



THE LUCY POEMS

MIKE FINLEY

The Lucy Poems by Mike Finley

Kraken Press, 2014

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The Dog in the Picture

He always stands out,
even though the thing that delights him most
is that he is in.

Even when no one in the group
is talking to anyone else,
everyone talks to him,
even though he can't talk,

or perhaps that's why.
He neither toils nor spins,
he spends his lifetime humbly,
on the floor,

living without irony or muttering,
leaving his own family
to be with yours, to go along

without regrets of any kind,
see, he is grinning, tongue
hanging out to here, he knows
this picture is forever

My Heaven

It lately has occurred to me
I don't like anything as much
as watching the dogs play.

They are so fierce
and so trusting
and so happy to be
horsing around.

If I was to die right now
and I was given the choice
I would want to walk in the woods
at just this time of year
with my girl Lucy.

She would do her thing
and I would walk alongside,
no arthritis, and turning over
things I found.

And if I could insist

I would see my other two dogs,
who left me long ago,
join with her, young
and impossible,
so violently kind
and so grateful to me,
and no old man in a bathrobe.

And if you say,
that's a dumb heaven,
that's fine, it's just my heaven.
Figure out your heaven
on your own.

At the No Parking sign

My dog Beau was smart about geometry,
he never tangled the leash around a post.
If he saw a post, he walked around it on my side,
he never tried to go around.
It was little things like this I loved him for,
unlike so many dogs today,
who get wrapped several times around the post,
and they turn to you with that hapless expression,
as if to say,
You know that thing that always happens?
It's happening again.

Forgive Us Our Trespassing

Park rangers have begun boarding up overnight
the entrances to Hidden Falls and Crosby Farm along the
Mississippi.

I suppose people are screwing in the park pavilions in the
dark,
or shining the fish, or meeting in cars to divvy up the day's
take.

But the lockout means I can't go there at crack of dawn
and bike with my dog, me pedaling and her running
alongside,
no leash, complete outlaws.

It feels good to me and I know it does to her, too.
Her face breaks into a pulsing, panting grin,
and her expression as we travel back to town says,
You used me, boss, you used me real good.

I came up with the idea of visiting
corporate campuses on Energy Parkway and Kasota
Boulevard.

No one uses them early in the morning,
just semi trailers parked at the loading docks
and maybe a car or two belonging to the cleanup crew.

I expect one day a dick with a badge will catch us on
closed-circuit
and say, Hey, you're not supposed to be here.
This is private property, and this company
would have legal liability should anything happen to you.
And I'll say, But my dog needs the exercise,
she needs to be tuckered out till she's practically blind.

And he'll say, But that's trespassing
and I'll say Yes but it's nice trespassing.

Standby Equipment

If you tell the fireman to be more productive
he will have to be out starting fires.

Sometimes it is good to have some stand-down time,
like that dog curled up on the red braid rug
who would like nothing better
than to be splashing through the swamp
but dreams and snores on your sneakers instead.

Wish Made

Panting

In the Grass,

Having Fetched

Three Dozen

Chuck-Its

It wish

It could be

like it is

just now

all the time.

The Girl Who Pursued Squirrels

There was never a question of catching one.

She could not be described as stealthy.

But still she kept at it, racing every one to the tree,

Then losing them high in the canopy.

Many long for such a fit and enthusiastic girl,

But for her there are only the squirrels.

Song for My Dog

Lucy Brown, Lucy Brown
Best dog I have found
Best dog in the entire town
Best dog anywhere around

How I love you
sweetest poodle
How I love you
through and throoodle

Good runner
Good chaser
Good catcher
Fair swimmer

Sweetest poodle in the world
Lucy Brown you are my girl
In the oyster of my life
You are the perfect pearl

My Two Wives

I have a wife who goes away.

I have a wife who stays.

And when it's me that goes away,
the second wife accompanies.

I place the heart upon the shelf,
and light the frankincense.

And when the smoke causes it to beat
I go into my dance.

I ask you to go out with me,
out, as in a match.

I make you kiss me on the mouth
And tell me just how much.

I want to die the same time as you.
The same instant, in your eyes.
I want to breathe my last with you
then brace for the surprise.

I have a wife who stays with me.

I have a wife who leaves.
There are no rules defining us.
We venture as we please.

I want to die embraced by you,
On the cliff up above the shore.
I want to step to the edge with you
and then take one step more.

The Love That Keeps Us From Being Good Citizens

I love the forest and I cherish the lake
and I honor every woodland creature.

