



### ***On a Train With a Coyote Ghost***

by Robin Wyatt Dunn

*Inspired by a painting with the same title, by Barbara Sobczyńska*

I am heading east, into Kursk.

The coyote ghost is coming too.

It is snowing.

I am not afraid of the coyote ghost; I like him. He is very large.

Outside it is very cold, and growing colder.

I am going to see The Worker. I need broth for my grandmother. Her village has been ill, my grandmother especially. This is why I am going to Kursk, where The Worker is said to live now. My papers have been prepared; they are in my purse. My mother bought me the purse; it is black, like my hair.

I am not afraid, because the coyote ghost is with me; he is my father's. For years, he was my father's friend. Now he is coming with me, over the border, on the train.

My name is Jezebel, and I am a Jew. But inside, I am more ancient.

I do not know how old I am, inside. Outside, I am ten.

...

When my father was in the army, he met the coyote ghost in a bombed village, outside of Beograd. My father, who was good with animals because he was a hunter, asked the coyote ghost what he was doing in a village outside Beograd, since coyotes only occur in the Americas.

"I am a ghost and can live wherever I please," the coyote ghost told him.

"You should leave here; there are more dogs where I live."

"Where do you live?" asked the coyote ghost.

"Krakow."

That is how I met the coyote ghost; he came home with my father, after the Americans bombed Serbia.

Long ago, The Worker's ancestors crossed over the Bering Strait into the Americas, taking our traditions with them. Now, one of them has returned, as a ghost.

...

I know that the coyote ghost sometimes thinks about eating me. This is in its nature. I do not think about eating the coyote; it is a ghost. Also, I do not care to eat dogs.

The coyote ghost is coming with me to help me at the border.

...

It is night, but soon it will be morning. Every hour, the conductor walks through my car, to see that everything is in order. I am the only passenger in this car. People are poor now, and my mother saved for a long time to buy me this ticket. When the conductor passes through, I hide the coyote ghost under my purse. Because he is a coyote, he is very good at hiding in tight places, although he is many times my size.

"When you understand the intentions of the Russians, you will know that you are passing into a liminal space within the mind which is defined by color, and shape, and movement," the coyote ghost is saying, staring into my eyes. "I cannot tell you in advance what they will do. But once you understand what they are going to do, you will understand what your own actions must be, to satisfy the needs of the gate at the Russian border. Even in life, coyotes must be cognizant of gates, and in death, more so. If the Russian guards are going to refuse you, you will know in advance, if you pay attention. If they refuse you, I will take one action. If they admit you, I will take another. Do you understand?"

"Of course," I said. "But what will you do if they refuse me?"

"That is for me to know," the coyote said. "Naturally, you could always give up now and let me eat you."

"Not just yet," I said. "Maybe later."

"Hmm," said the coyote.

...

Our ancestors were great students of Nature, especially plants. The Worker knows which plants can be used for special purposes, such as divination. My grandmother is a powerful visionary, but even her talents she says are not enough for what we are facing now, and so I have been chosen to go and get the broth, because it is needed.

I am not afraid.

The coyote holds my hand, in its paw, and slowly, I fall asleep, with the snow outside, and the train humming beneath my body.

...

When I awake, it is already morning. We are approaching the border. The conductor enters the car, and the coyote ghost hides under my purse.

"Not there," I whisper to him, and he hides instead under my skirt.

I pick up my purse and take out my papers to show to the conductor.

"Good morning, *dzyevushka*. Papers, please."

I hand him my papers. He examines them carefully. Then he places his stamp on them.

"Who is meeting you in Kursk?" he asks.

"My father," I tell him. But my father is dead.

The conductor notes this in his notebook, then leaves. Outside, I can see the city in the dawn light.

"You can come out now," I tell the coyote ghost. He comes out from under my skirt.

"They will let me in," I say.

"Don't be so sure," says the coyote ghost.

A hundred meters from the edge of the city, the train screeches to a halt.

"Open the window," says the coyote ghost.

I am afraid. And the window is stuck. I pound on it with my fist.

"Open it," says the coyote.

I pound and pound on it; I can hear men coming in the next car. My hand is bleeding.

Finally it opens, and freezing air swirls into the car, filled with snowflakes and yellow-red light.

The coyote pushes me out the window, and I land in the snow beside the tracks.

"What will you do?" I shout at the coyote ghost.

"Now you run," he says, looking at me from the window with his strange eyes.

I am running through the snow. Behind me I can hear soldiers.

"Halt!" one of the soldiers shouts, in Russian.

I run faster.

Behind me, I can hear the coyote, and I look back; he is much larger than the train, glowing in the dawn light, his smile terrible, and gleaming, and I scream at him not to kill them, but I look away.

I do not know if he killed them or not.

I am in the woods. I am crying, under a tree. I still have my purse my mother bought me. Inside it is the letter to The Worker.

...

