Buoyed by a dusting of snow last night, Joe LaRock is beaming and animated when I meet him for seven o’clock coffee at the Whiting Country store. I normally never drink coffee, but today I pour myself a small. Not wasting any time, Joe happily pays for my coffee and rushes into his hulking Ford F150. I pull myself up into the front seat and settle down next to Joe’s usual passenger—a heavy, black gun pointed down into the foot space.

Joe is a big man with a kind face and the disarming accent of a man who has lived his whole life near Shoreham, Vermont. He marches through the snow about six-feet tall with a thick barrel chest and big shoulders. He trims his brown hair and slightly graying beard short, accentuating the large features of his face. Robin’s egg blue eyes straddle a long straight nose that looks normal-sized next to his huge cheeks and full chin. His hands are thick, calloused and skilled. On the hunt, Joe wears a faded orange hat with a camouflage brim, a green-and-black checkered Johnson wool shirt, leather work gloves, and light brown Carhartt working pants over waterproof green boots. Under his thick wool outer layer, tattered collars and worn buttons of three different shirt layers peek out behind each other. To stay warm his main strategy is to keep moving.

Before I can gulp down my coffee, we stop halfway down an icy dirt road dividing two crop fields. “You might want to come out and see this,” he says and I fumble for my video camera. Just in front of the car, a trail of fresh paws in the new inch of snow gives the dogs their first chance of the day. Joe unlocks the “dog box,” a kennel fitted to the back of his truck and three dogs jittery with excitement scramble down and plant their noses to the ground. Joe is concerned about his best nose, Izzy, whose paws are still healing from last week’s hunt. He decides to rest her on this run, hoisting her unwillingly back into the box. Within a minute, Rocket, Izzy’s younger brother, starts barking methodically, or “cold trailing,” telling Joe he’s got the scent.

Joe’s foxhounds are called “Running Walkers” and they live and breathe to chase coyotes. White, brown and black fur insulates the foxhounds from the cold but, like Joe, they are happiest and warmest on the move. In the back of his coyote truck, whimpers and howls of the two dogs kept behind can be heard over the engine, pleading for Joe to let them run. Padded paws and wet black noses peek through the shiny aluminum bars of their hay-bedded kennel. Even when their paws are bloody and raw, they will keep running unless Joe keeps them locked in the box.

Each dog runs equipped with a GPS collar so that Joe can track his dogs and stay ahead of the coyote during the chase. Joe keeps a small Garmin Astro 220 dog-tracking device in his chest pocket that shows each dog moving as a point on the screen with an exact distance from Joe. “I’m no technical wizard,” Joe says, “but this little thing is amazing.” Joe communicates the positions of his dogs to the other hunters with a separate radio that he keeps clipped onto the center of his shirt. In the past, Joe relied on a much less effective telemetry device that beeped more or less frequently depending on its distance to the dog.

Hunched over the kitchen counter in his home, Joe confided in me that he doesn’t go hunting just to kill coyotes anymore, “It’s about watching the dogs do the work and seeing what they were bred to do.” More than just admiring their abilities, Joe forms deep attachments to his dogs, some of whom he’s hunted with for almost as long as his daughter has lived. He told me stories of some of the dogs he had lost on previous hunts. Hank, one of Joe’s best dogs and brother of Scout, drowned a few years ago chasing a coyote that escaped across a river. Magnum, another of Joe’s favorite dogs fell suddenly during a chase when he destroyed the equivalent of his Achilles tendon. “I walked over to him and he was wagging his tail like nothing happened,” Joe remembered, “but his hind leg was all going the wrong direction.” Joe took him to the hospital and paid thirty-five hundred dollars for a surgery, “so at least he could ride up front with me.” But, the morning after a successful surgery Magnum reacted to the anesthesia and dropped dead on the kitchen floor. “How’s that for a sad story!” Joe almost shouted when he finished telling the story, laughing to stave away the welling of tears.