But given a choice between leashing my dog
and letting her scare away geese

Geese who have been flapping all day up in the sky
and desperately need this moment of rest,

And the glad look her mischief engenders,
I know I will let her make her presence known.

Two Men at The Dog Park

I never have liked him. He watches passers-by from his cement table and you can feel resentment and judgment radiating from him. A small man, you think maybe he is a floor refinisher, someone who spends time on his knees and has a perpetually bad back. If your dog poops and you didn't see it, he will be on you in an instant, pointing out the exact location of the drop, and offer you a hostile baggy.

He is angry, and that includes you.

Today he heard me yelling at Lucy to dial it back, that she was playing too intensely with another young dog.

He comes up to me and says, "Your dog is just doing what dogs do. She's not doing anything wrong."

I'm grateful for this, for the moment. "Thanks. I know she's not aggressive, but she gets excited sometimes, and I don't want people to think she's a danger."

He looks at me keenly. "Dogs do fine with one another. It's people that are ignorant, and need to be educated."

I nod, trying not to set the guy off worse. He shakes his head and walks away.

Another man, the owner of the dog my dogs was squabbling with, come sup to me.

"Sigmund Freud said something like 'Dogs love their friends and bite their enemies. Unlike people, incapable of pure love and always mixing love and hate in their object-relations.'"

That was pretty intellectual for the dog park. And the quote kind of breaks down at the end.

But it was true. The floor refinisher was keying me in to the nature of both dogs and men. Dogs will always do the emotionally logical thing. But then the man educated me in the most overbearing way possible. We should all be like him, telling strangers how ignorant they are, and how

much we hate them.

Teaching My Dog To Read

It has been a slow process,
her eyeing the page,
then licking the page,
then looking up at me.

It does not help that she cannot say the sounds,
not having the proper anatomy.
Still I'm patient we will get to that in time.

Because when you love someone,
and you know that they love you,
you want them to read your books.

Peace Among Dogs

I will let you eat the scraps from my plastic bowl.

You may sleep on the pillow next to the bed.

When we play I allow you to show me your teeth

Because I know there is no war between us.

Pet and Peasant

Each has no identity
except for the property
he lives on, hence the name.

When the land goes,
he know he goes, too.
It's always that way.

How many times
the master confessed to crimes
he could not help committing.

The old resident confides:
He had no choice,
there was never any quitting.

Outside Dog, 4 AM, St. Paul

No barking, no wagging, no rush
to the plastic fake-iron fence to greet us.
Just standing blinkless in the snow.
About ten years old, I'd say.
You can tell he's having a moment.
Christ did not die on the cross for him.
No guardian angel shadows his every move,
he is outside that and everything.
This is all there is, 17 degrees, a bus goes by,
the moon obscured by low-dragged cloud,
bowl iced over, tattered toys impaled in the ice.
He looks like he was having a thought,
but then it got away from him, the way
they all do in this dog's life we live.

The Man Who Would Not Trade His Dog

There was a man who would not trade his dog.

People would come up to him and,

because his dog was so excellent,

would offer a one-up swap with their wonderful dogs.

"He knows every trick in the manual,

plus seven seaman's knots," said one man,

displaying his shih-tsu,

who seemed eager to make the trade,

perhaps because it would be something

to tell his grandchildren about,

if people let him have grandchildren,

and if he were somehow able to keep track

of where they all wound up.

Other people offered two dogs, three dogs --

one threw in a 22-foot cabin cruiser

with Fish-Finder and GPS.

But the man was steadfast.

"Your offers are all very kind and flattering

and I can see your dogs are all excellent dogs,"

the man said, "but I think I'll stick with Jerome."

Selling My Dog to the Circus

I felt the relationship had gone as far as it could go, so I took my poodle dog to the circus to sell her.

While I haggled with the ringmaster, Lucy wandered through the stalls, sniffing the elephants and bears.

The horses snorted and paced to one side, unimpressed.

On the other, a circus poodle ambled by on its hind feet in a pink tutu and top hat, an insane grin pasted on its face.

I could tell Lucy was dubious about the whole enterprise.

When I was unable to convince the circus of her acrobatic abilities, we drove home in silence, her sitting high in the back seat.

"Why did you put me through that?" she asked. "I have never been so embarrassed. You know I'm no acrobat."

I pleaded my case. "I thought a change would be good for

both of us. I know that you have a yen for the glamorous life."

She placed her head between the seat back and the window, watching the store lights go by.

"I hate my legs," she said.

Bloodhound

We are like those search dogs
in the prison movies,
you wave the smell of the escapee
in front of them, a dirty sock or underpants,
and off they go, focused on one thing only.

