

## WOLVES FIGHTING

Strongest fangs woo passion

Teeth ripping

Shape shifting

Knives slashing

Life in wolves' world

And mine

On the other side of youth we die

Out of the den too soon

Hunger silhouettes

Moral ground made of blood

Eat for another day

And don't look for age

It finds us

Richard Heller

© 3/28/05

## REMEMBERING THEM

All night long, howls close and far make music around my tent. I know it's night, for even in the land of the midnight sun, fur and fangs stay constant. The vigil for breeding and eating binds all shape shifters together at night. In the seven months I have lived here, never once went eye to eye with one of these fellow travelers, but they are always around.

Billy, my enduring friend, is big for a sheltie, but not for a dog. I keep him near. At five foot eight and 175 pounds, I spend most of my time in a rage. It's better for me to keep away from others of my kind. The sound of wolves reminds me to avoid things that could get me shot. It's easy to listen to the truth of ancient hounds. Billy was fair game, but I was not, so they hid from us. But one day by accident, I scared a wolf away from his meal. All that I saw was his big tail disappearing into the brush. His paw prints and teeth marks were the only things he left behind. The feast he abandoned was big and old, well furred, but with ribs showing. It was a wolf like him. He had started to gnaw on him. The dead wolf was still warm. I wanted to skin him, but he looked too familiar.

I have spent time with wolves kept by people. Part wolf or pure, their stories are as tame as their surroundings. But the wild ones, coyotes or wolves, fill my mind with thoughts of who we are and what we are becoming. I hate them and love them.

I have always been able to sense them. What happened some thirty years ago in the middle of the night will haunt me the rest of my life, and if I don't make it to heaven, it will be for a decision made on the first of those two nights.

It was raining hard in Little Tujunga Canyon. My wife and I had just upgraded from living in an 8' x 8' tent, into a 1962, vintage, Silver Streak, 24' travel trailer. Our five dogs, Cashew, Nafka, Billy, Cotton, and Luka; cats, Goldie, Delilah and our goat Pepsi had good shelter. We all went to bed.

“Richard.”

“What, Lyra?”

“Cashew wants in.” Half Lab and the other half Australian shepherd, he was strong. He did course and carouse all night long, when he had a mind to. Weather never seemed to bother him. Two years before, he trotted from Lyra's parents' house in Santa Monica, to my place in the Hollywood Hills, all in one night, just to enjoy the company of Lyra's other dog Nafka, who was in heat.

“Richard, Cashew wants in.”

“He'll be fine, Lyra.”

In the morning all our other animals were fine, but there was no Cashew. We looked everywhere. I searched the hills for days on my horse Sparky, looking for him. Cashew loved riding on Sparky with me. On trail rides he would run, and for every mile Sparky and I trotted Cashew would almost do two. In the last minutes of a ride, he would run full blast and jump the fifteen and a half hands onto the part of the saddle that rested on Sparky's withers, and there is where he would finish the ride. Sparky loved just about everyone. But Cashew and Sparky for some reason had a very special love for each other that I did not understand at the time. Cashew's demise had come from the call of a coyote in heat. She lured him into her pack, and there and then they killed him. Lyra and I could feel that Cashew's energy was gone from the property that first morning he was missing,

but we could not stop hoping that we would see him. Even now, we see him in other dogs. We just look at each other, and no words are uttered between us. We both know what the other is thinking.

A few weeks after Cashew's death, a movie called Star Wars came out. Lyra wanted to see it. Closing the ranch gate after feeding and cleaning, we drove our sad hearts down the canyon road, into the city. I don't like violent movies, car crashes, gunfire, and battles; they are not what I go to movies for. Lyra and I will never agree on violent movies, although I do enjoy sitting next to her at them.

Twelve midnight, Lyra opened the gate to our ranch, got back in the truck, and we drove the short distance down to the creek, where the Silver Streak was. My hands feel thirty years older, as I punch these computer keys. I found my goat first. She had been ripped apart with her intestines hanging out along with her other vital organs exposed. Still breathing and looking at me with her warm brown eyes, the same eyes that would look at me as I milked her and shared the milk with the dogs, cats, and myself, morning and night. We loved her and her joy. Billy was seventeen and was now blind, but he loved her most of all. They played for hours. He chased her, and when she would lose him, Pepsi would baa to him, and then she stayed still until Billy bumped into her. Then the game of chasing would start again. I took my rifle out and shot her and cried. In the dark of that night, I buried her.