Hearing the barks getting fainter over the hill, Joe and I double back to “the ridge” to cut off the coyote in chase. In two minutes he stops the truck and we can hear the barking getting louder. Joe loudly loads a ten-bullet clip into his .223 caliber Remington pump rifle and we start crunching uphill through the snow. Along the way he strides so quickly that I have to break into a jog multiple times to keep up. We arrive at the top of the ridge too late for the coyote but just in time see Rocket running, sniffing and barking every breath. The dog runs right past us but doesn’t stop to lick the face of his master, continuing in pursuit out of sight over the other side of the ridge. “Go on buddy, get that coyote!” Joe encourages.

Now finally the pace of our mission calms enough to enjoy deep breaths of the cold air and relaxed conversation. Joe tells me that in the summer and fall this area is perfect for turkey hunting. “That’s actually why I own it,” he chuckled. Many years ago he’d been hunting here and seen a For Sale sign posted on a tree and bought the property. On the way back down to the car he points out several handmade tree blinds twenty feet above the ground that offer perfect sniping spots. When I ask him about cooking his own turkeys for Thanksgiving, he laughs, “We never make it to Thanksgiving. Those turkeys taste too damn good.”

Just as we are reaching the car we hear three distant gunshots and Joe smiles, loosening the walkie-talkie on his chest in anticipation. “Dead coyote, fellas” says Joe’s father Rupert, and a frenzy of excited radio chatter follows.

Joe usually hunts with a half dozen or more buddies that are a close-knit bunch of friends, coworkers, and family. After meeting at the store for coffee, each hunter fires up his own vehicle and the search begins. The first hand I shake in the frenzy at the Whiting Country Store belongs to Joe’s father Rupert. Rupert is leaner than Joe, and his full gray mustache accentuates the narrowness of his weathered face. He wears the same green-and-black checkered wool coat, but always dons a muted orange half-vest that covers the upper half of his torso. “He’s not only my father but he’s my best friend,” Joe says with feeling. Rupert and Joe have been hunting all kinds of animals since Joe was a little boy, and Joe appreciates the time his father spent stalking prey alongside a noisy and impatient child.

Back in his home, Joe rustled up a thick photo album to show me some of his and Rupert’s hunting exploits over the years—ice fishing in Lake Champlain in the winter, muskrat hunting out of swamp boats in the summer, Joe’s first deer with a bow at age eleven, and Rupert’s black bear. Almost every picture features an impressive string of slain animals, minus the pictures of Joe pitching for his high school baseball team and sitting beside a trove of ginseng roots collected one summer at Lake Champlain to sell at five-hundred dollars a pound. In the old hunting photographs, Joe’s father Rupert sports a handlebar mustache as Joe tags along at his hip, and Joe confirms that in his thirty-nine years he’s never seen his father without it. Rupert divorced Joe’s mother when Joe was twelve, but the vicious hunting duo kept the adventures going. Recently, Joe and Rupert travelled thirty-eight hours to hunt deer in “the-middle-of-nowhere” Quebec, and Joe insists that it was well worth the drive.

In terms of coyote hunting, Rupert is not over the hill by any means. When I started hunting with Joe, Rupert had been the hottest gunman of the whole group and his streak continued throughout the month. Rupert adds two GPS-collared foxhounds, Gus and Spook, to Joe’s sixteen-legged fleet. Joe chuckles because under Rupert’s neck-length straight silver hair, his hearing has completely gone in one ear yet he still manages to put bullets into coyotes as well as anyone with his steady hand and finely-tuned instincts. Every Sunday at five o’clock , Rupert hosts all of the LaRocks, including Joe’s mother, her new kids, and all in-laws and under one roof for a family dinner. Joe smiles when I ask him about it, “It’s like Christmas morning every Sunday, is the best way to describe it.” Joe warns me that you better have a good excuse if you don’t show, “otherwise you’re in big trouble with Rupert.”