I do not hear anything after ten minutes, and so as not to freeze I get up and walk, towards Kursk.

...

I believe the coyote understands the sickness in my grandmother's village, but he will not tell me what the sickness is.

I am walking. The sun is climbing. My hand hurts. My feet are very cold in the snow.

In the distance, the train is still standing there, motionless. I walk, staying under the trees, until I find myself in someone's back garden.

I have made it. I am in Russia. I must find The Worker's address. The shaman.

...

An old woman invites me into her house for tea, and I don't speak very much Russian, so I just nod, and smile. She is talking about her son, who died in the war. Which war, I don't know. She is very old, as old as my grandmother.

I show her the address I have written down.

"*Gdje?*" I ask her. "Where?"

She draws me a map, with a pencil she sharpens with her knife.

...

Kursk is smaller than Krakow, and lonelier. I walk towards the center of town, but most people do not meet my eye. I am afraid of soldiers, but they do not look at me either.

I can feel the coyote ghost close by, but I do not see him.

Outside the Church of the Ascension, playing in the mushroom fountain, I see The Worker. I know it is him. His address is still five blocks away but I know this is him. He is singing to himself, and washing himself in the church fountain.

I walk to him immediately and say, "Mr. Worker?"

He smiles at me. He keeps singing and washing himself.

"Mr. Worker? Is it you?"

"I am washing," he says, smiling at me.

"I am sorry to interrupt your bath. My name is Jezebel. I need your help."

"You are a Jew," he says.

"Yes," I say.

"I am a Jew too," he says, smiling.

"You are?"

"Also, I am a Buddhist."

"I see."

"Here, come take a bath with me," he says.

"No, thank you," I say. "I will wait till you are done."

"I'm almost done," he says.

Mass has started inside the church, and I can hear the priest singing. The snow has slowed; I stand under the eaves of the church, to stay warm.

"It is warmer in the water!" the Worker shouts, laughing.

I try to smile, but my teeth are chattering too hard. I wonder where the coyote is.

Finally The Worker finishes his bath, and he pops a small mushroom in his mouth, while wrapping a towel around his body.

"Come with me," he says, and he starts to climb up the rain gutter on the side of the church.

"Is it okay?" I ask.

"Yes, come on!"

It's better to move than stand still in this cold, so I grab ahold of the rain gutter and dig my feet into the side of the church and start to climb up.

The Worker reaches the edge of the big blue dome at the top of the church.

"We shouldn't be up here!" I whisper to him.

"It's fine, you're only a little girl, and I'm only a little man! Come on!"

I follow him into the dome, stepping very carefully, holding out my hands for balance. My purse, with the letter inside it, is hanging around my neck. Somewhere, in the clouds above, I can feel the coyote.

The Worker lifts the cross on top of the dome like a hatch, and it opens just like a door. I am amazed, and the Worker smiles at me. Inside the dome is his little hut, just like our ancestors had.

"Come on in," he says, and I do. I climb down the ladder and sit down by his fire, and then I see that the coyote is already here.

"I see you've brought my old friend The Wolf!" says The Worker.

"He is a coyote," I say, and coyote smiles.

"Same difference!" says the Worker. "Will you have tea?"

"I'm not supposed to do any drugs," I tell The Worker.

"This is just tea!"

"Okay," I say, and The Worker pours tea for the three of us.

It tastes delicious. It tastes like the forest.

...

Part of me is afraid The Worker put drugs in the tea anyway, but I know that I'm tired, and only a little while ago I was running from Russian soldiers. The Worker seems to expand and contract like a balloon, but I tell myself that it's okay, and soon he will give me the broth I need to take to my grandmother.

...

The coyote ghost and The Worker had a lot to talk about; it was clear they were old friends. I tried to listen, but I couldn't understand a lot of it. A lot about history, and wars, and adventures they had had together, and old arguments.

Then I heard the coyote ghost tell The Worker, "She isn't worthy of your potion. Give it to me instead, so I can bring it to my family in America. We need it more than this little Pole." I gasped.

The Worker smiled. "Are you willing to fight for your little broth, Jezebel?"

"Yes," I said, and swallowed.

"How shall you fight?" asked The Worker.

"By hook or by crook," said the coyote, smiling.

"With stories," I said.

The Worker smiled. "I like that idea," he said. "Each of you tell me a story. If I don't like either of them, I can always eat both of you. Coyote, you go first, you're older."

Coyote began his story.

...

"I have been hungry for a long time," said The Coyote, "longer than either of you have been alive. When I was a little pup, I hungered for human flesh, and now that I am dead, I hunger for it more. It has been so long since I had any. Before I took a wife, I found a boy outside Phoenix. In Arizona the Americans were killing many Mexicans, and they had left a boy outside near a cactus, and he was very tired, because he had been running from the soldiers. I killed him and ate him there, and it was the best thing I had ever tasted. The boy tasted like fear, and like love, and like memory, which is, I later realized, what my wife tasted like too.

