



# Difficult Dog

by Michael Finley

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## **A JAR IN TENNESSEE**

## Dog and Master

Back when my daughter Daniele and I used to walk dogs at the Humane Society, I surprised myself several times by taking strange risks. Almost as if I were guided by voices, I found myself unleashing a big dog, who looked like she really needed a few moments of play, and let her run free in the crusted snow of Como Park.

It was a risk because I did not really know these dogs. They could easily have run away from me. The very fact that they were at the Humane Society suggests that that was how they got there – they were runaways. If I had allowed a dog to escape, it would likely have meant the dog's death, and certainly the end of our privileges at the center.

So what was I doing? And how did I know these dogs, many of them doomed to die in the weeks to come, would allow me to release them afterward and return them to their cells?

Which brings me to the predicament of this book.

What do you do when you want to give the dog as much freedom to run and play as possible -- but you don't trust the dog?

There are two separate problems here -- you, and the dog.

First, you. Or in my case, me.

I know hundreds of dog owners, and very few fret about their dog's happiness as I do. For the majority, it's no heartache to keep a dog in a kennel at night, in a fenced in yard by day, and on a leash at every other moment.

I'm not that way. My standard poodle Beauregard has beautiful long legs that want to run, and I love to see him galloping across an open space. Every dog I have had, I wanted to give the gift of freedom to. For me, it's the most fulfilling part of having a dog -- seeing them express themselves. Which they do better off-leash than on. Running free is the happiest experience a dog can have.

Twenty years ago, I decided to allow my first dog, Casi, to roam free in the night streets of Minneapolis. I believed she needed and wanted freedom, and freedom was my gift to her. I felt American wanting this freedom for her. But it was a gift that resulted in her death, at the wrong end of somebody's car fender.

I have said things that strike some people as heretical: that death was not too great a price to be a real dog, if only for a few years.

Responsible friends challenged me on this. Where did I get this notion, and what right did I have to impose it on the creatures in my charge?

Good question. And it's the reason I wrote this book. It's about reconciling the ideal of total freedom with the constraints of living in the real world, and the shortcomings of the dog itself.

Then, there is the dog. For better or worse, the law treats all dogs the same -- as noncitizens, with no rights whatsoever. In most places, having a dog off-leash is illegal.

There are good reasons for such laws. Dogs scare people. They get into fights with one another. Unleashed dogs are harder to clean up after. And they harass other wildlife -- cats, ducks, woodchucks, you name it.

In a perfect world, it seems to me, really well-behaved dogs



should be allowed to do anything they like. Really wild, dangerous dogs should by all means be controlled.

Which leaves dogs like Beau. Beau, is a funny, appealing dog in nine out of ten ways. He is curious and pleasant with adults, and patient and pleasant with children.

But he's tremendously dominant with other dogs. His great burden in life is having to impress other male dogs at every opportunity. It's not his fault -- it's in his nature to be that way. But the behavior that results from this predilection is unbearable to many people -- growling, face-making, sexual humping of other males.

As a young dog, Beauregard's dominant tendencies tested my wisdom as an owner, and my odd ideas about freedom, to the absolute maximum. We're a funny match, indeed -- a fabulous, freedom-loving dog with rotten judgment, and a master who is pretty much the same.

Dominance is the most difficult of all dog traits to correct. It can be done by simply breaking the dog -- punishing him with beatings, shaming, or electroshock every time he growls or intimidates. The problem with this solution is you wind up with a broken dog.

No, the solution is a renegotiation of the relationship you have with your dog.

This book is the story of a dominant dog and his loopy but loving owner, and how the two of us renegotiated our relationship.

## A Question of Breeding

My family decided it wanted a dog.

The dog of our dreams was neither flatulent nor obese, rabid nor narcoleptic. A dog neither too intense nor too slack, too homely nor too beautiful. Not so human that it was hopelessly neurotic nor so canine that it was unsuited to human company. Not so oversexed that it whimpered at the sight of your cuff swishing past, nor so neutered it just wanted to sit under the almond tree, like Ferdinand the bull, and smell the flowers.

Our primary consideration was my wife Rachel's and my son Jonathan's allergies. (My daughter Daniele and I aren't allergic.) So we narrowed our choice to the class of non-shedding dogs. There are only a handful, and they are mostly breeds known for dignity, industry, and valor.

We knew that you can't really buy a dog based on the dog itself. Particularly if the dog is young. All puppies are adorable, and you will want to take them home, even if it's guaranteed they will grow up to be bullmastiffs or chows.

No, breed is important. The breeders and groomers and owners we talked to all agreed that the key to understanding an individual animal is knowing about the breed. Why does Buster, or Patches, or Cassandra do such and such? Buster is a boxer. Patches is a Bedlington. Cassandra is a Lhasa Apso.

Our strong preference was to establish the breed we wanted, then wait until a dog of that breed appeared in the

pens of the Humane Society. After all, we had seen over a hundred breeds come through there – how hard could that be?

But there were problems. First, non-shedding dogs weren't showing up in large numbers at the local Humane Society. The few that were, were of the miniature varieties, which we didn't want, and which were quickly adopted by someone else.

Second, you could not test a non-shedding dog at the Humane Society for sneezing, because the place was so saturated with the air and hair of the twenty thousand dogs that had preceded the test dog. Rachel and Jonathan could not even enter the doors of the place. We took a schnauzer for a walk outside to get a clearer sense of it. It had Rachel and Jonathan sneezing their brains out in a minute. We couldn't take it home for a test drive, bathe it, and stand around smelling it, either – rules being rules.

So adopting one of the doomed dogs Daniele and I had walked wasn't going to work out. The search would therefore be more difficult. And more expensive.

But I was sanguine about this. All I asked was a breed whose dignity and bearing mirrored the seriousness of my own station in life.

So we got a poodle.

## The American Lionhound

The standard poodle is a misunderstood breed. In Minnesota, where we live, there are only about eleven of them, and they don't know one another. People evidently feel it's best to keep them spaced apart.

Most people, hearing the word *poodle*, think of the smaller miniature poodle and even smaller toy poodle. The standard poodle is a much bigger dog, weighing from 50-90 pounds. There is also a so-called giant poodle, even bigger, but this is not a separate breed, just a subset of freakishly big (and unhealthy) standards.

Poodles are one of the most identifiable breeds, having numerous features everyone knows on sight: the curly coat, longer than normal legs, floppy ears, long face, black eyes, tremendous white teeth, and excellent nose. But most especially, there is the haircut.

Tradition says the poodle was bred in Denmark or Germany over a thousand years ago -- making it a very ancient breed -- to be a retriever. Its ancestors may have included the French barbet and the Portuguese water dog. Its Latin name is *familiaris aquatius*.

But the coat, the coat! So luxuriant, so extravagant was its coat that the French seized on it as a subject of topiary, creating elaborate haircuts that made the breed the king of show dogs, a natural aristocrat -- and the most despised by people with democratic sentiments.

The coat deceives and beguiles. As a hunting dog, it provided wolves and bears with something false to attack, like a matador's cape. Since it never stops growing, the dogs can fool people, and even themselves, into thinking they are bigger than they really are. A rottweiler and a poodle are the same approximate height, but the rottweiler can weigh three times as much as the poodle. Many a standard poodle has lost in battle because it failed to factor its own fur into the power equation.

And the deception deepens. Have you ever seen a parked car with a white standard poodle sitting at the wheel, and done a double take? With its long legs, round head, and elegant, vertical posture, the poodle sits in an extreme isosceles triangle, like the temple cats of Egypt. Richard Dreyfus, whose life changed when he saw Suzanne Summers whip by him in the white Thunderbird in *American Graffiti*, could have been fooled by a poodle. Its bouffant hair makes it strikingly similar to a platinum-blond movie star, à la Carole Lombard or Jean Harlow. The white standard can be shimmeringly beautiful, which causes more than a double take – it makes you reappraise your basic orientation.

But just as they are attractive, so are they hated, and for much the same reason. While poodles (mostly the little ones) were the most popular breed in the 1950s, people have turned against them in the current era. Like the cars of the 50s, the dog of the 50s, all done up in bows and fancy styling, reeks of cutesy schlocky falsity. A properly appointed show poodle is both wonderful and a monstrosity -- remarkable that people can make a dog whose ancestors roamed the forests in packs look like that, but horrible in the extremes they push it to.

The standard is an extremely handsome dog under the right circumstances, with its jaunty spirit, jutting chin and silky

ears. But people are turned off when it is clipped and poofed and brushed and shaved so that half of it looks psychotically overdressed and the other half looks shaved sadistically raw.

When we decided that the poodle was the breed for us, Rachel and I had had little actual experience with one. I think we encountered exactly one in our travels through our neighborhood. It was a shaggy, chocolate-brown male, who bounded toward us with the most striking attitude. He seemed gloriously happy, and gloriously pleased with himself. I patted him, and he thanked me with a look in his eye, and he moved on.

At no time did he not seem doggy. In fact, if I could put my finger on what made him special, it was that he seemed to be aware that he was a dog, and he seemed to find lots of advantages to being one. He was smart enough to be let off a leash, inquisitive enough to entertain himself, and savvy enough and social enough to accost complete strangers and make friends with them.

Now, that was a dog. We imagined all poodles were of that same type -- regal, whimsical, and benign.

The dog we wound up getting would be all these things except benign.

We liked that chocolate dog but we still had reservations. My great fear was that I would be out some night with my dog, and I would meet a gang of street toughs, and they would take one look at my poodle and bust out laughing.

We told friends we were getting a poodle and while a few responded favorably, several were against it. The poodle wasn't a legitimate choice in their eyes. They envisioned a

small dog with a sharp nose and drippy eyes, sitting in Zsa Zsa Gabor's lap.

So we decided to keep a low profile on the breed. Our plan was to tell acquaintances that he was a very unusual graft from the herding dogs of, oh, the Transvaal. We decided to call his breed the American Standardbred Lionhound.

So long as we never clipped him into the usual poodle topiary, no one would be the wiser.

## The Killer

As is our family custom, I let Rachel do all the work, making all the inquiries with local kennels and breeders. Diligent as always, she called a half dozen places and interviewed them all, trying to get a feel for who was in it just for the money, and who really cared about the dogs. She quickly winnowed the field to a single candidate, Brigitte Leahy a 60-ish Czech woman who lived way out in some place called Dellwood.

Brigitte's main concern was Rachel's and Jonathan's allergies. "I placed a dog with an allergic family once and it was the only time I ever had to take an animal back," she said. "Most allergic people can be with poodles. This woman was allergic even to poodles. The children were heartbroken. Never again."

To forestall that happening again, Brigitte required that Rachel call a Seminole natural healer that she knew in Minneapolis named Tismal. Tismal practiced herbal healing techniques on both humans and animals. To please Brigitte, and to appear to be a better candidate than the other allergic woman, Rachel called him. But Tismal was a good egg. After he heard the names of the medicines, he conceded there was nothing in herbal lore that worked better than antihistamines.

Rachel's impression of Brigitte was that she was ethical and knowledgeable, very devoted to the health and happiness of her dogs, and very picky about whom she would sell to. This lifted her high above other breeders Rachel called, several of whom seemed completely unaware of health predilections like



hip dysplasia, and when a bitch should have her first litter.

Brigitte told Rachel horror stories about people adopting dogs from other breeders, keeping them for a month or two, and then selling them back, or worse, dropping them off at the pound.

She would not sell a dog to an owner until she had interviewed them and they passed muster. One buyer tried to buy a poodle as a surprise gift to his two kids, and Brigitte sent him home empty-handed and pissed off, because he refused to let her meet his family. With Brigitte it was her way or the highway.

Rachel wanted to impress upon Brigitte that the dog we wanted had to have certain characteristics. She wanted a calm dog, one that would not drive me crazy wanting to go out all the time, interrupting my work routine. And it had to be an intelligent dog but a serenely intelligent one -- not one that became bored easily, and resorted to chewing family heirlooms for entertainment.

Because we were new to the business, we did not ask the single most important question about a puppy: "Does he come from ultra-dominant stock? Will he grow up and want to be crowned lord of the canine universe?"

And because we didn't, Brigitte said, "I have just the puppy for you."

I was not privy to these interviews, so when we paid Brigitte our first visit, I pictured her as the consummate breeder. In my mind's eye I imagined a humble, semi-rustic setting, happy pom-tailed poodle dogs scampering everywhere, and a warm-hearted, jeans-wearing, white-haired

animal lover waving at us from the porch.

It turns out that Dellwood is the richest community in the state of Minnesota. Located on White Bear Lake, it is a reclusive community of yacht clubs, golf courses, and acre-sized lots. Brigitte's house was not overbearing, but it was very nice, and as I rang the doorbell in my jeans and sweatshirt I felt underdressed.

Brigitte's husband Sid let us in. Sid, we found out, was a retired corporate executive. Brigitte, who was blonde and not white-haired, and was wearing pearls, not jeans, invited us in.

"Come this way," she said, in a Czech accent of medium thickness. She seemed a tiny bit suspicious of us, but otherwise was very hospitable.