Joe and I are the last ones to arrive at the scene of the first kill, where four men and one panting dog stand about a hundred yards off the road in a large open field around a thirty-five pound carcass. I walk behind Joe with my camera bumping along at my waist as I get my first look at the coyote. It’s face looks calm, eyes still open and tongue hanging lazily in the fifteen-degree cold. It’s tan and dark fur is stained pink with blood and when a boot firmly turns it over a pool of red matching the large exit wound has already soaked into the snow. The second dog arrives and gorges on the scent he’s been following for the past thirty minutes, poking his nose up and down the fallen coyote. Then, without much thought a work glove swings down and yanks on a hind leg to drag the dead animal back into the truck. The work is easy over patches of ice when the body can slide, but over the sharp bumpy ground and rocks the body shakes out a trail of fresh blood.

After all the shots have been fired and the dogs are exhausted, Joe hauls the coyote carcasses to a young trapper in Middlebury named Brian who skins them and sells the skins in Canada. Joe used to skin all the coyotes he shot, twenty-six in his first season, but an ineffable foulness to the business prompted him to pass along the coyotes to Brian at no cost. “I’ve skinned everything there is to skin,” Joe says, “and I can honestly say I didn’t care to skin the coyotes too much. They have a funny smell… I can’t really explain it. You have to have a strong stomach to do it.” Brian sells the coyote skins in bulk along with other furs he collects, but on average each skin earns him twenty-five dollars.

Later in the day, I seize a chance to show some gumption at the site of the second kill. Joe and I were nearby when we got news over the radio, so we walked for a few minutes into a wide open field where we found David, the killer, Nicholas and two of Joe’s hounds. David is my same age, twenty years old, but seems much older with a gun over his shoulder and a dead coyote at his feet. He too wears a green-and-black checkered Johnson wool coat and Carhartt pants, but covers his head with a bright orange tuque (something Joe calls the “goofy tuque,” and reserves for only the coldest occasions). David stands taller than the other men at about six-foot-two and has dark brown eyes and dark facial hair that is less full than Joe’s. David’s nickname in the group is Johnny Cash, earned from his special ability to play guitar and sing old Johnny Cash tunes in the summertime. He must have seen the big smile on my face because he catches my eye and asks, “How do you like hunting?”

“This is awesome.” I reply, then blow a puff of steam from my breath that vanishes into the vast open scenery. We are a quarter-mile from the nearest truck, so we set out down a road of hard dirt, ice and snow. Joe and Nicholas each grab a dog leash and David awkwardly bends over to drag the coyote by its hind leg. After a minute of hanging behind and recording video, I jog to catch up with the hunters and help out. “Want to take a break?” I ask Nicholas.

He lets out a big sigh, “Thanks, I appreciate it. He’s a heavy one.”

Eastern coyotes are the meaner, meatier relative to the warm weather coyote, ranging from about thirty to fifty pounds with gray and blonde fur. Flashing across an open field or bobbing through skinny trees, coyotes can be confused with large dogs or wolves but they are much more elusive. Originally native to the American southwest, coyotes have adapted to the Northeastern climate and ecosystem with no natural predators and swelling populations. They are everywhere but people don’t notice them because they stay hidden so well—“Deer are sharp,” Joe said, “But coyotes are frickin wily.” Even a slight breeze behind Joe and me in the direction of the coyote sends a red alert and the coyote will dash away from our scent. Sometimes, a coyote will turn one-hundred-and-eighty degrees and run exactly back along its own tracks then veer off to the side so that the hounds will sniff their way into a dead end. On our second hunt we lost a coyote near a road and Joe explained that coyotes also try to cover their scent by dashing down stretches of icy roads or recently plowed fields that are difficult for the hound dogs.

In Vermont, the coyote is the only furbearing animal that can be hunted legally year-round and most locals share a common disdain for the animal. One time we tracked a coyote onto some private land and asked a farmer for permission. “Kill as many of those fuckers as you can,” he said, and everyone on the radio got a good laugh. Another time, an eighteen-wheeler truck stopped in the middle of the road to point across the field and tell us he saw “two coyotes headed that way.” In addition to poaching farm animals, coyotes kill small rodents, birds, snowshoe hare, cottontail rabbits, woodchucks, and even deer, not to mention many a pet caught wandering in the backyard. Coyote control efforts in the past to protect livestock have seen limited success because the coyotes that survive boost their reproductive rate and quickly restore their population. Vermont Fish and Wildlife does not support any bounty programs to exterminate the coyote population, programs which used to be common but “have no place in modern wildlife management.” Eastern coyotes have established their presence in Vermont for many years to come, but they will always need to keep their eyes out for the weekend hunters like Joe Larock and his hound dogs.