"Because I had eaten that boy, I grew a hunger for humans, and looked for ways to eat another. But the war had ended, and human flesh became much harder to come by. I longed for someone to leave a small child unattended, or a baby abandoned, but found nothing.

"Still I could not forget my hunger. It burned in me, like a fuel, and even after I had gotten married and fathered children I would spend many hours alone, on the edges of Phoenix, looking for a human to eat. All I found was cactus, and the occasional rabbit.

"When I realized I could not forget about my hunger no matter how much I tried, I prayed to the Old Gods of the Dogs, They Who Howl, and sacrificed some of my blood into the river water, one summer. Then I had a vision of what I was to do. I was to kill my son with my own teeth, They Who Howl told me, and then I would be given a human to eat, at my leisure.

"Possessed with the vision, I sought out my son, who was now grown, and who had moved to Los Angeles, where he lived in the arroyo, with his cousin.

"All over Los Angeles I prowled, seeking my own flesh, so I could propitiate the will of my gods. At last I found him in his arroyo, but I saw that he was now stronger than me. And he

saw my intentions in my eyes, and he and his cousin beat me, and drove me from the arroyo limping, into the city, where I dodged cars, and ran from children who taunted me, wondering where was my desert, and where were my gods, and where was my wife, and where was I, but there was only asphalt, not even any stars to navigate by.

"I died there in Los Angeles, lost and alone. Shortly after I died, I was given a choice. I could serve my family as a ghost, as compensation for my abandonment and madness, or I could be reincarnated as a human being. Reincarnation I found disgusting, and so I chose the first option.

"It was a good choice, because I had to learn a lot to become a proper servant of The Coyotes. I had thought myself a well educated canid, but I knew almost nothing in life. In death, I learned what diplomacy was, and what war is. I learned to speak human tongues, and I traveled widely, including to Serbia, where I met this girl's father.

"When I met Jezebel, she made me remember my own son, and my foolish promise to the gods. That is why I agreed to help her help her family. But on the train, something occurred to me. This sickness has afflicted all of us, for many generations. Why should it be this little Polish family that gets to receive the cure from your wise hands, Worker? Why not give it to the Coyotes? Have we not served you longer, with more loyalty in our disloyalty, and more trickery in our loyal hearts even as your loyalty is trickery in the ways of your awesome magic? Hasn't my family earned your cure for our affliction, these many years?

"On the train I realized that this girl is too over-eager. She believes too easily. She thinks that I would help her simply because I was a friend of her father's. But she forgets that I am a coyote. And I hunger, even now, for human flesh. Give me the potion, Worker, and let me eat her, and before I crumble into dust and cease to be forever, I will be your Coyote, and work your great will wherever you say."

The coyote smiled his great toothy smile, and I could not look at him, I hated him so much. So I began my story, speaking in as loud a voice as I could.

"My name is Jezebel, and I am a Jew. I am ten years old. My grandmother is dying. So is my grandmother's village. For five hundred years my people have lived here in Poland, and before that, we lived for five thousand years in Israel, the land of Sarah's God. Before that, we lived with you, Worker, in Egypt, and south of Egypt, in Africa. Before I was a Jew, I was a girl, and before I was a girl, I was a human being, and before I was a human being, I was a mammal, like you, Worker, and like you, Coyote, cut from flesh on my mother's umbilical cord, and like Coyote, I want to help my family.

"Although we are Jews, my grandmother remembers the older ways, Worker, which is why she knew where you lived. I know that Coyote suffered a great deal, and that humans treated him poorly. And I can't promise to serve you as Coyote has; I am not a ghost, and I must serve my family.

"But I think that if you give me your magic broth, Worker, and let me give it to my grandmother, she will share it with her whole village, and her village is very strong, Worker, and they will learn to make more of your magic broth, and we will share it with as many people as we can."

I swallowed. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"So. . . you're offering to put me out of business!" The Worker laughed. "Ha ha ha ha! I like it! You win, girly! The broth is yours!"

And with that, the coyote snarled, and disappeared into a mist, out into the night.

...

Getting back to Krakow was not as easy as it was to leave it. It took me almost a year. Sometimes I still dream about the coyote.

Now, in Krakow, we have begun to manufacture the broth that cured my grandmother's village. Even in America they are buying it. I hope some of it gets to the coyote's family, in Phoenix.

I know that he meant well, though he had an evil smile.

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### **About the Author**

Robin Wyatt Dunn has lived in his adopted state of California longer than anywhere else. This year he started teaching composition in colleges in Los Angeles. His new novel is *A Map of Kex's Face*, due out at the end of 2014. More information is at [robindunn.com/kex.html](http://robindunn.com/kex.html). Check out his website for a list of his published books, stories, and poems.

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This story first appeared in the Third Flatiron Anthologies publication, "Abbreviated Epics."  
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