Her house was not at all what you'd expect of a house of dogs. First, there was no barking anywhere, not a peep, although something was ruling in another room. As a decorator she not did shun light colors. Everything was immaculate and bright. In one corner of her huge living room, in a mesh pen on a white carpet, between two white sofas, were two baby poodles only seven weeks into their lives.

They stared around the room with goofy, solemn expressions. Like all puppies, these young poodles gave only a glimmer of what they will grow to be. Their coats were straight, not curly, and their noses had not yet begun the long journey of elongation that is the breed's trademark. Both little dogs stared out into an empty spot in the middle of the room, with an expression of both moroseness -- the waking state of most dogs -- and acceptance. It's the look the little waif girl Cosette wears in the *Les Miserables* logo.

The dogs were neither alarmed nor excited to see us. But

the black one ambled toward us, pressing his nose against the pen, his tail wagging ever so slightly. The young male appeared to be a grafting of a lamb onto a crocodile -- long white teeth and snout and ravenous eyes, all wrapped in spun black fleece. Neither he nor his sister yipped or cried. He allowed me to lift him from his pen and sat with me on the couch for several long minutes.

The kids and I took turns holding the black one on our laps on the immaculate couch, while Brigitte filled us in on what to expect. We knew nothing about poodles, except that they were classy-looking and didn't make us sneeze. Unfortunately, this was not the meeting where Brigitte would tell us the negative points of the breed. This was the meeting where she would judge if we deserved to adopt the poodle puppy.

I patted the little dog who rested in Sphinx position across my lap, and praised him to Brigitte. "He's wonderful," I said, and he was. He was the gentlest, sweetest-dispositioned puppy I'd ever seen.

Brigitte smiled a tight little smile. "And he will be just like his father. Sid, fetch Razz."

Sid went into the adjoining room, opened a kennel door, and brought out a two-year old poodle, black like the one in my lap, but otherwise bearing no resemblance. Where the puppy was soft and lambent and life-affirming, Razz was clipped ferociously, had a military bearing, and eyed us with enormous suspicion. Razz was a breeder. His testicles, clipped to the nubbin, jangled between his legs like industrial ball bearings.

"This is what he will grow into," Brigitte said.

My family took one look at Razz and we all had the same thought -- we hoped to high hell the little dog didn't turn out like this.

## The Puppy

Our puppy, I promised myself, would sidestep all the nonsense about show dogs, breeders, and obedience training. We would make him a member of our family, and that environment, and not his genes, would decide his destiny. No way would we turn him into a ramrod like his old man. Like my last dog, 25 years earlier, I would raise him right – with lots of freedom and doggy surroundings.

We had no way of knowing, looking at his solemn little self, that he would mature into a creature every bit as dominant as his sire, all my hippie dogrearing practices to the contrary notwithstanding. We didn't know. We couldn't know.

He was sacramentally still as I petted him, beautiful as only youth can be -- docile and unformed and almost sorrowfully calm. I looked into his eyes and saw the blankness that is typical of the breed. Poodle eyes have none of the golden fire of a husky or the emotional warmth of the Labrador. They are almost like sea lions' eyes, waxy black pools of god-knows-what.

We agreed to take the puppy home with us in another four weeks, wanting him to have plenty of time to play with his litter mates and be with his mother. By that time it was the week before Thanksgiving, and he rode home in the joined laps of Jonathan, 8 and Daniele, 12, still and uncomplaining. I looked at the kids' faces as they petted the baby dog – they were never so beautiful to me.

As we arrived at our house, the rain was turning to snow – the first of winter. It would go on to be a record winter for snow in Minnesota -- sixty inches that would cover the state

for five months, then melt into raging floods in the spring, sweeping away whole towns.

We led the little black dog to a sleety corner of our back yard to pee, and waited until he was done. It took ten minutes, and his black coat turned gray from the pelting ice.

I carried him the two flights to my attic office and sat with him and hummed a little tune and stroked his fur. We understood that the first hours in a new place can be traumatic. Baby dogs howl in distress to be in a strange place, away from mom and the sibs.

But this puppy was perfectly quiet. We played for a few minutes, me moving my hand toward his mouth and him snapping, a little feebly, at it. He was all in.

Looking back, what I did next was clearly a mistake. Daniele should have spent the first night with the dog, not me. But I set an oversized pillow on the ground and lay my head on it. The puppy sidled over to me and knelt beside me, putting his chin on my hands. And we napped like that for the better part of the early evening.

## A Meaningful Name

The morning after your puppy's first night in your house is a classic "morning after." Now you get a chance to see more clearly what you have bought into, and what is in store for you.

Our puppy awoke that morning full of pee -- he had not messed the floor, or anything. Jubilant at this discovery, I picked him up and ran him downstairs and out the back door. The yard was completely iced in from the winter storm. The little dog found a spot, which was the spot we would have recommended. He stooped over, the winter wind whipping his soft hair across his face, and unburdened himself. Rachel and I immediately rewarded him with a few nuggets of the handmade kibble Brigitte supplied us with. He devoured it greedily, tail wagging in a clumsy, arrhythmic way.

We learned later that this foray into sleet and cold was the first time he had ever been outside, on his own four feet. This frozen moment was his introduction to The World.

Our whole family was touched by the little dog's spirit. Not once had he cried in the night, or complained in any way. We looked at one another jubilantly, as if we had made the best dog decision ever made.

The week that followed was 98% bliss, as we got to know our new toy. A puppy is almost literally a living toy. The word *puppy* comes from the French word *papee*, which means doll. And a doll is how we treat it. We handle it, hug it, stroke it, brush it, play with it. It is an extremely special thing, and it seems only natural to let all our emotions -- delight, sympathy, affection -- flow into it.

It is good that a puppy is cute, as it prevents most owners from killing it when it does the inevitable damage to house, property, and self. Puppies do harm primarily by biting, clawing, and excreting. It takes a couple of months to a couple of years to get these three behaviors under control. Most trainers stress positive reinforcement to get these behaviors in line -- praising, petting, and rewarding it with a treat each time he does the right thing. But most owners go negative at some point in the training process. Not to worry -- the puppy will continue to love you even if you spank it. But have a care -- everything you do to your dog comes back to you in some way, usually unexpected. Traumatized dogs recycle their bad feelings later. Which is why people are leery of adopting previously owned dogs.

There were difficulties with our new puppy. He would release a dozen drops of pee whenever one of us bent to be with him -- evidently out of happiness.

Urination was a management problem. Every evening I would set him down for his long evening sleep, and every morning I would awaken at about six, grab the dog, run down the stairs, and still in my pajamas, slip on a pair of galoshes and try to get the dog out before he released.

But it was a doomed enterprise because 1) he had to go really bad after a night in Daniele's room, and 2) he was genuinely happy to see me, so he started peeing on me, in celebration of my interest in him.

He did not lift a leg to pee -- a sign of male dominance -- until he was seven months old. For that entire period he crouched and released like a female, and hid the truth of his nature.

We kept the puppy on the second and third floors of our house because that was where we stayed. But it meant we had



to carry him up and down the stairs, because puppies don't understand stairs. They can't get the rhythm, they are a little acrophobic, and they slip around a lot on polished wood. We worried about him getting anywhere near the stairs.

So we carried him up and down like a prince on a palanquin for six weeks, and then downstairs for another three weeks. One consequence of dog owning for me was a resumption of the backache that began when the kids were little. But by the end of this period he was able to do both by himself, and he would tear up and down the stairs, demonstrating his stair prowess.

The puppy was allowed, technically, to pee inside the house. We stationed flotillas of newspapers in the rooms he frequented most -- Daniele's bedroom and my third floor office. Brigitte had trained him to go on the paper, and he was pretty good about it, except that he considered himself to be on the paper if his front legs were on it -- he had only a scant idea what his hind legs did or where they were in particular. So he sometimes stood front legs on the paper while his back legs peed on whatever was next to the paper -- Hogarth prints, Dead Sea scrolls, my work, whatever was handy, irreplaceable, and absorbent.

A puppy's brain, I came to learn, is Platonic, like ours. It creates classes of things, and compares specific examples against those classic forms. An elm tree at the boulevard was obviously "a tree." As was the shrubbery around the front porch. So was the Christmas tree inside our living room. So was the philodendron inside our bedroom. All being trees, all were fit targets for his youthful fountain of pee.

Likewise, newspapers. Dogs 10,000 years ago never learned to be paper-trained. Perhaps the habit was formed over time, as dogs were cave-broken, then papyrus-trained. By the our time, newsprint had become the target of choice. But some

ancient memory, combined with a dog's inherently weak color receptors, confused the forms of "newspaper" and "\$900 Persian rug."

We learned other odd things about the creature in our midst. Whereas normal dogs eat kibble and chew on rawhide, this dog grazed on Kleenex and chewed on hats and gloves. We never did get the thing about Kleenex. No one in our family had ever swallowed a single ply of the stuff, but the dog put away whole boxes. It must have soothed some ancient craving, but for the life of me, I could not tell you what he used before there was tissue paper.

He was oral as hell. Not just his love for food, or his need to be tearing or gashing something every instant of the day. He longed to make contact with you, as intimacy or celebration of the relationship. But while it was the lamb that wanted to be friends, it was the crocodile that ran out to embrace you, white teeth flashing. We lived in constant fear of one of his love bites hooking our flesh and slicing us into curly fries.

At first we thought this was a puppy fixation, but as he got older, we figured out that this is a poodle trait. He impulsively "bites" everyone he meets and can get to on the hand, even strangers on the street, many of whom find him absolutely terrifying. This bite is not really a bite -- no skin is broken. But he squeezes your flesh for a moment, like a good firm handshake. You feel the ivory canines, you feel a slight crunch as his teeth sink in -- never enough to draw blood, but often enough to make you yip -- and you feel the warm slobber on your fingers.

He is saying hello in his dominant way: *Hi. Gotcha.*

Beau has destroyed a half dozen pairs of gloves this way. And he does it to everyone, including, when he was younger, complete strangers, who must feel as if their life is coming to

an end. Obedience school did nothing to diminish this grisly handshaking ritual of his.

It would be so easy for Beauregard to guillotine my hand from my arm with those crocodile teeth, but he never has. God, it hurts sometimes, and I never feel very successful in communicating the pain these bites cause me. Beau just looks at me and grins. On the other hand (so to speak), he stops.

At the end of the first week, we held a family meeting and voted on a name. Some names were rejected because they didn't make sense, or suggested the wrong nationality. Since he was a French poodle (never mind that poodle comes from the German word *pudel*, for splashing), we thought he should have a French name.

But it could not be a "foo-foo" name like Monsieur or Choufleur. And the name had to be easy to abbreviate. Thus we chose the name Beauregard for our little black dog. The name means "Looks good," and doggone it, he was a good-looking animal. It was the name of a distinguished Confederate general – no foo-foo there. And Beauregard shortens to a fine name for yelling from the front porch: Beau.

## Puppy Love

But what I must warn you about here are the peculiar behaviors that show up in puppyhood. The little signs that, while cute today, signified something more problematic down the road.

I am thinking about the humping. From his very first day with us, little Beauregard would go into a semi-standing position, wrap his tiny front legs around one of our legs, and commence with a “sexual” thrusting that was hilarious to watch, but was a little unnerving. He especially liked doing it to Jonathan. With the boy kneeling on the floor, the dog would climb his back and start with the feeble thrusting. He was a skinny black creature of coat hangers and pipe cleaners, but humping away at Jonnie to beat the band. We howled and shoed Beau away. It's not easy explaining to an 8-year-old boy what the puppy wanted.

In fact, we had no idea what the puppy wanted. Surely a 12-week old puppy is not libidinous? I called Brigitte with this and the other concerns that were mounting. So to speak. She was full of answers that, with one exception, were not answers:

Kleenex? "His father is a Kleenex eater. The entire lineage on the sire's side ate Kleenex. I don't know why they do it, exactly. Try to keep it away from him."

Newspapers? "Use a lot at first, and gradually reduce their area. Praise him when he does it outside. Roll up the Oriental rugs."

Stairs? "You'll have to carry him up and down until he's four months old."

Biting? "Poodles do that. They bite you. Out of love." (I could discontinue the practice, she told me, by squeezing his lower jaw each time he bit me, to cause him pain. Trouble is, he was usually cavorting at about forty miles per hour when it happens -- it's hard to grab a dog by the maw at that speed. And I was never anxious to cause him pain.)

Humping? She paused. "He's communicating something to you. He's telling you that he's glad you're his. He's staking a claim to you."

We liked that answer. We liked that it meant Beau did not really want to have sex with our son. But we did not fully understand the answer, either. What Brigitte was communicating, was that this was a dog who would routinely classify things, all his life, as his and not-his. It was a sign of an ultra-powerful drive of territoriality and dominance.

## Kindergarten

When a puppy is three months old, he is ready for puppy training, also known as puppy kindergarten. Most dog owners at this stage know their little dogs pretty well, and many of the shortcomings of their personalities have come into view.

Puppy training is the first time owners present their dogs to the world. Owners are not dogpeople at this point. They are an odd, insectlike, six-legged race, with the two species constantly jostling and tripping the other. The ambient condition of early owners is bewilderment, their intuitive mode is xenophobia. It goes beyond "My dog is better than your dog" to "Is that a dog?"