Joe LaRock has four hound dogs, a wife and a daughter and he loves them all. Just twenty yards from the house, four small doghouses shelter Joe’s well-loved beasts: Scout, Izzy, Rocket and Tiger. Nowadays he cracks a raw egg onto each mound of kibbles at dinnertime to give his dogs extra protein, and also to use up the excess of eggs from his chickens. Scout is the oldest hound, ten-years old with paws like snowshoes and the first one up in the morning. Tiger is just a year-and-a-half old, but also the fastest runner in the team. Izzy is seven years old and comes from “impeccable bloodlines,” making her “by far the best hound in the group.” He gave her the nickname “Big Money” because she was the first dog he ever spent six-hundred dollars on. Joe liked Izzy so much that he went back to New York to get her younger brother Rocket.

The layout of Joe’s house shows how his hunting hobby and family life are divided yet fundamentally intertwined. Far away from the front door on the first floor is the “gun room,” where Joe’s wife Beth makes him keep all his toys. Beth was jokingly given the nickname “Cruella de Vil on the hill” many years ago for shouting at all the hunters when the rumbling of trucks and loading of dog boxes before dawn rudely woke up her and the sleeping baby. In the “gun room,” the walls extend about twelve feet by ten feet, but the room feels much smaller because of some twenty mounted deer heads jutting out from all sides. The floor is almost covered by guns and hunting paraphernalia big and small, including some ground animal skins and a beautiful stuffed bobcat lurking in the corner. Printed photographs show Joe’s father clutching the antlers of two bloodied deer at once and Joe crouching behind a row of seven dead coyotes with three hounds climbing up his legs to lick him. The first gun that Joe reaches for, a.22 caliber Hornet, belongs to his ten-year-old, blonde-haired daughter Abigail who just killed her first deer this fall. He showed me a picture of Aby, as she is called, face covered in brown paint, grinning and thrusting a thumb in the air from inside Joe’s handmade shooting blind. Later, after Aby and Beth came through the front door with groceries, he told Aby that one of his hunting buddies saw the picture and remarked, “My father never would have done that for me!”

“I know, I’m spoiled.” Aby admitted.

Joe also killed his first deer when he was nine-years old, and when we walked through the frozen swamp he pointed out the exact ridge where he fired the shot. “One hundred and ten pounds,” he said proudly, “I remember that deer like it was yesterday.”

During the week Joe works hard as a lineman for Central Vermont Public Service (CVPS), climbing up telephone poles with spikes on his boots to repair fallen or damaged power lines. In eighteen years he has fallen twice. Once, he slipped straight down the pole but landed “like a cat” in the snow and walked away scratch-free. The second time, he fell backward but something in his equipment belt caught on the telephone line and he dangled on the wires before scrambling back onto the pole. This year, in the aftermath of Hurricane Irene, Joe worked 18 to 20 hours a day for two full weeks. Despite the dangers and long hours, Joe likes his job—he meets lots of grateful people and it’s where he met his wife, who still works at CVPS reading electricity meters.

In the summer Joe finds time to bring his hound dogs to a massive 300-acre coyote pen in upstate New York to keep them in hunting shape while Joe and his friends cook up hot dogs and spectate from lawn chairs. An eight-foot-tall fence around the whole perimeter prevents the high-leaping coyotes from escaping for good. The coyotes in this pen are conditioned and naturally selected to be fantastic runners, evading a nearly constant barrage of hound dogs. At any given point the pen is stocked with about forty coyotes and hound owners pay seven dollars for each hound to let them run for the day. Sometimes, Joe has witnessed, a dog will be gaining ground on a coyote when another one will run into its path and lead the dog in another direction. Joe’s hound dogs rarely catch up to the well-conditioned coyotes in the pen, he says, because their legs are out of running shape, but the dogs still enjoy every second of the chase.

