



HOW I DEFIED THE WHITE MAN  
AND OUT-FOXED FOX<sup>1</sup>

*Michael Engelhard*

**H**ere I sit, tied to the side of their barn, collar and chain rattling and rubbing me raw, while the Pale Faces are boiling up water to scald me with. How did I get myself into this bloody mess?

Blame my growling, rumbling belly for causing trouble yet again. Last night, on my way to Bear's camp, I felt a craving for their juicy hens, for the sweetness of peaches, for pink-fleshed melons or chilies that burn your tongue and make your eyes water. I actually started to drool. So I stole into the scented night, following my nose to their fenced gardens. Somehow, they must have known I was coming. When I tiptoed up to the gate, there lurked one in their likeness—a shadow amongst shadows—though fashioned from pitch.

But where are my manners? Let me introduce myself, quickly, because there is not much time. They will come soon to drag me away.

I was born long, long ago, when earth and sky briefly kissed. I have been around these two-legged ones forever. I recall the time when pyramid

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the White Mountain Apache story *Coyote Fights a Lump of Pitch*, recorded by anthropologist Grenville Goodwin between 1931 and 1936

builders idolized me on stone terraces that scraped the sky's belly. They disemboweled slaves and captives, ripped hearts pulsing and slippery as frogs from cleft chests. Blood drenched their plazas to honor my name—*Huehuecoyotl*—the first of many I should come to bear. Whenever I got too bored, I made them fight each other.

Soon, a hairy-faced breed swarmed the highlands, encased in shimmering skins, mounted on animals as fierce as they were, creatures that neighed and smelled strangely and struck warriors with terror as their hooves blew sparks from the rocks. Under the sign of the cross, their masters destroyed temples, killing or enslaving those who worshipped me. A new name heralded my fall from the ranks of the gods. The invaders began calling me “Indian Fox.” They referred to their bastard children and to half-breeds as *coyotitos*, “little coyotes.”

Huh, the gall of it!

I managed to get along with the raven-haired people to the north clad in buckskin and butterfly blankets. When those people were freed from the place where they suffered after the Long Walk, I showed them the way home, to the west, toward the four sacred mountains of *Dinétah*. They even named a moon after me, their prince of chaos: Mixed-up Month, which is half summer, half winter.

At the dawn of time, when some Holy Beings turned into animals to serve humans as food, I pissed all over myself, making sure people would never crave my flesh. The copper-skinned ones called me “Song Dog,” “Little Brother of Wolf,” or at times, enviously, “One Who Always Fornicates.” The name I like best is *Ma'ii*—“Slim Trotter” or “Roamer.”

*That* bunch treated me with respect, remembering well what I stole for them from the gods: fire, tobacco, and even daylight itself. But alas, I also gave them mosquitoes and Death. It is in my nature, I cannot control it. Levity, gluttony, lewdness and rudeness, pompousness and mischief are all part of the parcel.

The Wandering People left me alone. Perhaps, deep down, they sensed kinship—they once were the raiding kind, too. Together with Owl, I was considered a messenger, not to be messed with, one who could not be killed, because the life force only dwells in my nose and the tip of my tail. Herders in the Valley of Rock Mittens thought that chasing me would bring bad luck upon them. They owned thousands of sheep, and though I took from them whenever I felt like it, most still would not kill or even touch one of us. During the time of the big drought, when

the earth withered and sheep bones whitened the flats, Government placed a bounty on our ears. To their amazement, the sheep men did not turn in many coyote coats. The suits did not know that anybody who skins a coyote releases its spirit, which will haunt that person like slander. Believers still say a prayer whenever I cross their path. In the olden days, they'd turn around and go back after sprinkling pollen and turquoise in my tracks for their protection. Even their war parties would. The sandaled peasants down south fear my evil eye, which helps them and us to stay out of harm's way. Some accuse me of hanging out with witches, but on that matter, my chops are sealed.

Only inside the womb of their *hogans* and only between first frost and first thaw, when thunder sleeps in its lair, do the First People dare tell my stories. Huddled around crackling fires, they pass on the ancient tales about "First Scolder"—braggart, singer, punster, liar, and thief. In this manner, their young suckle at the teats of knowledge, eager for the milk of right and wrong, for proper standards to live by.

If nothing else, I'm always good for a bad example.

In my most memorable feats, I outsmart the Doughfaces—traders, farmers, soldiers, whisky peddlers, tourists, and show-offs—those who do not appreciate things unkempt and unruly. I finagle the greedy ones out of horses and finery, selling them gold-shitting asses and trees that grow money. I enjoy playing the wayward underdog, hero of the oppressed.