This hatred of others is both a badge of pride and a token of something darker, the fear that you have made a terrible mistake you are going to have to live with for the next fifteen years.

This is the danger stage in dog ownership, when many people conclude that the relationship is not working out. The puppy may still be pooping all over the house, destroying valuables with its teeth, and biting people. You have tried everything from positive reinforcement to the withdrawal of all affection, sometimes both in the same hour. Strangely, the dog seems to act more, and not less, confused.

Puppy training may be just what you need at this point. A trainer instructs you in the basics of housetraining, walking on a leash, and how to socialize with other dogs. I recommend that everyone go for one simple reason: to see that other people are suffering, that it's not just you.

Young Beauregard enjoyed kindergarten, and by and large

he behaved -- he never defecated on the carpet or piddled on the instructor. But I noticed he was different from the other dogs. Whereas they acted like babies, hewing to their masters' ankles, he pulled the leash to the extreme, trying to get at the other puppies.

He was a dog without social fear, I thought proudly. No shrinking violet in our house!

## Other Dogs

The best thing about walks isn't the smells, which are memories of dogs past, but meeting other dogs in the present flesh.

There are dogs who adore all other dogs, and there are dogs who despise all other dogs. But there are no dogs who are indifferent to their own kind. Walking is the best chance a dog has in the course of a day to meet with its own kind and exchange particulars.

Beau was an adorer. We would be out walking in the newfallen snow, and he would strain at the leash to cross the street, where a man was walking his German shepherd. When Beau got a chance to mingle like this, he was all over the newfound friend, licking and pawing him, offering evidence of his goodwill. He wanted the new dog to begin where his litter left off.

Very often, however, dog owners, seeing us, would quickly turn in the opposite direction, and hurry their dog away. Beau would whine his frustration, seeing them disappear around the corner. I, too, was frustrated – what could the owner be thinking of? Didn't he know that dogs need other dogs to be fulfilled? Wasn't he afraid the dog would contract his own antisocial behavior, and turn mean?

A better way for Beau to encounter his kind was to make regular rounds of the backyards. The two of us created a mental map of the homes in the surrounding blocks that had dogs, especially dogs that spent lots of time outdoors.

Beau would be in terrific tension as we would head out of the house, looking for dog action. He was so much fun to be



with when he played, in those days, that I was frisky, too.

Many dogs came up to the fence to make our acquaintance. Many people also seemed happy to see me and my proud pup. But at many houses, we encountered suspicion and evasiveness. When we approached, the people inside would see us and call their dogs inside – even when Beau and their dog were behaving nicely through the fence. It seemed awfully rude.

There was a young boxer named Ginger, the same age as Beau. Her owner was a Latin teacher who wanted to raise her for breeding. Beau was always dashing out our front and over to their place, where the two dogs would frolic on the sidewalk. Ginger especially seemed to lose control, going into a squirm and shimmy dance on seeing Beau.

Ginger's owners' great concern was that Beau would have sex with Ginger 1) at all, which would have produced the world's weirdest dogs, boxers and poodles being the opposite of one another in every possible way, and 2) during her first heat, which most breeders like to avoid, as it taxes the dog's maturity. So when they saw Beau coming, they freaked out and tried to shoo him away, which was not strictly possible.

They may have felt they were just being sensible, but I felt they were being just a little nuts, and that they didn't want their dogs to be happy. I gloomily entertained the notion that all dog owners were like that.

Then we met Noelle and her two dogs Cobi and Sonja, who became Beau's first and best friends -- his sisters, really.

We first met them walking down the alley of their home on Selby Avenue. Cobi was the elder of the two females, a mix of poodle and border collie, with very strong herding instinct. Sonja was the younger dog, a Labrador retriever big enough to retrieve Labrador and half of Newfoundland.

When we walked by after an especially deep snow, they barreled off their back porch and began barking at us. Cobi, the herder, orchestrated the barking, and Beau was delighted with the havoc, and wagged his tail appreciatively.

The dogs' owner, appeared in parka at the back door. "Allo," she said. She was French!

"Hi," I said. "This is Beauregard, and we were just –"

"Beauregard," she said, stooping to pet the puppy. "It is true – you are so beauty-ful!"

Beau and I both brightened. I was dying to have someone say nice things about Beau. We had been cooped up in the house, me falling in love with him – and no one to show him to!

"You know what we call you where I am from," she said, scratching behind his ears. "*Caniche*. Oh, you are such the beauty-ful boy."

"It's nice to meet people who like dogs," I blurted out.

"We love the dogs," she said with a Gallic shrug. "I tell you, any time you want to visit, come by. My dogs, they always love to play. And you would be most welcome, Mike." I liked how she said *Mike*, stretching it into two syllables.

I was stunned to encounter such hospitality in emotionally frozen Minnesota. "Are you sure?" I said. "Because we'll be here every day. Beau just loves to be with other dogs."

"Let them play," Noelle said to me. "I will make you a cup of coffee inside."

And so began a splendid friendship all around. Noelle and her husband John, and their three kids, and their dogs, became "best family friends" of my contingent. All winter, and then all summer, and then on into the next year, I would stop by,

almost every day, and Noelle would make me coffee, and maybe I would buy a sweet.

Noelle wanted someone to tell her stories, and someone to tell stories to. She told me about growing up in Mauretania in Africa – her father was in the foreign service, and a friend of DeGaulle, and her mother was a concert pianist in her hometown at the base of the Pyrenees.

And so we talked, and enjoyed our coffee, while the dogs out back raced around the apple trees and played.

I loved watching Beau play, as a puppy, with other dogs. With Sonja and Cobi, they would run, snap at each other, paw the air like stallions, and otherwise wrestle one another to the ground. They could do this for an hours, and the looks on their faces were of unmitigated joy. I wondered why it was that Beau was so ready to play, and that other dogs sensed this in him and joined him in the fun.

Except for our brief introduction to his father razz, I was never really allowed to meet Beau's family. I understand his mother was a snow-white bitch named Emily, a champion show dog, as was his jet-black father. But Brigitte and her daughter Lorraine, who actually kenneled their dogs, were careful to hide their operations from me, and I never glimpsed what Beau's litter was like, except for that one moment when we all first met, and a lone white sister was with him.

Nevertheless, I came to the conclusion that Beau had a terrifically happy puppyhood. I had never seen him with his brothers and sisters, but I imagined he was a blast to be with, capable and active but never, ever, ever mean. As the alpha leader, he must have set the pace for the pack. I was sure they played rhapsodically, day after day, for the three months they were together.

It didn't dawn on me that Beau must have driven his

siblings crazy by having to run the show. And his poor mother!

So now, when he pulls on the lead because he senses a dog behind hedge or fence, or he knows I am headed for Sonja's house, I am convinced he is trying to recreate those weeks of bliss, rolling on his back, nipping at one another's ears, striking heroic poses one moment, clowning poses the next.

In my theory, dog friendships recreate the emotional hum of the litter. And emotion is pretty much everything to dogs.

Which means that, when he is solitary, at home, on his pillow, staring emptily out the window, he misses his litter. Even the most pampered lap dog must feel this quiet grief, a yearning for what is happening on the other side of the window, and a dim memory of paradise, tumbling with one's siblings.

One day I had a special treat for Beauregard. I took him with Daniele to her riding stable in Wisconsin. While Daniele rode, Beau played with a setter collie mix, and the two of them fought and played for the full 60 minutes of the lesson. It was a dazzling display, in the dizzying atmosphere of horse manure and sawdust, of all-out full-tilt dogplay, like a boxing match with no bell between rounds.

Beau played so hard he drove the older, stronger dog into the ground, where it lay panting, waiting for permission to get up.

## Different Sticks

It is possible to over-romanticize dog society. While dogs are social, their socializing is not always natural or fluid. Not all dogs hit it off. Sure, they universally sniff one another out, but that's just the most basic thing, like a handshake or greeting. Beyond that, they can be quite helpless.

Each breed is like a tribe, and each tribe has its eminent concerns. Beagles are concerned – they are very concerned -- about rabbits. For a setter, fetching sticks is the order of the day. If a Labrador retriever is not paddling about in the water, it cannot be fulfilled. Border collies are obsessed with maintaining order in the herd, even when there is no herd. Whippets run. Terriers harangue. Poodles pose.

Get all these breeds together and there are bound to be disconnects. Beau wants other dogs to play dueling tyrannosauri with him. He can do it for hours. But if the other dog is a golden retriever, he won't get far because the retriever, perhaps nature's most devoted dog, will have all eyes on his human, in case a stick is thrown his way, or a compliment, or a pat on the head. (Goldens are do-gooders and praisehounds.) The poodle barks at the retriever to forget the stick and play with him. The retriever ignores the poodle, eyeing the stick as if it were God's gift. Oh right, the poodle, says, and he almost rolls his eyes: the stick.

Dogs want to mix it up, but their interests are not the same. So different, they are unable to find common ground. I have been to parties like that.

I can illustrate this point by going one dog at a time through our neighborhood:

After Cobi and Sonja, Beau's best friend was Britt, a queenly Doberman pinscher several years his senior. We often poked our long nose in her back fence when passing her house, and if she was there, we let ourselves in for a few minutes of play. Britt was exactly what Beau's education lacked -- a strong feminine presence to lay down the law about what was proper and what was not. Some days Beau would hector her, and she would let him know with a cold glance that he was not welcome. Other days she would deign to play with him, and their play was inspired, like the dinosaur battles from old sci-fi movies, with the two of them thrashing, jawing, and pawing the air. I could watch the two of them wrestle for an hour.

Basil, an oversized golden retriever whose master bitterly regrets neutering him – “It took all the dog out of the dog” – is a loner by nature. He just likes to stand like a statue in his lawn, and warn away interlopers. He also likes to slip out of his collar and go for long, slow walks through the neighborhood. When Beau salutes him, Basil smiles fondly, but can't think of anything they might do together.

Reggie, a fox terrier, is a people dog. He likes to be fondled and held on a lap. When Beau and he get together, they haven't a clue what to do. Beau gets into a semi-sexual position with Reggie, standing atop him with his genitalia dancing in front of the little dog's face. The little dog bows down and averts his gaze. It is a stalemate.

Emma, a Dalmatian, hates the thought of other dogs walking by her alley. She seems especially to despise Beau and wants to kill him.. Her owner wears a look of exquisite pain when we walk by – she is ashamed that Emma is such an unmitigated bitch. I eventually learned that dominant females are often the most difficult cases, because they feel territoriality even more fiercely than males -- because it is the

nest they must protect.

Barney, an elderly beagle, looks gouty and gray. His owner, Bill, steers him away when we come by. My sense about beagles is that one thing alone causes blips on their radar, and that is rabbits. Beau, as a puppy, is blind to the possibility of wildlife. For a while I considered putting a bumper sticker in our back yard: Start Seeing Squirrels.

There are two Alexes near us. The Berubes have an Alex who is a sheltie, and he and Beau seem unable to connect. Alex only likes his master, Ned Berube. There is no room in his life for an erratic, attention-seeking puppy. Ned, a minister, finds Beau interesting, and always gives him a pat. But I get the sense he is writing sermons, with Beau as the Prodigal Poodle.

The other Alex is a soulful Brittany spaniel, who hints and whines when we stroll by. But he seems more lonely for human company than for Beau. He licks my fingers through the cyclone fence. Alex is a dog whose owners leave him all day, and each day he suffers meekly until they come home.

Two dogs Beau was intrigued by were Harley, a Rottweiler, and his pal Buster, a golden mix, who live upstairs and downstairs from one another in a duplex on Dayton Avenue. Harley's owner is Brent, a dancer, and Brent's dad Pete owns Harley. After the big snows, the two dogs discovered they could tiptoe up a tall drift and stand atop their garage, and bellow at anyone traversing their alley. It is quite a sight, to look up and see two giant dogs hollering at yo u. Beau thought that was very neat, but Buster, himself a puppy, was standoffish with Beau, and even a bit hostile.

Other dogs have even less chance of connecting. Sparky, the Keiths' mini-dobie, is blind and frail and incontinent. Beau is more interested in her as a chew toy than a companion.

There are two dachshunds a few blocks away that are very clever. They ring bells to be let outside and poop in a litter box. One dog is evidently the pet of the other. But there is no room in this precise living arrangement for a creature of Beau's sprawling temperament.

We also know a small poodle mix named Binks, but Beau doesn't like him much. He is the kind of dog who tries to attack you and complain when you fight back, simultaneously. Even his owner doesn't seem to like him. Only the daughter likes Binks, but she likes him very, very much, which suggests he has virtues only she can measure.

Besides Cobi and Sonja, Noelle's dogs, I can think of only two dogs in the neighborhood that Beau has struck up any kind of relationship with. The first was a lovely small golden named Mango, who lives behind the Congregational church. Mango is a male the same age as Beau, and has the same ineffable light in his eyes, that seems to say is was ready for anything. But we have never got the two dogs together. Their friendship exists with a fence between them.