Before I had finished making her earthen bed, Lyra yelled, "Where's Billy?" We looked all around, called out to him for hours, but we saw and heard nothing. Now, with Cashew not here protecting the property, coyotes could have their way with the least defensible members of our family. I didn't realize how well he guarded us. Three years

before, I had seen how vicious Cashew could be. Late one night, I was pulled over by two sheriffs in Malibu Canyon, in Lyra's 1964 white VW Bug, with Cashew riding shotgun. Apparently, there was a guy an inch taller than I, with different color eyes, but with the same name. The real difference between us was that I pay my parking tickets, and this guy lets them go to warrant. When the sheriffs handcuffed me, Cashew went crazy; I thought he was going to break through the VW's window. I've seen vicious dogs, but nothing like this.

I told the Sheriff, as he started to pull out his revolver, that it would not be necessary to shoot him. I could get him to calm down, and my one phone call would be to my girlfriend Lyra. The sheriff chimed in, "That's one angry dog you've got."

"It's my girlfriend's dog."

"God."

We never found Billy, and I haven't had goat milk since. It pains me to miss them. Billy's little brass bell that he wore in grizzly bear country in Alaska hangs from the outside doorway of our bedroom now some thirty years later, and if I decide to be buried, it will be in the coffin with me.

I could have bought a flock guardian dog, such as a Great Pyrenees or an Anatolian Shepherd. Instead, I built a big fence around the little cabin that was on the property, and moved the trailer up by it. Our horses were big, strong and healthy. I never killed a coyote, but I did shoot in their direction a few times to scare them off. Things were safe once again. At night, the dogs, Nafka, Cotton, Luka, and cats, Delilah and

Goldie would follow me down to the horse corral to feed, in the cool of the night. The dogs, cats, and I sat still on the ground and listened to the sound of Sparky and Seco eating alfalfa. The sounds of the fifty gallon drums made into feeders has a distinctive drummer's clamor when slightly moved by the horses' noses as they fed along with nature's evening music. Sometimes, Lyra would join me.

One full moon night as we walked with our entourage of animals down to the horse's corral, we heard Sparky squeal out a neigh at the same time we heard the thud of a hoof hitting something alive. While Seco, a 16-hand Appy mare, ran around the big open field of the corral far from her feed. In the light of the moon, Lyra and I watched three coyotes surround Sparky, and take turns getting trampled and kicked. There was no need to help Sparky, as I saw my gray gelding kick a coyote high into the air. Two days later, Sparky and I picked up the trail of the coyotes at the corral and followed it to the same clearing where Cashew was killed. Up on a knoll past the clearing, I saw a coyote almost slither down deep into cover. Going back down into the wash, I circled around in back of the dense creosote and chaparral. I motioned Sparky into it, and the chase was on. We chased the coyote down the short draw to the wash, then up a small canyon with high walls and no way out. There at the end, with nothing but steep walls on three sides of him, he stood sideways to me, with tongue out and panting. I got off Sparky, picked up a large, heavy rock, and with less than seven feet between us, I raised my arm to let the rock fly. The coyote knew he was dead. As he turned his head away from me, I saw the whole side of his jaw had been bashed in with the bottom teeth on that side drooping over like dead flowers with the bent stems of his gums still holding his now useless teeth. Close enough now to see the dried blood of the fight two nights ago splattered from his

kicked-in nose and lower jaw down to his shoulder. I lowered my arm and dropped the rock. He looked at me, and I spoke to him almost in a whisper. “You’ll only be hunting lizards the rest of your life.”

We had other problems in the months that followed, but never again did a coyote set foot on our land.

The next winter, while driving through the Panamint Range of Death Valley in the quiet stillness of the snow, I felt them. Turning to Lyra, I said, “Over the next rise I think we’ll see some coyotes.” There, playing, running and inhaling in the crisp winter, were two of them. It was there that I let go and forgave.

© Richard Heller 4\8\05