Yes, the world and the long brown path unroll before me, but my road’s soft shoulder’s strewn with the lumps of animal carcasses, their older or newer blood rusting in sprays all around them. Coyotes most often—gutsier amblers—but all others too: skunks, antelope, the odd tabby, the lost dog. On some, buzzards have uncovered a cage of ribs. Others, intact, might as well be resting, sprawled out in a graceless sleep.

I both hurtle by and don’t. The insistent fact of them—dead there, bloating, in hundreds—erupts against the scene just out of frame: fields of infant cows, lolling their heads testing their legs, still wet with the grease of their mothers, at play in the fresh alfalfa.

If I look closely, I think I can see them daydream. They drift off and come to and run, so full of this pink spring, back to the udder, to the perfect warmth of a milk-full belly. I am not interested in the metaphor here, spring and all, but
the barbed wire—unspooled for uncountable miles—and the strange membrane that it, in its tines, makes all around me. On the highway, an unimaginably fast wilderness, grown dense with shatter and slam and maggots. Beyond the small fence, a soft meadow.
Dog and Coyote

And it’s not the gulf of misunderstanding
but its character—that it’s composed of
what feels to me, on my skin, up the trail
a ways, looking at my dog nose to nose
with the coyote he’s rustled from the scrub,
like violence.

Maybe, misunderstanding is a mistake—
I understand nothing about the coyote, its
hunger, its practice, and little more about my dog,
small there, duff-colored, the quickening crank
of his little mutt-heart.

But they stare into one another for a handful
of slow seconds, each to the other uncanny and
strange. Maybe, recognition is too slick, too.
In that yellow field, I think mutant cousins; I think
of the time between them, the grayness of it.

And the coyote gives chase, hard. I start to yell
the clean, guttural sounds I’ve learned to use
to move animals—the stubborn horse, the bear
lavishing the dumpster. These are embarrassing and
very loud and don’t work.

I run toward the two of them running toward me
and am resolved: I will shove both hands into the thrash
of fur and jaw-muscle, let my own blood into the snarl
and snot and kick away this wild dog. Beast, I think.
And I will carry the leftover tatters back down
to the road, however broken.

I don’t have to—the dumb volume of my noise
or stumbling stops it all. My dog makes it to me
and I cradle him, coo a little. We start to talk it over.
The coyote ducks into the vast spread of bramble.
Later, headed home, I know it won’t be the brawl stuck in my head. Not blood, not heat, not the prying off of jaws. but the soft moment just before—three motionless animals looking for a way to look at one another, caught in the the precarity of distance, slow in proximity’s honey.
Walk far enough into the woods above town and you'll find apple trees, the odd asthmatic lilac. They are there, the pamphlet at the trailhead suggests, because there had once been a town. A post office, good road, something like a school. The apples were planted in the backyards of homes now gone, whatever roughhewn wood, soft chinking, shingled roofs now eaten by the soil which bore them.

McIntosh, if I had a guess—the apples. A Wealthy or Wolf River, maybe. But not bittersharps. Choices versatile: sweet enough for a pie, tart enough for cider. Cultivars worth snacking on here and there.

Somedays, I think of hiking up there, taking a cutting, letting it root out in a pot back home. Or else, a simple graft. Harder, I could go up with a thick sack and haul some fruit home, see what the seeds do.

What stops me? Usually, it’s: leave them for the bears, those critters who’ve enfolded them into their own ecology. Or it’s: better let the old things rest, whittle away their last slow decades spared the crude pestering of my picking.

As I think of them today, they’re ghouly. Tattered flags of an occupation gone sour. The clinging red signposts of a ghost town with virtually no ghosts. The remnant whisper of some folks who, for loss of profit or premise, ceded to the howl and press of these hills.

What needs saying: apples themselves are not invasive. They’re persnickety and non-rhizomatic. The fruit that falls or is by bear-gut taken away won’t set seed. If it did the resulting apple would be uncategorizable, a lonely anomalous pip.

Wildflowers

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In winter, lacking the decoration of fruit and leaves, the trees are undistinguished.
    Each spring, their understory thickens and spurts, their deadfall falls.
In May, they bloom and waft out only a faint sweetness.
    How long until they’re wildflowers?