The other dog, whom Beau did not discover for several months yet, is a gorgeous white Samoyed named Sophie, who lives by the park in a corner house. Sophie and another dog, a ferocious-looking but very childlike, older, black Samoyed male, spend hours every day tied to two giant spruce trees. Sophie and Bear are owned by Walter, who dotes on those two large dogs like a dad, and takes them running in the park across the street every night, off leash. When I met Walter, I felt I had met my twin, dogwise at least.

Beau and Sophie usually play with Sophie chained up, and Beau let loose. They have a marvelous chemistry, Beau pursuing Sophie with a heroic passion. Indeed, she is the quintessential spirit-dog, with an angelic light shining out of her, beaming news of great canine wisdom and joy. When she



is with Beau, I see Beau at his very best -- gallant, funny, and fair-minded. He loves her.

Beau is so taken with Sophie that, if she is not home, he will find the spot in the yard and sit where she usually sits, and sprout a huge pink boner. And his smile is a true smile.

Beau loves all these dogs. But Sophie (and Cobi and Sonja) are the only dogs he gets to play with. The others are either barred from him by fences and gates, or their masters shoo him away, or the dogs can't figure out what to do with one another.

For a dog who lives to socialize, this is a frustrating formula.

## Poodlevania

The happiest times I have spent with Beau have been while walking him. Every morning in our house, Beau and I get up and we drive Daniele and Jon to their respective schools. Then the two of us go down to one of our Mississippi River locations, within a mile of the airport.

On the Saint Paul side are Hidden Falls and Crosby Farm. On the Minneapolis side are Fort Snelling State Park and an area known to historians as Camp Coldwater, but known to my family as Poodlevania, the one place in the Twin Cities where dogs roam free.

These areas are all wild and relatively unpoliced. They include sandy beaches, cottonwood swamps, backwater pools of the mighty Mississippi, ruins from Minnesota's earliest settlers, cattailed marshes, and tall stands of pin oak, red pine and spruce. The woods are plentiful with deer and raccoons, and the waterways course with ducks, herons, and snapping turtles.

When the coast is clear, I let Beau off his leash, and he dances alongside me while we walk two to four miles along well-worn dirt paths.

The horrendous blizzards of our first winter brought equally horrendous spring floods. The roads into many of our river-walking areas were shut down, as the river rose up above its banks and dumped millions of tons of riverbottom sand along the alluvial plains south of the Twin Cities. The transformation from sleepy green riverbank to barren soggy dunes could not have been more striking. Footbridges, docks, picnic shelters and sheds were lifted up and swept away. The

scars of the flood are still evident -- plastic bags caught in tree branches at twenty feet above flood stage are still there today, tattered and translucent, ghostly markers of yesterday's high water.

The upshot of all this destruction was that the parks were officially closed for about three months. These three months of devastation, coinciding with Beau's fourth through sixth months of life, were exceptionally fun ones for the two of us, because we would go where no one else dared, and no one, including police, would follow.

There on the dunes and muddy plains of the river flats, Beau seemed to blossom into the kind of bodhisattva dog I pined for -- happy, handsome and brave. He encountered every kind of creature, from white-tailed deer in high snow to big, dangerous snapping turtles at egg-laying time. We saw snow fall, and heard ice crack, and seedlings sprout. We heard the chaotic yakking of the crows in subzero weather in the bare treetops.

Every day I seemed to walk further with him. Some days we walked for two hours or more. I had an aching knee, but having my puppy dance with me by the river made the twinges bearable.

Sometimes we would just sit in the soft sand and watch the river go by, and we feel our breath inside us. Beau gets all panty when he is happy and his mouth opens in a saurian grin and he winks at me. Such times I thought, this dog understands everything. That matters, anyway.

When I walk Beau, I often take a tiny wire notebook to jot down ideas in. We are like two toddlers doing parallel play. Beau will roam from tree to tree sniffing the beauty and fixating on places where a woodchuck may have paused in the

last 48 hours. And I will daydream about projects I am working on. If a thought comes to me, I whip out my 69-cent Mead memo-book and scribble the thought down.

I don't think Beau minds my daydreaming, but I'm certain he resents the memo-book. Sometimes I look up from the silver coil and he is looking at me with a look of dissatisfaction that seems to say "Yo, Shakespeare, ixnay with the ookbay."

Sometimes Beau has severe energy rushes, in which he suddenly starts dashing back and forth in frantic ellipses. He tears like a cheetah through the underbrush, tongue hanging out the side of his head. It is truly an uncontrollable mood he is the grip of, and if I could translate it into words it would be something like "Wheee!" Only in giant triple-italics, double-underlined, and red.

## Sore Ears

The people who developed the poodle breed, sometime 600 to 1,200 years ago, were individuals of remarkable ingenuity. They created an animal of superior intelligence that could run like a cheetah, that could hunt and retrieve, that could fight and laugh, and whose incomparable coat protected it from rain, wind, sleet, and snow.

But as with the invincible Achilles, one part of the miracle dog was left vulnerable – the ears.

A poodle's ears go in forever. You twist the flap this way, and you can make out a dogleg to the right that twists and curls several inches. Then, if you pull the ear out straight, you see another long curling chamber aimed right at the middle of the head.

The dog's entire head is only about five and a half inches wide at the ears. But the twisting chambers of the earways create spaces and crannies no finger, no swab can get to.

The problem is that the dog is the same inside as it is outside. Its thick coat can grow inside its ears, and the profusion of hair creates a climate conducive to the creation of waxy deposits, the entrapment of moisture from swimming and bathing, the infestation of mites and ticks, and the culture of yeasts and bacteria.

The first time Daniele and I brought Beau to Brigitte for grooming, we worked with the dog for four and a half exasperating hours. Brigitte clipped away at Beau's puppy hair with a pair of barber scissors, while entertaining me with one horrific story after another about betrayals that had occurred to her in the breeding business.

She told me about handlers who so damaged certain of her prize-winning poodles that they replaced them with different, lower-quality animals, hoping the switches wouldn't be noticed. Handlers, she said, were about one rung lower on the ladder of creation than field smut.

Other breeders cared nothing for the dogs in their care. Horrible deceptions were rigged to win ribbons at the expense of the dogs' health. Animals were spray painted, fitted with prosthetics, taken apart, mixed and matched, driven mad by sordid deprivations just to bring home the victory bow. Only she cared about health, about integrity, about the dogs' well-being.

Then she came to Beau's ears.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, my." She stepped back and bit her knuckle.

"What is it?"

"His ears. They are bad."

"How bad?"

She looked at me without wavering. "Bad," was all she would say.

Brigitte got out a bottle of ear dust and a pair of Foley surgical clamps, and had me hold Beau's head still while she went in after the hair. The dust allowed her to grab great fingerfuls of easy hair and pull it out, with the dog yipping. Every now and then she would grab a taproot hair, that had its origin deep inside the animal's head, and yank it out. Beau would scream when she pulled one of these hairs.

Brigitte looked grimly at me. "I did not know about this condition when I sold you this dog," she said. She went back to work, muttering bad, bad.

“Well, how often does this need to be done?” I asked. It was my plan to ignore everything she was saying. I was no canine ear surgeon, and Beau had never complained about his ears in the months I had had him.

“You do it all the time. If you are watching the TV, get in there and pluck out the easy hairs. Oh, this one will hurt,” she said, and wrenched a giant hair from Beauregard’s ear, and a giant cry from Beauregard himself.

“If you fail to do this,” she said, pointing the Foley clamp at me, “you will destroy the dog.”

I nodded, that I would be vigilant. But I wasn’t, and the ear problem came back. When Beau was about eight months old he began shaking his head. Something was bothering him. I continued to ignore it, until he was crying out when he would scratch his own ears.

The veterinarian I took him to told me that this would be a chronic problem Beau would have all his life. I could no longer ignore it, and began doing ear interventions at least every four days. A year later, his ears are as sensitive as ever, and I have been to four different vets about it, ranging in orientation from straight to natural healing. I have bought at least twenty different medicines – oils, unguents, dusts, and alcohol-based cleansers.

But the problem is insoluble. No antibiotic exists that will kill the infection and also reduce the pain. No cleaner exists that will scour out the wax effectively. The oils don’t seem to work at all, and some of the natural agents I have bought seem to make a bad condition much worse. Meanwhile, Beau is far from the perfect patient, squirming whenever I try anything. And I am far from the perfect doctor, with my bad eyes and low aptitude for detail.

I date the onset of adulthood in Beau to the time he had his first earache, and I was unable to bring him any relief. I have cleaned him, and massaged his ears, and painted them with tinctures of this and that. But the pain won't go away, because his ears are freakishly predisposed to this kind of infection.

I call it adulthood, because it is about the acceptance of suffering. From the day the pain began, Beau was a different dog.



## Bitten

The single greatest anxiety of owning a dog is the anxiety you and the dog feel when you leave him behind.

It is an anxiety of infinite regression. You are anxious about the dog's anxiety. The dog may be anxious on the merits, but its anxiety is magnified by your anxiety. And so on. Whose anxiety came first, is a matter for psychiatrists, human and canine, to resolve. And that will be costly.

I have always been anxious about my dogs. I put my career on hold for a couple of years with Casi in my twenties, because I could not bear to leave her alone all day while I adjusted claims or whatever. The claims weren't worth the pain.

When Beau came into our lives, I wasn't much better. As a puppy, I felt he was a guest in our home, and it was my job as host to allay his fears. I was also afraid he would hold my house hostage if I left. If I wanted my Roger Maris-autographed baseball back, I better be back soon.

As you can see, I gave him the run of the house too soon. He should not have had that leverage over me. But he did.

I will always be thankful that, deep down, Beau is essentially fairminded. Yes, he hated me to go. But something noble in him prevented him from wreaking revenge on my gathered goods. If I left him with Rachel, he would howl at the door I departed from, for ten minutes or more. But if I left him alone, he just shut up and went to sleep until I returned.

In other words, his histrionics were for our benefit. He had no personal use for them.

If leaving him home alone for a four-hour meeting is a big deal, imagine the significance of leaving Beau at someone else's place for a week, or more.

I began writing this memoir during a weeklong family vacation in the Boundary Waters in northern Minnesota in August, 1997. I was very concerned because we had left Beau for the first time ever with a third party, Brigitte's daughter Lorraine, who had actually bred Beau and his siblings.

Lorraine lived just east of Saint Paul's downtown, in a house in which many of the rooms had been converted to dog apartments. Each room has one breeding male, or two or three females, or a mother and a litter of however many pups. Instead of doors, the rooms have hardware-cloth gates, like chicken coops. All during my vacation, I visualized Beau sitting in this room, staring out the window, and across the prairie and forests of Minnesota, to me, sitting pining in my windswept cabin.

I missed him.

It happened so suddenly. He watched us pack for several hours, and his concern grew as he saw us haul our pet rats and guinea pigs in their aquarium tanks out to the car, and then off to a friend's house for safekeeping. He did not know whether to climb in the station wagon and come along, to experience whatever fate awaited the rodents, or to stay behind, and to experience the awful fate of not being with us.

After dumping the rats off, it was his turn. We grabbed a toy he liked -- a stuffed schnauzer with the bead-eyes chewed off -- a leash, a bag of dog food and a handful of snacks and rawhide chews -- and drove to Lorraine's. Beau's brother and sisters were there, and beau got to see them -- I think. I can't be sure, because Lorraine kept her operations out of sight of

visitors. I saw dogs at the window out front, but inside everything was walled off from view.

All week I wrote rapturously about my dog – it all got edited out later – and I planned to end the story with a dramatic reunion at Lorraine’s door. But when the vacation ended and we drove back to Saint Paul, Beau departed from the script. Instead of jumping joyfully into my arms, he got into a fight with another poodle, envious that Beau had spent every night in Lorraine’s bed with her.

Beau was bit. Lorraine was also bit, and bitterly reproached herself for not locking up the poodle in question before discharging Beau. She needed twelve stitches. Beau spent a feverish night, and in the morning he was himself again, and home.

## Gratitude

I am walking with my friend Evangeline. Beauregard was barking at her dog Tea (a Madagascan word pronounced TEE-uh), who is a spirit-dog to the bone. Tea took no mind of Beau, as Beau took no mind of me telling him to shut up.

"I love my dog," I suddenly blurt out.

"You should," Evangeline says. "He's wonderful. I think he's the handsomest poodle I've ever seen."

"Handsome, he is. He's clever, and he's athletic, and he's fun to watch. He has a funny personality."

Silence.

"I just wish -- I wish Beau would give me something sometime."

Evangeline squints. "How do you mean?"

"He should give me something. I give him things -- food, shelter, pats, pills."

"He gives you companionship."

"He has to. The leash."

"He gives you kisses."

"I'm never sure if those are because he loves me or because I have cookie crumbs on my lips."

"Perhaps it's asking too much, to want an altruistic poodle."

“My old dog was giving. We shared everything -- food, bed, exercise. She sort of fussed over me, in a doggy way. She was a pointer, and she was always on point -- for me.”

“Maybe you don’t need as much from Beau. You had Casi when you were single and poor.”

“Beau is my friend. But he seems so self-absorbed. And greedy. And ungrateful.”

“Oh, but he’s grateful. He adores you!”

“Yes. But just once I’d like to see some evidence that he cares. When he bites me or knocks me down, there’s never any sense of him being sorry. He’s a nice enough dog, but he lacks the Big Soul. I want a dog who has Big Soul.”