These late arrivals, true mutts if I've ever seen any, really look sickly and pale—strange to imagine that all two-legged ones were baked from the same clay. They call me "prairie wolf" and would like me to share the fate of Big Trotter, who has been banned from most of his range. Like him, I have been blamed for the death of sheep as well as for killing deer, which they themselves like to slay, often for pleasure. But it is all a damn lie. Drought, disease, and accidents cut down more of the dumb, wooly beasts than my fangs ever could. They also don't understand that by killing us randomly, by orphaning litters, by breaking up mates, they give the survivors no choice but to go after tame animals, which are easy pickings. Nobody gives me credit either for dining on Rabbit, who competes for pasture with their goats and cows, or for killing the weak and diseased, which only strengthens their herds.

Wherever they see so much as the charcoal tip of my snout, these sour-smelling ones get excited. They bring out their shooting irons,

their strangling wires, biting jaw-traps, and poison-firing devices. They spike arroyos and mesas with noxious carrion for me to choke on. Most of their ploys are easy to smell, dig up, set off, and turn upside-down. Whenever I leave steaming turds on top as my calling card, chalk faces turn the color of strawberries. Then they *really* get mad. They give chase in their flying machines. They gas and burn my pups in their dens, or drag them out with steel hooks and club them to death. But the more young ones they kill, the more of them I shall sire and raise.

Only the smart among us prosper, and—irony of ironies—with the culling of the unwary, the survivors’ cunning only improves. Their flimsy fences do not keep turmoil out. I have learned suspicion and caution. I am always present but rarely seen. I shrink to a tawny blur and melt into desert dusk. I crouch like a boulder, forever watching, listening, and testing the air for that familiar rankness, for footfalls announcing the enemy’s heavy presence. It is as some say: a feather falls from the sky. Eagle sees it. Deer hears it. Bear smells it. And I am there to catch it before it touches the ground.

We are the continent’s most persecuted—a sad and pathetic record. Pursuing delusions of an orderly world, their cowmen and fur men kill hundreds of thousands of us every year, at great cost, if I may say so. And yet, they keep calling themselves *sapiens*, “wise.”

I once was “God’s Dog.” A buffoon. Fringe dweller. Shape-shifter. Scoundrel with a thousand faces. Now they despise me as varmint. Students of Man label me archetype, demiurge, mythic prototype, or figment of subconscious urges; but their fancy words bite less than fleas do. Better people have called me worse things. Like my disguises, my names are plentiful—like the stars, which I scattered across the deep night sky, long before humans were so much as a thought in the mind of creation. No name seems to stick, though, and you want to know who I really am: nobody but your twin red in tooth and claw, an uninvited guest, the shaggy shape that skulks through your dreams.

I only feel safe at night, when I serenade the full moon, and my desire meshes with that of my mate, a foxy little devil with haunches and a muzzle to die for. Together we trail across wind-scoured mesas or vanish in sandstone mazes, stepping into pooled shadows, avoiding swaths of moonlight. You may glimpse us as tan-and-gray mists at the edge of your vision. Scratching here, sniffing there, and lifting a leg elsewhere, we are

pulled along by the flutter of titillating perfumes. The musk of unfolding moonflowers teases our nostrils. Squirrels leave invisible tracks in the air. Something delicious rots in the bushes. Ears pricked, we listen for distant howls, for the furtive sounds of other night stalkers. Our paws stamp the wet sand of creek beds—the only sign of our passing. By the time Sun’s pale finger stabs the horizon, we rest, curled up in a hollow under the old windblown cottonwood that has been our home for generations.

Where was I? Ah yes, the upstarts. A nosey subspecies of them, with high foreheads and poor eyesight, has bestowed yet another moniker on me: *Canis latrans*, the “barking dog.” To add insult to extermination, they compare my voice—the yipping, yodeling, and yammering that speaks of possibility and the sweet pangs of freedom—to the tuneless growling of my chained, ball-less cousins who joined their camps. Don’t get me started. How could these inbreds sell out? How can the groomed pansies waste their lives guarding livestock and homes and grub-like babies, to be rewarded with beatings or scraps from their master’s table?

It’s great fun to play pranks on them. We lure the sons and daughters of bitches out into the sage, into the pit of night where they are easily ambushed and torn up or otherwise violated. Some can still bear our offspring, true *coyotitos*. But their blood is no good.

Anyway, those eggheads, they are a handful. I’ve heard cowmen calling them “bastards.” They sneak up on us, armed with charts, clip boards, binoculars, theories, and hypotheses, poke around our dens, handle our blind, naked pups, even collect my shit, and—rumor has it—try to monitor our wanderings with chain-less collars. What foolish creatures indeed. But somewhere deep down I almost have a soft spot for them. After all, I am the irrational kind myself, engaging in strange pastimes for the sheer fun of it. At least they do not appear overly violent.

Very unlike the scowling figures who are stoking the fire at the other end of the yard at this moment. Instead of rambling on, I should rack my brains to get out of this fix.

Where is Brother Wolf when you need him?