When a dog does catch up to a coyote, sometimes the coyote will turn and fight for its life. “People sometimes forget that these are wild animals, and backed into a corner they can be quite ferocious,” Joe says. On my third hunt with Joe, Tiger came back to the truck with several scratches bleeding red from his front legs and face. “Looks like he got into a scrap with a coyote and lost,” Joe said with a measure of pride and compassion—pleased with how Tiger ran but sensitive of his pain. Joe went on to boast that Tiger runs so fast he had a knack for running *ahead* of the coyote. “All these guys have seen him do it,” he insisted.

Joe does not have a son, but at thirty-nine he is old enough to treat me like one. When we walk through the woods in search for coyotes, he shares with me some of his hunting wisdom and keeps me included. Once he noticed a small urine spot in the snow between some coyote tracks and launched a question, “Time to test your knowledge, John. Male or female?” I guessed wrong and he explained that males urinate in front of their hind paw prints and females behind. “Young male,” he said, also noting its age because the coyote had not yet developed the leg-lifting urination pattern of older coyotes. A second test came the next week standing over another set of tracks, “When do you think this print was made?” I guessed wrong and Joe pointed out that the bottom of the print had frozen into shape, meaning that it was made last night. Then he ball his fist and pressed into the snow gently, “*this* is what a fresh one looks like.”

The best impromptu hunting lesson I received from Joe was in shooting his rifle. We were in a lull of coyote activity and Joe turned to un-shouldered his gun. “Ever shot anything this big?” he asked, “Want to?” He handed me some earplugs connected by a thin string and pointed out an eight-by-eight-inch sign forty yards away—POSTED: Hunting, fishing, trapping or trespassing for any purpose is strictly forbidden VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED. I put two holes in the sign and we both inspected the damage with big smiles. One of the bullets pierced through the tree near the bark and carved away a skinny trench. Joe helped me sift through the snow to find the two bullet casings that I could keep as souvenirs.

On the way back to the Whiting General Store, Joe and I frequently talk about his precocious daughter Aby and her successes in school as well as the hunting field. Last year, her presentation on homemade salsa won first place in the 4-H public speaking competition in Vermont and later in all of New England. This year, she is researching to give a presentation on horses. “She wants to be a veterinarian,” he says, “which would be helpful with all my dogs getting beat up all the time.” There was a pause as I reflected on Joe’s compelling relationship with animals. “But then again, I wanted to be a dentist when I was a kid and look where I am now!” We both shared a good long laugh. Aby’s only comical fault is her mixed-up radio jargon. “Four ten,” she always says, instead of “ten four” which is code for “I heard you.”

“I’m taking John back to the store, he’s got a hockey game,” Joe spoke into the radio. A few seconds later came a crackly response.

“Good luck, John!”

Joe handed me his radio and I pressed down the button to speak.

“Thanks, Mike.”

“Hit ‘em hard!” he added, and we laughed again.

The first time I saw Joe shoot and nearly miss a coyote was sudden and exhilarating. Our dogs had been on the scent for twenty minutes and we were in the car driving across Route 74 with wide-open fields to either side when Joe saw a coyote flash across the road fifty yards in front of us. Joe muttered something like “I’m gonna shoot this coyote” as he lurched the truck to a halt on the right shoulder. In one motion he undid his seatbelt, grabbed his Remington pump from its resting place near my leg and opened his driver door. I quickly started my camera and jumped out my door but Joe was already twenty yards ahead sprinting into the open field. I tried to close the gap but I was still about the same distance away when he stopped about eighty yards into the field and lined up the fleeing coyote. At this point I held the camera by my chest so I could appreciate the moment fully. About two hundred yards away, the coyote was sprinting on a line away and slightly to the right for Joe. One, behind, two, closer, three, in front, four, to the left, and five, behind again. Each bullet kicked up a white cloud of snow and dirt from the ground so I could see exactly where each shot missed. Joe turned around and started marching back to the car with a big exasperated smile across his face. Another thirty minutes later, Rupert killed the same coyote after it ran almost all the way to Middlebury.