She liked that idea. “How many dogs are really generous?” she asked. “It’s in an animal’s nature to satisfy its own needs.”

“Not Lassie’s,” I said almost bitterly. “Not a golden retriever’s. They yearn to do good. Mine just wants to go for walks. And bite me!”

Evangeline frowned. “He’s hilarious. Maybe his gift is that laughter.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But it’s not what I hoped for.”

“Maybe his gift *is* his selfishness,” she said in a moment of inspiration. “His self-involvement is so obvious that it’s instructive.”

## When Good Dogs Go Bad

Most dogs, when they are puppies, are such a funny mixture of affection, self-absorption, and mischief that it is funny thinking of them being moral beings, or emissaries from heaven.

Mischief, for instance, can't be evil. Beau has always been the sort of dog who, if he sees something he wants, he goes after it. As a puppy he was forever knocking over the trash and rooting through it for something aromatic. He would snarf down any Kleenex or paper towel, especially if there were some horrid treasure wadded up inside.

But it wasn't until the sticks of butter turned up missing that I had to admit there was a problem.

Our family isn't one to stand on ceremony. We don't dine on fine china, and when the meal is over, we have no rule saying the butter must be rushed to the refrigerator. Barring a heat wave, we leave it out on the dining room table, for the convenience of any family member who might appreciate a dab of delicious butter on a cracker or slice of bread.

It's an honor system, and that was why, when the sticks of butter began to disappear, it shook us so.

I lined the family members up and read them the riot act, demanding of each where he or she had been at the time of the disappearance. All seemed to glance nervously -- guiltily, it seemed to me -- around the room. "Make no mistake," I told them, patting the dog's greasy head, "I will use geometric logic and I will get to the bottom of this."

Theft is kind of cute in a dog. Surely he must sense the

pointlessness of stealing from people who have shown they will give him just about anything. And if he doesn't grasp that, then that's cute, too.

My dog is a thief, and from the evidence I've been able to accumulate, he always will be. Just as the great thieves through history have been specialists -- some fancying pearls and jewels, others targeting fine automobiles, or objets d'art -- this thief focuses on food items. Butter was just the beginning. Beau has eaten at least two dozen sticks of the stuff now. But he has other interests -- chicken bones, cold cuts, whole hamburgers, spaghetti sauce, bacon fat. Egg shells. Pumpkin pie. French fries. He has eaten whole bananas. Peel and all. He once ate a used coffee filter.

I can reproach him, scold him, rub his nose in the coffee filter, lock him out of the kitchen, and let him know in every way I can that stealing is wrong. But he keeps stealing. He bends down low and pretends to be ashamed when I yell at him, but it's a ruse. I didn't get through to him, and the next chance he gets he will be up on the table feasting on leftovers, or shoulder deep in a tipped-over wastecan.

I brought this up with his breeder, Brigitte, on one of my many forlorn visits to her house in Dellwood, seeking advice on how to curtail his campaign of evil.

"Oh, he will never stop doing that," she said. "His father was the same way. He is a villain, pure and simple."

I paused, wondering whether it was a good time to remind her of her promises about him when I bought him from her. ("He is like an angel. He is kind. He wants to be a good boy for you.") I decided to let it pass for now. "Is there anything else I should know about him?" I asked.

"Well," she said, tentatively at first "-- when you are out with him do you carry a club?"

“A club? Why would I carry a club?”

“To break up fights,” she said, looking at the floor.

I turned to go. This was nonsense. My puppy loved other dogs. He was not about to get into fights with them. “You point the stick right at the other dog, right in its face,” she called to me as I headed for my car. “Don’t swing it like a bat -- shove it, and twist it, like a poker. They don’t like that.”



## The Blue Poodle

When Beau was about nine months old, I got another call from Brigitte. I took the call apprehensively, because Brigitte never called except when there was something horrific to tell me about my dog I did not know yet. Previously she had put the fear of God in me about parvovirus, heartworm, and frozen feet. This one was to be about hair pigment.

"We conducted a test on Razz [Beau's father]," she said excitedly, "and he appears to be a blue!"

For a moment I thought perhaps a sneeze had prevented her from finishing her sentence. But no, *a blue* was how she wanted to end it. Blue is one of the possible variations to a poodle's coat, along with black, white, chocolate and apricot. I knew nothing about it, so I had to take Brigitte at her word.

"If he is blue, there is a good chance Beauregard is also a blue," she said.

"Why wouldn't we know what color the dogs are?" I asked.

"It doesn't manifest until they are about two years old. The signs are a few white hairs at the small of the back, and in the hands."

I called Beau over to the phone, examined him briefly, and located perhaps a half dozen white hairs in the places she suggested.

"So," I asked, "is this good?"

"Michael, I have been trying for eighteen years to breed a blue. Razz would be my first."

"And it is good."

"Indeed, yes. It's unusual. It increases the breeding value by a lot."

"Well, that's great, Brigitte. I'm happy for you."

"It's good news for you, too, if Beau is blue like his father."

I pulled apart Beau's fur. The color of his skin underneath was, as I had always known, bright blue, like the baked finish on a Dutch oven. "Why is it good for us?"

"You can breed him," she said. And she took on an accusatory note: "You haven't neutered him, have you?"

"No. But we got Beau just to be a pet."

"You could command stud fees of \$400 per service."

"Wow," I said. "I wouldn't have to write any more."

"He would be in demand around the continent," she said.

"We could travel," I sighed.

"It's a grand life," she assured me. I pictured her palatial home on White Bear Lake. Of course, Lorraine, her daughter, who did the actual breeding, lived in a firetrap slum on the near east side of Saint Paul.

By the time I hung the receiver up, I was living a different life. 1996 was more than the year of the great flood. It was the Year of the Blue Poodle. Fate had seen fit to designate my dog as the bearer of DNA for a generation of as yet unborn blue dogs. And I, as the agent for the vessel of this honor, stood to ring up a pretty price for it.

## The Mean Dog

I canceled any plans I had to have Beau neutered, just as he began to give me reason to have him neutered.

Beau had been the most social of puppies. When I took him for walks, he would stand up on his hind legs as we passed a dog in a yard, and whine as I dragged him away on two legs, like a sad circus clown. Unleashed, he could play for hours with another dog. Any dog would do. The game was always the same, a kind of tyrannosaurus rex fight in which the two dogs stood and crashed into each other, fell to earth, whirled around, and did it again. I loved to watch him do this. To me it was beautiful.

So it perplexed us when he began to show signs of turning anti-dog. Instead of rejoicing when he encountered other dogs on the sidewalk, Beau would emit this low, hostile grumble. Where once he had yipped and barked enthusiastically, he now regarded other dogs with a cruel, curled-lip sneer, like an evil Elvis.

His dominant streak was widening. The father's aggressive demeanor, just like his blue coat, was beginning to manifest in the son.

I was at a pet food warehouse store, the kind that let you take dogs on leashes through the aisles. Beau always loved going shopping at these places, and I think perhaps he thinks all stores are pet food stores, because those are the only ones he has been in. Occasionally he has committed a faux pas against this delicate system, lifting a leg to urinate on a bag of premium dog food. When he did this I glanced at the assistant store manager in alarm, as the yellow pool formed around the

base of the bag. But she knew what I didn't, that Beau was not the first dog to mark that spot. Indeed, he was merely adding his two cents worth to an ongoing conversation.

So I'm dragging Beau from aisle to aisle. As usual he's interested in everything that moves: goldfish, crickets, ferrets, the works. But around the corner comes an adorable white husky puppy. Beau greets him with a horrible snarl and strains to move forward and get him.

Stunned by the display, I make a joke of it to the puppy's owner: "That must be a really evil dog you have there."

She accommodated me by saying that, yes, it was an evil puppy and my dog was very discerning to see that.

But the problem ran deeper than one evil puppy. When we get a dog, usually as a puppy, aggressiveness and dominance are far from our minds. Sure, some dogs bite -- I mean really bite, not the hand-chomping thing Beau liked to do. Beau could never bite anything. He was innocent in his heart.

I remembered how he looked at me when I first met him. He was so meek, so grateful, so eager to have someone to love. And my plan was to raise him to be a spirit-dog, joyful, life-affirming and pacifist in all his inclinations.

As a puppy, your dog will nip you and you will laugh it off, or wince, and tell yourself he is just teething. Or it is a mistake -- his little sharp tooth just happen to catch the web between your thumb and index finger, and tear a painful gash in it. It was your fault, and you promise to be more careful in the future.

Lurking in the back of your mind is the awareness that you have taken something derived from a wild wolf into your home. How thin the membrane is between his amiable doggy

nature and the feral side, you're never quite sure. You've heard tales of dogs who could never overcome their lupine half, and bit people, or were forever getting into scrapes with other dogs, and had to be destroyed. But not *your* dog. Not after the way you raised and trained him.

A friend told me how a group of dogs, huskies and shepherds, that had lived together for ten years suddenly turned on the oldest female, whom they had honored and respected all that time, and killed her as a group. And afterward they were the same playful, goofy animals, chasing a rolled-up sock while their friend lay dead beside them.

Something happens in the dog/wolf brain that we just don't get. It is incredibly upsetting when you see it starting to happen in a dog you thought was unalterably kind.

At six months, Beau's dominance began to kick in. He began putting his paws on the other dogs' shoulders. Gently at first, like he was giving them a word of friendly advice. But then less gently, as the games wore on. Eventually he took to clutching the other dog and mounting her or him from behind. If the dog didn't like that, teeth were bared and gnashed. As often as not, Beau would toss the other dog on its back and put its throat in his mouth, growling all the while.

All this would usually happen while the other dog's owner and I would be chatting amiably about the local sports team or sewer assessment. Suddenly we would be aware that my dog was threatening his dog's livelihood. It was embarrassing. I would leash Beau and ask him a series of ridiculous questions ("How are you going to have friends if you do that?")

For several months Beau lived in an in-between zone, frolicsome and frisky one moment, violent and intimidating the next. In any social event, he could act any of a number of

ways, or act one way and then switch in a moment to something ugly. He could do almost anything. He could bark insanely, growl, bare his teeth, or just intimidate the other dog with a killing stare. Or he could go into action, flipping them on their backs and fastening his teeth on their throats. He was the opposite of a bodhisattva: he was a bully, preying on puppies, weak males, and older dogs. He was driven not by soul but by the storm of hormones raging in his bulging testicles.

One day he attacked Britt, the queenly Doberman. It was as if all the training she had given him had blown away. It meant I could no longer trust him with even the least threatening dogs -- older females.

At my birthday picnic on the fourth of July, he tossed poor little Binks, the dog no one loves except the little girl who owns him, on his back and bit him, handing me a \$105 vet bill as a birthday present.

He had excuses. His ears were bothering him that day. It was an exclusive party, and Binks showed up late and uninvited. And Binks had never been a favorite of Beau's.

But the biting was unacceptable, and it ruined my day, even before a yellowjacket in my margarita crawled onto my upper lip and sent me pronking about the picnic table in pain.

What was going on? I asked, daubing my lip and racking my brain trying to understand the dog.

When he acted up, I would scold him. I would choke him with a too-tight hold of his collar while I scolded him. I even whipped him across his butt with the leash when he would do these things, during the moment of flare-up.

But my actions only confused him. He would grin

idiotically when I berated him, hoping I would revert to behavior he liked. To him, this was my behavior problem, or the other dogs' behavior -- but not his!

In short, he was beyond help. And my plan for raising him to be free and wild was failing.

## Help!

Every time I have been confused about Beau, I have sought out Brigitte. She was grim, and a little paranoid, but she had experience with dogs that I could never begin to duplicate.

Now I was at a very tricky crossroads with Beau, and I needed her advice. I called her, and she said she was packing things up for a big show, and she could not talk to me that day. But if I came by her place in another week, she would show me how she had dealt with issues of aggressiveness in the past. And not to worry: the problem was not unmanageable.

Relieved, I waited for her return. When I knew she was back, I drove out to her place, and rang the doorbell -- no answer. Something was wrong, I sensed. Peering through the blinds of the house, I saw that all the furniture was gone. She had moved!

When I drove by her daughter's house on the east side, the Poodle Arms where Beau had stayed when we went on vacation, that house was also vacant.

I looked at Beau, and Beau looked at me. We were orphans. From now on we would have to make our own way in the world.

I talked to people, and I read. It never registered on me that dogs do fight. The wildness in them is how they maintain their social order -- through emotional brutality. The pack stays strong when its members are on their toes, alert to the possibility of violence. Violence within the pack, like puppies rolling in mock combat, tunes the pack for violence outside the pack. Predictably, a few members are dishers-out of violence. They are endowed genetically with naturally



dominant personalities. They are the leaders of the pack.

When Beau was with us for one day, and began humping our legs, he was not being sexual. He was asserting his ownership of us. It was an infantile expression of dominance. The ferocious face that his father presented when he met Beau, was now becoming Beau's face. There was nothing I could do to change that.

The dominant encounter can be expressed in terms of transactional analysis. A dog's identity is comprised of three parts -- Puppy, Dog, and Friend. Dominance is a chip placed for life on certain dogs' shoulders.