He has not been around much in these parts and, I hear, is not well. I’m luckier. To begin with, I am smaller and make do with less. Mice, squirrels, chip-munchies, birds’ eggs, frogs, bugs (my least favorite), snakes, road-kill, and on lean days, plenty of plant fiber, make up the bulk of my diet. Wolf on the other paw always has been a picky eater,

preferring deer and bighorn sheep. He is bigger and needs more food and water, which doesn't help in a place hotter than stinking blazes. The Wandering People say that my pelt is the color of rain clouds mixed with the yellow of breaking day and evening twilight. Pretty, huh? Using big words like evolution and selection, the bookworms claim that my hair is thinner and shorter and lighter-colored than that of my relative to shed extra heat and to blend in. What nonsense! Everybody knows that I used to be bright green, envying Bluebird her pretty coat, until one day—but that is another story altogether.

I do not travel in packs. Occasionally, my mate accompanies me. For some reason, I never aroused the newcomers' deepest fears, as did "Big Brother," even though I am smarter and more wary of bait and other human ruses.

How did I end up like this, then?

Well, there I was, staring in disbelief at that black shape guarding their gate. "Move over, Gray Eyes," I snarled, but he did not budge. "If you don't move, you'll get my fist in your face. Wherever I go on this earth, if I punch a guy with my fist, it kills him." There was still no response. So I dealt him a good one, only to feel my arm stick, clear to the elbow in pitch. "What is the matter?" I howled. "Why have you caught my hand? Let go, or I'll knock out your wits and lights with my other fist and send your teeth flying!"

You can imagine how it went from there. Stuck to him with all four legs and my tail, I tried to bite the cur and became completely immobilized. "He is a slow learner, that old Coyote," I hear you say. But that is not true.

As I was saying, we figured out how to deal with the new breed better than Wolf did, to the point where we again prowl eastern seashores and woods. We lived there before, ten thousand years ago if I remember correctly, in the company of woolly mammoths, short-faced bears, saber-toothed cats, dire, dire wolves, and very few fur-wearing upright ones.

Fortunately, we have found a new sheepfold: the stone-and-steel villages and burbs of the Pale Faces. Life there is easy. Not many of them bear arms in those places—or at least, they don't use them on us—and food is free for the quick-witted. We steal from Fido, dive headlong into garbage containers, or into city ponds for fat morsels of duck. Cats, which spend most of their lives indoors and normally are the ones that

pounce, are a windfall. It is mostly curiosity that kills them, and their rhinestone-studded collars litter the stone walks and backyards of cities west of the Great Divide.

However, the Whiteys' tricks and trappings *can* put you into the most unlikely or embarrassing situations. I recently heard from an aunt who rode in Portland City's rooms on rails, snuggled up on an artificial skin-seat. Crows, those other tricksters, chased one of my kin into a cliff dwelling in Seattle, where he took refuge in the box that takes people to the top. Another one broke into their place of kept animals, going after the pea-brained peacocks.

Those young ones sure know how to whoop it up.

Our numbers have rebounded from the terror of almost a century ago. Slowly but inevitably, we take over Seattle, Albuquerque, Denver, San Diego, Oakland, San Francisco, Tucson, and the City of Angels. The roving seed of my loins has even colonized their Garden State, the Stinkers' most crowded place.

Anybody who is not a homebody now moves to L.A., and they say that more of us live in those hills than before the olive-skinned Long Knives first emerged from wooden, waterborne tubs. Some joker made it big in the moving pictures out there. For a living, he chases Roadrunner, falls from cliffs, gets blown up, steamrolled, or zapped, in wily but vain pursuits. Doesn't he know that easier marks can be found inside their pens?

Down south, a bunch of Not-Quite-So-Pale Ones crosses the big muddy river without invitation. Do they need one? *Hell no!* if you ask me. A while ago, the Northerners picked a fight and took that dry country from them. Greedy and reckless—as, admittedly I myself am on occasion—some of those nut-colored ones abuse my good name. They've been known to abandon *compadres* whom they call "Chickens." They just leave them out there, in the desert, to get plucked by vultures or, if lucky, to get picked up by the grabbers in green with slick eyeglasses, who send them right back where they came from. Now, word on the range is, they're building more highfalutin' fences down there.

Not for me, *hombre*. I decided to stay out of those crazy places, trying my best to keep a low profile. And look where it got me!

But enough chitchat—I see Gray Fox coming. He is loafing again, probably also bent on picking the White Man's many pockets. "Hey,

cousin! Over here,” I call out to him. “There are some good things cooking for me in that pot.” He says nothing, but puts his muzzle to the wind and cautiously peers at the kettle in which they intend to boil my hide. “They have potatoes, coffee, bread, all sorts of grub for me,” I tell him. “It will be done soon, and the Whisker Heads are going to bring it to me. You and I can stuff our faces and bellies together—but first you must help me. Can you put this chain around your neck while I go and take a leak behind that bush?” So they won’t notice I’m gone? The sucker agrees, slips the chain off my sore neck and clamps it around his own. “It will only take a minute,” I say.

As soon as I am out of sight, I break into a trot, then a dead run. A chuckle wells up in my throat until I can no longer contain it. Hollering with delight, I disappear over the ridge in a whirlwind of dust.