The second time I saw Joe shoot at a coyote my whole body appreciated the loudness of Joe’s Model 7600 Remington pump. We had been walking for awhile, but now we sat perched on a snowy hill with a good view through the trees below us and the dogs were closing in. We could hear the dogs barking every breath, which means they have the coyote close. I saw him first, one-hundred yards away on a neighboring ridge about the same height as us. I said something quickly to Joe like, “Over there!” Just before Joe could wheel around and shoot, the coyote paused for a half-second looking straight at us, and I admired his blond and dark gray profile. Then he bounded across the ridge to the right but not out of sight. Joe, with his face flush along the barrel, muttered, “Watch your ears,” but I was fixated on the coyote and didn’t bother. My kneejerk reaction was to fling my arms up to the sides of my head but my bell had already been rung. For a moment we peered hopefully across the small gorge. “You hit him?” I asked, trying to balance the volume of my voice against the ringing in my ears. “Don’t know,” Joe responded, but when we crossed over we saw the path of the bullet piercing the snow just four feet from where the coyote prints suddenly changed direction. “Definitely sprayed some dirt in his eye!” Joe said and we laughed together as our adrenaline faded.

On my fourth hunt I finally saw Joe kill his first coyote of the season. Rupert blurted something over the radio while we were standing by the rails of the truck and suddenly we were tearing down the dirt road. The days had been warm all week and the snow had disappeared from the surrounding fields. We stopped forty yards from a fully-opened cow carcass atop a compost pile of dirt and skeletons. To our right, the field bellied down to a small gorge that fed a pale green creek. Together we scanned the placid scene and waited tensely for the coyote, standing on a tuft of brown grass that offered some elevation to see over brush. This time, Joe saw him first. Then as he raised his gun I found him too. One-hundred and fifty yards away, moving toward us and left along the flat bottom of the gorge. I saw the coyote take three or four trots before Joe boomed a shot into his hind leg. The coyote crumpled on the impact of the shot but managed to keep momentum toward the brush where the flat bottom met the opposite hillside. Joe shot again but I had lost sight of the coyote. One more shot, then so did Joe.

We leaped over the shallow creek and crunched our way to where the coyote had been hit. A small patch of blood on the thin layer of melting snow told us he couldn’t be too far from this spot. At that point, Rocket, who had been chasing this coyote for over three hours, came weaving steadily toward us with his nose downward but too tired to bark. Joe called over the radio to Rupert, “Dad, you copy?... I’m gonna need some more dogs down here.” But just then, Rocket found the body only twenty yards away from where we were standing. Joe approached slowly, cautioning me that it might still be alive. Joe had hit him twice, and he lay on his side with tongue lazily dropped in defeat. Joe celebrated with his exhausted hound, kneeling to wrap him in a big hug. “Look at you! Rocket, you are the man!” As I pet Rocket, I noticed a deep red cut under Rocket’s eye, most likely from a scrap with the coyote, and Joe judged the cut worriedly, “Looks like I’m gonna have to do surgery on that one.”

The crew rendezvoused at a nearby Mobil station to get burgers, sodas, and to plan the next move. Joe got some high-fives and jibed with his half-brother Shaun, who also killed a coyote, about whose shot was further. “Fourteen shots to kill that coyote!” Ronnie exclaimed, recounting with pain the five times he had missed from two-hundred-and-fifty yards but taking comfort that Rupert and Scott also missed shots. The real hero of the day was Rocket, who stayed on the scent from eight in the morning until lunchtime despite injury and obvious fatigue.

As we drove back to the Whiting Country Store where my car was parked, Joe mentioned that he had looked into getting a mentor license so that I could wield a gun of my own on our next hunt. With Joe as my mentor, I could forego the traditional hunting education course and learn from Joe instead. Even though my month-long task to collect videos and stories for my writing class had come to an end, Joe and Rupert made me feel a welcome and permanent part of the group. I know that any weekend this Spring if I am looking for adventure, I’ll drive to the Whiting Country store at seven o’clock to meet Joe, Rupert, and the guys for coffee.