A mere show of ferocity -- snarling, teeth, growling -- sometimes resolves the discrepancy. The dominant dog will convince the less dominant dog to submit.

Or violence may be necessary. Violence occurs between dogs because they don't know what else to do with one another. They know of no agenda except pack order. Their instincts override their training, and they scrap. Both dogs begin in Puppy mode, demanding attention. It makes a Puppy want to become known to another dog. It makes a dog run a hundred yards to meet another dog.

But when the two dogs are together, the Dog part of their personalities kicks in. Now they are parental and disapproving, desperate to establish and maintain order.

It is the Dog, not the Puppy, who fights. Puppies lose focus, but Dogs are terrific at maintaining focus. They quickly see they are intolerable to one another. Like two gunslingers whom no town can contain, there is only room for one top dog.

A big problem here is behavioral styles. Some dogs like to

threaten to fight, or fight ritualistically, making a great to-do but not actually inflicting damage. Others like to actually fight. If you think you can tell which is which before the fur starts flying, you are wrong.

Fights don't just erupt, but they develop very rapidly. I think it is a matter of guardedness. Take two dominant dogs and put them together. Each animal approaches the other with the possibility of peace. But it is a corrupt peace because both dogs are too dominant to provide the token of submission necessary to grease the peace. With no token offered, the guardedness of each dog increases. You can feel it increasing. Nothing is said, but if it were, it would be something like: *Oh yeah? Well, Oh , yeah? Oh, yeah! Yeah!*

The submissive dog will knuckle under immediately, and all will be well. A most awkward situation is when two submissive dogs get together. It is like watching Laurel and Hardy take ten minutes to enter a door. *After you. No, I insist, after you. No no no, I am unworthy. To the contrary, it is I who am unworthy. You unworthy, why compared to you, I am ....* It is like the trip to Abilene that no one wants to take, but everyone goes anyway. *But I thought you wanted to go.*

A moderately dominant dog can be made more submissive simply by beating him in a good clean fight. But a supremely dominant dog like Beau won't admit he is beaten. The idea of the other dog being better, even though he weighs three times as much and has spikes on his collar and gets his haircuts off the rack, is an unthinkable thought to him.

Then there is the question, if you could teach your dominant dog by force to bow down to others, would the others comply by not fighting? A few will. Some bullies simply need propitiating, and then they are meek as does. They have the will to lift their guard, provided the token is submitted. Then they are all pals.

But some won't. They attack and harm you anyway. These non-reciprocating dogs, just like nonreciprocating people, ruin it for everyone because they make it unwise to let down your guard. They make disarmament impossible.

## The Unkindest Cut

The step most people take to curb dominance and fighting between males is neutering.

Neutering is a clinical procedure. First, the dog is placed under a mild general anesthesia. Then, using sterile technique, the surgeon makes an incision in the area just in front of the scrotum. Blood weeps immediately from this incision. The dog's testicles are removed through this incision, and the blood vessels that connected them to the dog are ligated (tied off). Then the surgeon sutures up the incision, using dissolvable sutures. Once the dog is fully awake and mobile, he is free to go home. Since the sutures are dissolvable, the dog doesn't have to return to have them taken out.

What could be simpler? Indeed, what kind of owner would resist such a benign procedure? And everyone wants you to do it. "Neuter him," the world seems to be whispering to you at every turn. All the dog books tell you to do it. People who've had the procedure done on their dogs swear it's harmless and effective. People whose dogs your dog has attacked are especially in favor of it.

Neutering is necessary to prevent fighting and roaming in males. It helps reduce the chance of cancer of the testicles. Plus, it's birth control – with all the millions of unwanted puppies in the world, why does your dog deserve the experience of procreation?

This is what they tell you.

Still, I had a dreadful time with the concept. I count six reasons.

One: Beauregard was a pedigreed dog. His value resided in his loins. His father was a breeder, a stud dog. He was a blue poodle, for pete's sake. God gives you a freakish gift like that, and you snuff it out like a flaming birthday cake?

Two: Beau and I were both males. I knew in my squeamish bones that this was not a pleasant procedure. The very thought of a knife going in there and slitting the sac, snipping the connecting thread, and sewing the animal up again without his essential parts, caused me to seize up.

Three: I was responsible for Beau, like a parent is responsible for a child. Parents are not supposed to sexually mutilate their children, and I didn't feel right doing it to Beau.

Four: Dogs are supposed to be man's best friend – what kind of best friend castrates you?

Five: I had a problem with creating happiness with a knife. A bodhisattva dog should be able to overcome hormonal urgings and behave. I was a teenager once, I settled down eventually. Beau should be able to, too. Self-control is all that is needed.

Six: Is manageability a suitable excuse for mutilating an animal?

I suspected that everyone, dishing out this conventional wisdom about neutering, was simply wrong. Or that they were duped by the sinister crypto-veterinary establishment, which was running up huge bills for unnecessary surgeries. It reminded me of the stories that circulated about pot in the '60s – that you would end up in a madhouse and your children would have flippers.

If on the one hand you have all the forces of control urging that you clamp down on your dog's special purpose, there are also people to support your intuition that castration is a drastic

step. I found an essay by Kevin Behan on neutering on the Internet that holds that dogs are out of control not because their testicles are throbbing with antisocial urgency, but because they are frustrated as a group by the disappearance of purpose from their lives.

That purpose, Behan maintains, is hunting. Find a happy dog and chances are that dog is doing his job of hunting in some way -- either as an actual hunter or via any of a dozen pack behaviors or hunting surrogacies -- fetching, chasing, herding, even guarding. In each case the dog engages in a kind of predatory behavior which is healthy -- the prey instinct channels sexual aggression into acceptable forms. Let me quote you a sample:

"When the prey instinct is given the time to work its subtle magic, a free flowing sociability is the rule with intact males as well even more than between females because testosterone supports a more open and malleable sexuality. Play sessions are a good illustration of this phenomenon. In one moment one dog assumes the predatory role and then in the next he acts like the prey thereby initiating a chase. The game progresses to the extent that its participants can readily switch from one "modality" to the other. The higher the game escalates, the greater the pleasure and the deeper the bond that is engendered.

Reproduction is not the primary reason for those testicles, Behan says. Their primary use is provide emotional power to fashion the pack into a disciplined fighting organization -- an army platoon -- so these relatively small creatures, working together, can run down and kill moose, bison, elk, musk ox and the like.

"While it may be difficult for the modern dog owner to reconcile his pet's "loving" disposition with the violent

mandates of hunting, the connection is undeniable and the predatory heritage passed from the wolf to the dog made the later domestication possible. A strong hunting drive produces in dogs a pronounced sociability and this is then consummated via the sexual instincts, either through such obvious expressions as when dogs mount but more often through more subtle clues as when dogs give paw, roll over, lift their legs, rub their hips and shoulders against people, other dogs, or even against inanimate objects such as the ground, bushes, sofas, etc.<sup>1</sup>

I found this persuasive because it fit well with my yearning for a spirit-dog, a dog that radiated altruism and consciousness from its own soul or nature -- not because a veterinarian amputated all its unpleasant parts.

I am always beguiled by the "natural" approach to dog-raising -- but I am unusually unwilling or unable to put it into practice. Beau was a solo dog, a lone pet in a human family, cut off from his poodle pack. I wasn't about to adopt a bunch of other dogs on the off-chance Beau would not only not attack them, but somehow create a hunting practice in our urban neighborhood of Merriam Park, a place devoid of elk and musk ox but full of cats and little children.

Meanwhile Beau's testicles were reaching critical mass. His solitariness made him less a soldier in a platoon than a lone gunslinger. Something had to give.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Behan, "The Debate over Neutering," <http://candlewood.com/caninearts/NEUTRING.htm>. Posted 6/2/96. Read 7-7-98.

## Assassination

I knew I should place the call to the vet's and schedule Beau to be neutered, but I just didn't pick up the phone. Call it denial, call it a dogman's hope that he won't have to have his best friend castrated – destroyed in order to be saved, as we said of villages in Vietnam.

One day, things came to a head. Beau and I had made a couple of trips down below the Lake Street Bridge separating the Twin Cities. There was a University rowing club down there, until an arsonist burned the great boat barn to the ground. But there is not much else, and Beau and I walked a finger of sand running alongside the Mississippi.

On one such trip, I found a beaver lodge. Right smack dab in the city, under the bridge, amid all the honking and pollution, two beavers had made a home for themselves. At least a fourth of the timber on this narrow strand – hundreds of young trees, and a dozen large ones, including a mighty cottonwood -- had been gnawed to the ground by them, and dragged toward their lodge.

The male was often visible, cruising the shore. If he sensed our presence, he would dive down with a loud sploosh – I think to draw attention toward himself and away from his mate down below. Beau hailed the male beaver with a mighty howl. He had never seen a beaver before.

I told my family about the lodge and they agreed it would be nice to visit. So the Saturday after Thanksgiving, we all trekked down under the bridge. I cautioned everyone to be quiet as we neared the lodge. But we must have been too noisy, because the beavers did not put in an appearance. It also



occurred to me that the beavers might be gone, or dead. The water going through the city is not the cleanest.

Walking back, we hailed a man with a Doberman-Rottweiler mix on a leash. As soon as I saw them, I clamped a leash on Beau, to avoid embarrassment. But the dogs seemed to want to be with one another, and the man and I did a “shall we?” to one another, and unleashed the two dogs.

It was the mistake of a lifetime for Beau. Within seconds he was confronting this stolid dog, baring his teeth and issuing horrid growls from deep inside him. The Dobie-Rott seemed less passionate than Beau, but unafraid of a scrap. I was fumbling with the leash trying to slip it back on Beau when the fight began. I was caught right between them, and the collision was violent.

A poodle is classified as a soft-mouthed animal, bred to retrieve a bird without mangling it in his maw. A Dobie-Rott, by contrast, can probably crunch concrete with his teeth. It was an utter mismatch

Though the battle only lasted three seconds, it was different from the other confrontations Beau had forced. In the others, I had a clear sense that Beau was putting on a show of ferocity, and other dog complied with a show of his own. Here, he looked and sounded truly awful. But it was a bad miscalculation, because the other dog wasn't putting on a show, and didn't take Beau's antics as theatrical. Swiftly and efficiently, he lunged toward Beau, took the poodle's throat in his jaws, and bit down.

Beau crumpled, blood leaking from his side. He was still growling, but now it was with an eye to ending the conflict and not being bitten again. I finally snapped on the leash, and noticed I too was bleeding. There was a three-inch cut on my calf, that felt more like an abrasion than a bite. I believe it was

caused by the Dobie-Rott's collar rubbing against me.

The man and I looked at each other. He was scared, and I was in shock. I mumbled an apology – it was Beau's fault, after all – and moved to get Beau out of the area. Blood was pulsing from his neck and foreleg, and he was shivering and confused. We had a choice between walking a half mile upriver and following the paved path, or climbing the cliff and getting more quickly to the car. With my bad knee, I couldn't carry the dog, and neither could Rachel or the kids. So I knew I had to coax the stunned animal to follow as best he could on foot. Up the path we went, a drop of blood marking every step.

I believed Beau was going to bleed to death. My hope was to get him to the car, and race him to the vet's.

We rushed Beau to the vet's, and I decided in the car that, if we could save his life, as seemed increasingly likely -- he had not lost consciousness and was sitting calmly with the sock-turned-tourniquet tied around his shoulder -- that he would be the beneficiary of two operations that day, not one.

In the receiving room, Beau continued to lose blood, stepping into the puddles and smearing them along the tiled floor. But he was compliant when I lifted him onto the examining table, and patient with the doctor, who slapped on a bandage and stopped the immediate bleeding.

"Doctor," I said, "I think it's time I had him neutered."

She agreed. And as they led Beau away to his confinement pen, I caught one last look at him being dragged through the door, his eyes locked on me as the door closed. I think I know now how Judas felt as Jesus was led out of the garden.

When I returned for him the next day, I was afraid. I was afraid he would remember my betrayal, and sense his diminished capacity. I had ordered the end of his sexual life.

How could it not affect our relationship?

But when they brought him out to me, I felt bad for a different reason. His face, neck, and leg were shaved. A big bandage, containing an internal drain, bound up his left elbow. They put a plastic collar on him, to prevent him from biting and licking his wound. The collar could not fit through the half-opened door, and he banged his face and shoulders against it violently -- because he saw me, and wanted to get to me, whatever the cost.

## Post-Op

In Beauregard's eyes, the bad thing I had done wasn't ordering the neutering. It was leaving him overnight with strangers, who did all these things to him, including the clown collar. He wasn't mad at me. He was delirious to see me. I hadn't left him in these people's hands forever.

Hell wasn't being chopped, creamed and diced by men in white coats. Hell was me being away.

The surgery and aftercare for his bites wound up costing about \$150. The neutering itself was very cheap, under \$100. The price is kept low to encourage the practice and keep the dog population down. The attitude about the procedure itself is blasé. The vet summed it up for me thus: "He won't know about it, it won't hurt, and he won't care."

