entire ecosystems due to climate change.

We broke for lunch and I took a quick peek at her again. Nothing had changed. Only the sunlight that was strong on her face in the morning, had now moved away from her.

I remembered a chapter titled 'Learning the grammar of animacy' in the book, *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer. In this chapter, Dr. Kimmerer is in conversation with her students about the use of the pronouns 'he/she' for plants and animals, and how using 'it' objectifies them and makes us distant and care less about them. I also thought about the word 'anthropomorphism', a word that was fairly new in my dictionary, and the many debates I had heard amongst scientists who were questioning the attribution of human traits and emotions to non-human beings. As my own relationship with the natural world becomes stronger and stronger, I feel more and more restrictive by the language I speak, and I'm unable to have explanations for everything that I experience. If my usage of 'he' as a pronoun allows me to develop compassion, love and respect for the non-human beings we co-exist with, then why not? If finding metaphors in the human and non-human world allows me to see clearly this human supremacy we are deluded by, then why not?

I was humbled by this Coyote's presence. I was in the company of a wise wild canine who called this park and this coastal city home, even though her life was short lived. I wondered what had happened? I wondered if it was a hit-and-run case, or just starvation. I was full of loving-kindness for this being I had known for only a few hours.

Some more weeding with long pauses, and lots of wandering thoughts in between. A group of ruby-crowned kinglets started to chirp above me. I couldn't recognize the tree they were on, which by now had lost most of

its leaves. I wanted the kinglets to join me in my mourning. Maybe they were. Maybe they already knew.

I remembered another time when I had found a dead hummingbird on my commute back home in the Presidio. I couldn't help but take her back with me in my backpack, and a few of my park friends and I later decided to give her a proper burial near a Coyote brush at Lands End. We planted an Indian paintbrush next to the burial site, a flower loved by this bird, hoping that one day a new hummingbird would come for nectar. A few weeks later, three new hummingbirds came, and a few months later, an unhoused person found shelter in that same burial spot. I wondered what would grow in the soil where this Coyote lay. I wondered who else would visit. Just then, an aircraft, in classic Blue-Angels style, started to create patterns and designs in the sky, as if offering a tribute to this Coyote. Maybe they also knew.

The sun gave us a gentle warning of departure, and I found myself adding more layers to my now cold body. I started to pack up my wandering thoughts, gathered all the grasses in large green bags, put my tools in my backpack and started to make my way back to the trailhead. I had two cameras with me that day, but I had not yet taken a photo of her. I had to remember her. She had allowed an opening in my heart in a way no one had so far. She had given me the opportunity to grieve all the losses I had heard about this year. She had given me the space to think about friendship, and my own relationship with the non-human world. What a gift she had been, even in this unawakened state.

My hands trembled as I went close to her again, and the camera wouldn't focus. I placed a dandelion flower by her side but felt as if I was invading a sacred space.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I drove back from Marin to San Francisco. I would learn later from a friend, a Coyote expert, that she indeed was a pup. On the third night after seeing her, I dreamt of a Coyote. I don't remember my dream, but I would like to believe that it was her.

As a nature interpreter, I have often shared an indigenous folklore of a beautiful friendship between a Coyote and a Coyote brush. This story will have a new meaning in my life now. This story will include the feelings of deep privilege and honor I felt on a sunny December day, being in the presence of this Being.



"I was in the company of a wise wild canine who called this park and this coastal city home, even though her life was short lived."

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For more information

- Contact [Yakuta \(https://www.nps.gov/common/utilities/sendmail/sendemail.cfm?o=7295D4B493D2B8BD98B7128FC916B9A655BE49814FB39E895E11AD9E50D994B8&r=/articles/000/an-obituary-for-a-coyote.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/common/utilities/sendmail/sendemail.cfm?o=7295D4B493D2B8BD98B7128FC916B9A655BE49814FB39E895E11AD9E50D994B8&r=/articles/000/an-obituary-for-a-coyote.htm) [Poonawalla \(https://www.nps.gov/common/utilities/sendmail/sendemail.cfm?o=7295D4B493D2B8BD98B7128FC916B9A655BE49814FB39E895E11AD9E50D994B8&r=/articles/000/an-obituary-for-a-coyote.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/common/utilities/sendmail/sendemail.cfm?o=7295D4B493D2B8BD98B7128FC916B9A655BE49814FB39E895E11AD9E50D994B8&r=/articles/000/an-obituary-for-a-coyote.htm).
- [Coyote Tracking in the Marin Headlands \(https://www.nps.gov/articles/coyote-tracking-marin-headlands.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/articles/coyote-tracking-marin-headlands.htm).

See more from the Bay Area Nature & Science Blog (<https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/blog.htm>).

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