In plain sight of the staff, I unhooked the collar and gave it back. When Beau made to lick his wound, I told him No. He looked up at me with a trusting expression and turned away from the wound. In the week he would wear the bandage, and during the two weeks afterward that it healed without the bandage, I didn't see him lick it once. This was an unprecedented feat of cooperativeness.

The vet was right. Though his recovery from the bites was gradual, his castration seemed a matter of indifference to him. Where he once sported two hairy black walnuts, now all he had below his penis was a soft wrinkled seam. He continued to give himself the usual licks in this area, but I never got any sense from him that he was curious about what became of his testicles.

Since his neutering, Beau has followed one loopy phase

after another. The first phase was recovery, in which he laid low while he got himself back together. He was very calm and very patient through this period, which was very reassuring to me.

In the next phase, he was feeling absurdly fine. He would tear around inside the house, scratching our wood floors with his toenails. Outside, everything was a game. He would bound out the door and run across the street to meet passersby, just as he had as a new puppy. He was willing to fetch sticks -- not the usual one and a half fetches, but for a half hour or longer -- eternity for a poodle. When he saw another dog, instead of growling, his face broke into a giant dog smile, and his tail stood at unmistakable full-mast wag.

It was a second puppyhood, and we found this by turns encouraging (the operation must have been a success) and perplexing (what were we going to do with this giant child?).

Within a month that second puppyhood stage tailed off and Beau began to seem more like his usual aloof self. Fearing another attack, we recused him from the company of all dogs but those he already knew. But of course he would pass strangers on the sidewalk, and occasionally his old self would assert itself and he would growl nastily at these dogs, baring his teeth.

Beau has been a modestly better-behaved dog since his neutering. But neutering did not neuter his disposition. Eight weeks later, healed and on the prowl again, he was nearly the same dog as he was before. He never again started a fight, but he never backed down from one, either.

There are definite changes. He seems to appreciate me more. He waits docilely while I clasp the leash on him. He knows I am on his side, and I will protect him if I can.

So the operation was a qualified success. The immediate

removal of new testosterone from his system, plus the disorientation of surgery, resulted in his ultra-frisky period. But it did not eliminate the testosterone still in his system. Brigitte had predicted that it would take until three months after the neutering to discover what he would be like. What he was like was a dog only 25% as dominant as he had been -- still capable of asserting himself, and definitely inclined to defend himself, but having other options as well.

As a result he became a playmate again to dogs like Britt, the older female Doberman he had alienated with his earlier hostilities. Once again they were able to paw the air in Britt's back yard. Beau even did the unthinkable: he abased himself in her presence, rolling onto his back in a display of mock submissiveness. And he developed a new addition to his mock-fighting skills -- the butt slap. When Britt would encounter him from the side, Beau would shimmy his hind end against her and thwack her like a croquet ball. It was very supple and very funny to watch.

It was as if he had added submissiveness to his repertoire, as an occasional option. But he remained his essential dominant self, and I must still exercise caution when we meet other dogs.

## The Hunter

Life sans testicles took another loopy turn. Beau, who had spent a year of his life overlooking the creatures who frequented our back yard, now became obsessed with them. No squirrel could descend from a tree without Beau clambering up on the drapes, banging on the window pane and yelling at it.

Worse than squirrels were rabbits. Rabbits are not supposed to be a poodle's passion -- they are bird dogs, to the extent they are still hunters. But Beau's interest in birds begins and ends with the occasional tidbit of chicken we toss him after supper.

But now, like the chain-gang prisoner in *Cool Hand Luke* who yearned to escape to attend his momma's funeral, Beau had rabbit in his blood. Noelle and John, besides owning Sonja and Cobi, also have rabbits, having had an older male named Chewbacca for years, and recently adopting a young black female they found in the wild at a picnic, named Agnes. The plan was to keep these creatures apart, but one day Beau, smelling rabbits, leapt through the kitchen door and knocked down a partition separating the two creatures. Amid the 100 seconds of hullabaloo that followed, and before the two rabbits were resequestered, Chewbacca found time to have his way with Agnes. Thus Beau became a kind of bunny's uncle, or dogfather, to the litter that followed shortly thereafter.

Beau's interest in dogs suddenly rollercoasted. Where he became passionately puppy-like with them right after his surgery, now, a month or so later, he lost all interest in them. And they, to be fair, smelled something diminished about him.

His new allegiance was to the dozen baby bunnies squirming in a plastic tub in the Morrisons' basement. He was dying to go down there, and later, when they were placed in the hutch on their back porch, he would camp out there and press his nose against the stiff screen.

Events now piled on to heat Beau's bunny lust to boiling stage. Another neighbor, Fritz Ludwig, decided to grow rabbits for food, behind our alley. At times there were as many as six large Belgian hares crowded in a pen, dropping their mild duds through their chickenwire floor in a steaming, odoriferous stew.

The winds that winter seemed almost always to waft from the rabbit pen directly to Beau's nostrils. Twenty four hours a day, he would walk through the house on the tips of his toes, his eyes bugging out from excitement. If a door opened even a crack, he was out like a shot, racing past the alley to the Ludwigs' rabbits, whom he would eyeball, and occasionally bark at.

Upon entering their gate he would dash onto their back porch and press his face against the hutch, and stare at them mega-intensely until one of them blinked, upon which he would start barking and bellowing.

We often asked ourselves, what would Beau do if he got at a rabbit? A poodle is a retriever, trained to deny himself the gratification of the kill, and to fetch the game back to the hunter. Would he kill it quickly, or slowly, or not at all? Was he thinking about blood and bunny fur splattered everywhere, or the fascination he still feels for his stuffed animal toys back in the house, under the couch, where he has pushed them with his useless, thumbless hands and now, vexed at the intricacies of life with humans, cannot get them out?

We didn't know. What we did know was that it would not



go well with Noelle and John, who have shown Beau every courtesy in his young life, for him to devour their pets, or with the Ludwigs, who have also been forbearing, for him to devour their dinner.

Spring came, and the bunny litter grew, and Daniele conspired with Noelle and John to take two of the bunnies. Every night Daniele, too shy to go to the Morrisons on her own, would beg me to make a social call, so she could tag along and nuzzle the baby bunnies in the kitchen. In her wood class at school, unbeknownst to me, she was crafting something heavy and wonderful, a rabbit pen for our backyard.

Now the pen was set up, and actual bunnies were living under our own roof. Beau's nerves were stretched to the breaking point. He actually lost weight during the first week.

One day, when no one was looking, his excitement became too much, and he pushed his face through the light window screen Daniele had used in constructing the hutch. He broke the door, precipitating a family crisis. Daniele, who was truly devoted to her little bunnies, now regarded the dog, the dog we got for her, and who was behaving pretty much as nature and breeding dictated to him to behave, as hateful and a danger to her charges.

Daniele was twelve when we got Beau, and is 14 now -- no longer a scared child, she is an assertive teenager, and she is angry that the dog has ruined the hutch she made with her hands. It didn't help when her father applied his withered carpentry skills to her artwork and made it worse.

## The Crossroads

So what are we to do.

When you want your dog to be one thing, and he persists in being something else, you really have only two options. You can make him change (and yourself unhappy, because he never will). Or you can accepting that the way he is, is the way he is.

Wise dogpeople eventually opt for the latter course. But many are the tales of people who kept hoping that their dog's protective impulse would kick in, but instead greeted every malefactor on the threshold with kisses and licks.

I had these choices about Beau's dominance:

- I could break him. With a force collar or electric collar you can make a dog realize anything, no matter how urgent the countervailing impulse. You simply hurt him, a lot, when he growls at another dog. Eventually he stops.
- I could remove him from dog society completely. This is what many books recommend -- not as a desired state, but because it is all you can do.
- You can watch your dog like a hawk -- even if your whole approach to dogrearing has been *laissez-faire*.

For me, it was no choice at all. The first is repugnant, and the second is almost as bad. Because of my nature, and because of Beau's nature, I was stuck with the last option. It allowed Beau to keep being Beau -- but it meant I couldn't keep being me. I was the one who needed to change.

I began to pick and choose very carefully the situations in which I would allow Beau offleash.

On neighborhood walks, I kept him on-leash, until it was very late and I could be reasonably sure everyone (and their dogs) had gone in for the night.

I avoided parks and areas places where dogs did not gather frequently. Chance meetings of dogs who don't know each other, and who may be poorly socialized, are much more volatile than the "moveable feast" of dogs at regular dog walks. Poodlevania and other places were OK because dogs there knew how to behave, because they came there every day. City parks were much more dangerous.

I kept a constant eye out for trouble, particularly if I let Beau off-leash. I daydreamed less on our walks, and I paid vigilant attention to what was going on -- preparing myself mentally for other dogs, runners, bikers, police.

Along with a litter bag and leash, I carried a stick -- for fending, not throwing. You never know when you might need one.

I learned to judge what sorts of dogs were most likely to be problematic. Dogs most likely to raise a fuss are young neutered males like Beauregard. Dogs most likely to outright attack are un-neutered males.

Females who are fearful pose special problems -- because they feel threatened, they are much more likely to bite and draw blood than two males haggling over their superiority.

Certain breeds bear watching. I seldom worry about golden or Labrador retrievers -- Beau finds them dull as dishwater anyway. Herding dogs like collies tend to bark at Beau, but just to keep him in line.

Male dogs of fighting breeds are dangerous for us --

boxers, pit bulls, bull terriers, and the like. I haven't had problems with female pit bulls. Guard dogs like Rottweilers and Dobermans may look ferocious, but I have found they tend to be pretty gentle in practice. Chesapeakes tend to be crazy and in-your-face, which annoys Beau.

And puppies, especially males, are trouble. I immediately clap a lead on Beau and explain to the human with the puppy that Beau is affronted by their *joie de vivre*.

## Surrender

But as the months passed, a funny thing began to overtake us. Beau entered chronological adulthood. Though his worst habits -- competitiveness, impulsivity, and intolerance -- remained as deep-set as ever, there was something mellower and wiser about him. He knew the lay of the land now. He accepted and even appreciated my control. He stopped that awful plaintive bargaining for yet another walk, yet another hour in the park. When he came home, he put his chin to the floor, and he rested.

And I began to change, too -- to surrender to him.

It dawned on me that this was it. Beauegard would never be perfect. He would spend his whole life wobbling between the puppy state and desirous of continuous attention and fun, and the glowering grouch state, always on the lookout for some other dog to set straight.

My hope for a dog of a generous spirit, a dog of great soul, a bodhisatva dog of life and light who would give richly back to me, in wisdom and inspiration, gradually receded.

What happens is that you recognize that the dog you have, for all his shortcomings -- in fact because of them -- is the dog you deserve. You and the dog advance developmentally together, as on a leash -- you toward human adulthood, and the dog toward being your companion and friend.

You know how people joke that people choose dogs that look like them. When I got Beau I figured I had avoided that stereotype. He is a glorious sight in his black coat and crimson collar, and I am a dumpy middle-aged man not known for sartorial flair.

But deep down, underneath the finery, the stereotype holds up. Beau knows in his heart he is hot -- that is, after all, the essence of his dominance -- and in my heart, that is pretty much what I think, too. That the world disagrees pointedly and frequently is unimportant.

In little ways I have often walked away from social occasions having accomplished the same task that is his goal in life -- impress and dismiss, impress and dismiss. Beau is just luckier than me -- when I act that way, people let me know about it. He, being a dog, gets away with it.

I realized, too, that Beau's dominance was the key to his beauty. All his charm, all his humor, all his cocky confidence, were expressions of his willingness to confront nonsense around him with the power that was within. His life is a hunt -- for bunnies, for supremacy, for answers, for love. He needs that edge. It's part of his soul.

Take away the dominance, whether by electroshock or nagging, and you take away the dog. I had already taken away his sexuality -- I figure I'll leave the rest.

But I've got to watch him.

This is not a shallow intuition. The people who invented the poodle, a thousand or two thousand years ago, whoever they were, were an odd combination of practical, crazy, foolish and wise. Just as they created a regally coated creature who would be undone by the coat within, so was his kind bred to be social yet aloof, doggy yet distant. I identify these traits, and I recognize them. We are a matched set.

Now that I realize how needy he is, and understand that need, maybe I could forgive him, and forgive myself for being the same way?

I mean, for all his faults, he is still a pretty good dog.

## Soul Kiss

Beau has grown and matured in his two years among us. If I tell him to stay, he stays. This is valuable trick. A few weeks ago we were by the river and he came upon a big mother snapping turtle laying eggs in a ditch along by the path. Beau, running ahead of me, had never seen anything so curious and trotted toward the reptile to investigate at close hand. Alarmed at the possibility of having a three-legged poodle, I cried out, "Stay!" and Beau looked at me, gauged my seriousness, and froze like a deer in headlights.

He knows I am trying to protect him. He knows the world is dangerous. He does what I say sometimes. He still won't come when I say *come*.

He no longer charges out the door and into the arms of every unfortunate pedestrian passing by, as he did as a puppy. He no longer, praise God, growls viciously at every dog he meets, as he did as a hormone-wracked teenager.

But he is still capable of doing either, because each day is still a random rotation of his transactional personality parts -- his child/puppy, parent/dog, and adult/friend components. As a puppy he is still capable of playing catch with himself on the living room floor, flinging a rawhide chew across the room with his teeth, and then bounding after it, as if someone else threw it.

But he is redeemed from all this by the emergence of his adult self. I think it is not possible for a poodle to be a bodhisattva dog outright. The breed is ultimately too finicky, and too funny, to be an icon of sunny acceptance. But I get glimpses now of a rich, warm maturity in him, and a deep

doggy appreciation of the live he has been allowed to live.

His latest thing is his soul kiss. He comes to me, looks sincerely into my eyes. He places his forearms on my shoulders, dominance-style. And he licks me, tilting his head this way and that to communicate how deep his love is, how perfect his devotion. He is my dog, he is saying to me. Mine only, mine completely.

And since the day of my knee operation, and he sat by me as I slipped into unconsciousness, and he hovered over me, licking my wound like a great gorilla nurse, I have felt I could no longer say he has not given me anything. It was a new role for him, and he performed it well, and it has changed our relationship for the better.



## Three Markers

My life with Beau had three markers in it so far. The first marker was his puppyhood, a time of playing. The second was a transitional period, adolescence, during which I became confused and angry, and so did he. Now we were embarked on a third stage, and this one has been marked by anxiety and protectiveness.

It happened that less than a week after Beau's operation, he and I were delicately making our way through the Crosby Farm area along the Mississippi. (The delicacy having more to do with Beau's throat wound than his neutering.)

All of a sudden, a German shepherd that had been coming toward us on leash, snapped his leash and dashed toward us. He was on us in about two seconds, and the woman who had been leading him was shouting out to me, "He's never done this before!" Somehow I got between the two dogs -- Beau was in no condition to defend himself -- and began kicking the shepherd, who even in attack mode knew he was not supposed to attack me. His owner and I got him back on leash and we resumed our walk.

Poor, once wicked Beau, was just a shivering, shaved, defenseless creature.

It occurred to me that everything Brigitte had said came to pass. "Stick it in their faces -- they don't like that!" From that day on, I have taken to carrying a stick with me on our walks.

## Dogs' Fates

When Beau was nearly a year old, fully grown physically, but mentally still quite young, he was as much a mystery to me as ever, with his shifting moods and personalities, a growling fiend one moment, a lovable clown the next.

We took the same walks through the neighborhood as ever, but there were many changes among the dog and human population.

Do you remember Reggie, the fox terrier? His family decided they could not keep him, that their house was just too busy with four kids to do justice to a little dog. So they handed him over to another family, a block away. Freaked out by his transfer, Reggie did poorly in the new household. He chewed the wrong things, he messed in the wrong places, and worst of all, he bit someone. He had had none of these problems at his original home, but they were deemed intolerable by his new family, who had him destroyed.

Harley and Buster, the two dogs from the duplex who climbed the high snow to stand on top of their garage, were split up, when Harley and her master Brent moved a few doors away.

Barney, the gouty beagle whose owner ushered him away from Beau, disappeared. I never found out what his precise fate was, but I imagine he got sick and died.

Ginger, the funny boxer Beau loved to shimmy with, never became the breeding dog her family planned. She became quite broad in the back. She was still cute, but she was no longer handsome. Worse, she developed a malignant tumor on her back, which left a divot of scar when it was removed. She

was spayed, and is now just a house dog like Beau.

Some dog stories took a strange turn. Cobi and Sonja, Noelle's dogs and Beau's best friends, cooled toward him after his neutering. Whatever it was that he had before the surgery, he no longer had after it. Sonja became positively hostile to him, preventing him from entering the house. Noelle and I remained friends, but with the dog thing no longer working, we saw less of each other.

Mango, the golden who seemed to share the same spark as Beau, seemed to lose his spark after he was neutered. Neutering seems to take a heavy toll on golden retrievers. Basil, the other golden in our neighborhood, continued to exhibit his customary personality deficit.

I now, belatedly, came to understand why so many dog owners, seeing Beau down the street, hurried their dogs away. It was not because they were party poopers, but because their dogs were like Beau – they were willing to fight to establish dominance. They had been embarrassed too many times, and did not want to be embarrassed again.

But the saddest story involved the two Samoyeds, Sophie and Bear. Both were angels and very childlike, but Bear, age 8, looked quite ferocious. And he was said to be part wolf. One day he got off his rope and chased the neighbor's cat. Both Walter, his owner, and the cat's owner looked on in horror as bear caught the cat and tore it apart and ate it. Walter cried out to stop, until it was too late. Bear never responded to the command, and thereby sealed his fate.

"I couldn't have a dog that would not respond," Walter told me. "So I took him down to the hospital, and we sat, and I fed him his favorite food, raw beef, and I stroked him and sang to him as the injection went in, and he lay down and died."

"That must have been so hard," I told him.

He nodded, tearing up again. “I blubbered for days.”

A statelier death awaited the noble Sherlock, the bloodhound. One day, following a week of 95-degree days, Bob found him in his bed, the mighty heart stilled by the heat.

Poor Bob – he loved that dog like a giant bride. His solemn dutifulness was the perfect counterbalance to Bob’s inventiveness and wit. I tried looking up his name in the phone book, to tell Bob how sorry I was, and how great Sherlock was. But Bob is one of those American originals who don’t have a phone. Bob, I’m so sorry.

So we walk through the neighborhood and note the changes -- who is gone and who remains.

When Beau approaches a Sheltie in one yard, the little dog yaps and a face appears in the doorway, studying us to see if we pose his little dog a danger or not.

At another yard, I can't even see the dog that whines and wags by the gate. Beau is just another shadow in the darkness, and when I pull on his chain he resists. He wants to experience this dog. I let them get excited at the idea, but there is no possibility, what with the leashes and the gate.

I am feeling morose thinking of the crummy deal dogs have cut for themselves. They ache to play with one another, but countless obstacles impede them from happiness. They can look, they can smell, but they cannot fully engage. We drag them here and there by ropes around the neck, and lop off their sex organs, as if that would resolve the issue of nature.

It can't. The dogs are still aflame with desire and love, but the ropes and gates and missing sex organs make it all so difficult. We drag them from their joy back inside our screen doors, and put them in their places, and they nuzzle our hands, transferring that wild unkillable love to us, who despite the

ropes and razors are still beautiful to them.

They are better than us, and deserve better than us, but until such time, they circle on the rug, and close their eyes and sleep, and dream of big yards with open boundaries, and other dogs, and a happy life of tooth and eye.

## Good Dog

One summer day, Rachel had me move a yew tree from the station wagon to the back yard. It weighed about 90 pounds, potted. The moment I hoisted the tree on my hip, I knew it was too heavy. Too late -- I heard something crunch inside my knee. It was the meniscus that provides the cushion and glide for the knee joint, the knee cartilage that athletes are always damaging. It is an injury that, unless corrected, wrecks their careers.

I could still walk, but I could no longer run, and I especially could no longer do the pivoting, scrimmage game that Beau loved to play. Instead of chasing him with my glove or hat or scarf in his mouth, I could only stand and watch him tease me. We still went on morning walks, but they were limping, desultory affairs. A little of the light in our relationship together grew dimmer.

By Christmas it was apparent the meniscus wouldn't heal by itself, and I would need surgery to correct the tear. The last walks I took with Beau were quite painful - occasionally my knee would lock up, or I would slip on the ice and force the joint to hyperextend, and the pain would be considerable. On these occasions, Beau never paid me any mind at all; he remained on his course of interests, sniffing trees and trotting alongside.

My knee surgery was my first experience with general anesthetics. The surgical nurses had me mount the table and extend my arms like Jesus on the cross, where they laced me down, administered the shot, and I counted backward to about 98.

I awoke, hearing two nurses behind me muttering about something unspeakable that they were both aware of. I attempted to rise, in case they were talking about me, but I was unable to, and slipped back into unconsciousness.

I awoke again, in a second room. Rachel was there. When I could sit, I saw my leg was wrapped in an enormous cast of gauze and drainage. I could stand, and because of the drugs I could feel no pain. I could hobble from point to point. But walking was out of the question for the next week.

Riding home, with Rachel at the wheel, I wondered who would walk the dog, and how the dog would manage. More immediately, I wondered how I would keep the dog from mauling me when I staggered in the door.

But it wasn't a problem. We arrived at the front door, turned the key, and Beau, excited at first, apprised himself of my condition, and modulated his routine. Instead of dashing his body against mine a dozen times, he circled in tight spastic rotations, reining his power in, but wagging furiously against my wrapped left leg.

And when Rachel helped me onto the green couch in the living room, I was already losing it. We propped up my leg, and Beau knelt beside me. We were brothers now, both children of the knife. My eyes were shutting against my will. But I patted him, and the last sound I heard before blacking out entirely was the noise of his tongue repeatedly licking the site of his master's wound.

Good dog, I mumbled, spinning away from them both.  
Good dog.

## A Jar in Tennessee

A month after the operation, we are out again. Imagine a crisp winter morning. I am walking Beau at Crosby Farm alongside the Mississippi, an undeveloped park with lots of paths cutting through the trees along the shore. A perfect place for a scofflaw to let his dog run wild.

And I have a minicassette recorder in my pocket, a generic blisterpack Sony. They are great for taking notes when driving, or out for a walk somewhere. Sometimes people see you and think you are schizophrenic, talking to your hand, but that is small price to pay, in my mind, for being able to "write" on the fly.

The morning is gorgeous, with crisp new powder everywhere, and white vapor rising from the river. For just a moment, a four-point deer poked his head into a clearing. Beau, being a bit blind, pays him no mind.

My dog begs me to chase him. It's his favorite game, a role reversal because chasing others is the center of his life otherwise. My knee is still sore, but I pound along for a hundred yards or so, bellowing like a dog-eating bear. He adores that.

We take several switchbacks, going deeper into the trees. When we arrive at the riverbank, I feel in my pocket for the recorder. It's gone.

You know how when something is gone you check every pocket eleven times to make sure it's gone? This was that kind of gone. I figure I either dropped it when I made my last note, or it fell out of my pocket during the little jog. So I begin backtracking. The dog wants me to chase him some more, but



my mood is darkening and I decline.

The snow is thick, but there are many deer and rabbit and human footprints. A recorder could easily vanish into any of them. I calculate in my mind the loss of the unit -- maybe \$40. Besides, they wear out quickly because you are always dropping them. I look everywhere I walked -- about a two-mile distance -- for the little machine. No luck.

I was nearly reconciled to the loss when I spotted the unit lying on a patch of thin snow. The battery and tape compartments were both sprung open, and the tape and batteries lay splayed out on the snow, as if a squirrel or crow had given some thought to taking them home, and then said, nah.

I popped the machine back together and pushed the play button, still ready for the worst, a dead unit. But instead I heard my own voice. I was talking about Sao Paulo Brazil, which I had visited on business a couple months earlier. On the tape, I was sitting in a bus on a smoggy artery heading out of town, talking to myself about the beggars crouched by the highway signs, and the advertising, with the nearly naked models, and the infinite pastel rows of high-rise apartment buildings.

And now I am standing in a clearing in the forest, 7,000 miles away, hearing my high, sped-up voice. The woods are so quiet that this little machine and its tinny little speaker ring clear through the air. Nearby crows, hearing my recorded chatter and finding it suspicious, take wing and flap away to a safer bough.

If you have ever stood between two mirrors and seen the illusion of infinite regression in them, you have an idea what I was feeling, addressing myself electronically from a place so different and so far away.

And if that was not stunning enough, I flipped the tape over -- I did not want to tape over this interesting travelogue -- and there was my daughter Daniele's voice, talking to a caller on the phone. I reuse my answering machine tapes in my hand recorder, and this tape was perhaps five years old, when my little girl was eight, back before we got Beau. Now her voice sounds so clear, so young and lovely. I had forgotten what she used to sound like. I knew I couldn't tape this over, either.

Beau, meanwhile, was looking at me with that panting grin dogs wear when they are in their element to the hilt. But the look on his face just now is all wonderment and admiration. He "understands" very little that I do, but this latest trick, picking something up in the woods and having it talk to me in my own voice, takes the cake.

My friends, let me tell you, this is not the end of my story. Beau has a lifetime of adventures ahead of him. Dogs to run with, people to love. At one point he gets to paddle in a canoe, with a life jacket on. Disasters rain down upon our house, and the sun comes up afterward and dries the rain up. Beau catches a bunny, and lets it live. Beau is struck by a car one night -- and it lets him live.

But I choose to end our story here, in the woods, kneeling by the fallen minicassette recorder.

It was the look I saw in Beauregard's eye, the look of a knowing one, a holy of holies at last. He had made the difficult crossing, from a crazy, impulsive, demanding animal to one who saw, and enjoyed, the life we shared.

Wallace Stevens once wrote a simple poem called "A Jar in Tennessee," about coming upon a human artifact on a wild hillside. Placing anything human in the wilderness changes everything, just like in the time travel stories. The consciousness is contagious. Just as owning a dog is a kind of

portage, in which your soul enters the dog forever and vice versa -- a miracle.

It's entirely likely, since he is a French poodle, and Stevens is the poet of that breed. And it was such a gorgeous day, with the scent of sand and pine adrift in the air like microfine confetti in the morning breeze.