And if after hours and days of slopping
through the swamps he doesn't locate
the think he seeks,
it doesn't matter, the scent remains
in his head like a vision,
and he will keep splashing
until he finds the thing that got away
or his poor heart bursts.

Truth

Sometimes a thing needs to be utterly unimportant to have weight. This week i watched in horror as the new family puppy -- she has a name now, Lucy -- leaped off our front porch and into rush hour traffic on our sidestreet.

I kept thinking the same sentence that I used to tell my earlier dog, Beau, who has since passed on: "I have no use for a flattened dog."

So we hastened into the street and by the grace of God no cars were zipping by, cutting down Dayton Avenue to avoid the crowded traffic signal on Fairview.

The emergency blunted, and Lucy restored to the innards of the house, I thought of Beau, as I often do during Lucy's tutelage.

That willful, handsome creature.

One day when he was about 8 months old he too leaped down these same steps, heading west. At the corner he found a friend standing on her sidewalk, also 8 months old, a dumpy little boxer named Denise. Denise and Beau realized this was it, and together the two of them took off

down Dewey Avenue.

I will never forget the sight of the two of them, running with their distinctive runs -- Beau anarchic, ears and tail flailing in every direction and Denise humphing along on her stiff little pins.

I called after them, but you can't stop a runaway puppy with your voice. You have to track them down.

Our concern was not great. It was a sunny Saturday morning in the spring. The problem was less Beau being flattened than just losing him in the complexity of St. Paul's west side, and getting picked up by Animal Control.

I raised a posse inside the house and off the four family members went, biking, walking, and driving the avenues and alleys looking for the runaway dogs.

It took an hour but we found them. A lady five blocks away saw them, deduced they were neither wild nor rabid, and took them into her fenced-in yard, where they knelt and panted under an apple tree in full blossom. We thanked the lady and escorted our two escapees home. They seemed very pleased with what they had accomplished.

and that is what I want to suggest to you.

History shows that Beau was an assertive and sometimes overbearing animal when young, punctilious about the way others perceived him, but basically a decent dog who settled down over time, accepted his ultimate beta status, and learned to lick the master's hand.

He lived so long people forgot what a handful he was. When he died last summer, people were genuinely grieved by the loss of his now-noble self.

But that morning in May is what I want to hold onto. Beau and his girlfriend, escaped into the world, a world they did not understand one thing about, but gave themselves to wholly.

No leash could anchor them, no voice could fetch them back, there was only the unknown world to dash into, deeper and deeper, because this might be their one moment of belonging to themselves, for the entirety of their lives.

A few weeks ago I ran into an old friend, and we ducked into a tavern for a beer to talk. He had not known that Beau died the previous July. He expressed his condolences.

"You know," he said, perhaps freed by the beer to speak truth, "I never really cared for Beau."

I nodded, and lifted my glass to him in acknowledgment.

But I thought:

“Funny that I would throw you down a well to be with him one more afternoon.”

By the Mighty Oak Tree

I called to my young poodle Lucy, who was standing behind a thick oak tree in the park. I could only see her back legs and stomach, which seemed to be pulsing.

I called to her again. "Lucy!"

She did not come. I frowned. It is important to teach a dog to hear the master's voice and attend to it. Otherwise we will be leash-bound all our lives.

And here she was, ignoring me on the other side of the oak.

Dismayed, I strode to where she was, walked around the stout oak to see her, picking pink chunks of vomit from the ridged oak bark with her teeth, and gulping it down.

I pictured a drunk leaning against the old tree in the dark and losing a festive evening's ham sandwich.

"Goddamn it, Lucy!" I cried. And I did not say the following but I thought it:

"This is not what you are called to, licking vomit off a tree trunk. You were called to be a beacon to other dogs, a bright light directing them to grace and gladness."

But Lucy was not hearing me. She trotted away from the offered leash, and followed me across the park from a discreet distance, pausing periodically at the base of other oaks.

You could tell that, being young, she was hoping that ham salad with pickles grew from the ridges of every mighty tree.

You Could Tell He Was a Good Dog

Utility truck in the middle of St. Clair,
yellow lights blinking.

Stealing around, I see the dead dog
lying in the street, a basset perhaps,
an older fellow, white and black and brown,
and those infinite ears
folded against the blacktop.

Further down, an older woman, perhaps 75,
is stopped in her blue Ford Focus,
staring over her steering wheel with open mouth.

In the rear view I see two men in safety vests
lift the animal by his hands and feet
and set him on the tailgate,
and I think how I would not want
to have their job.

You Taught Me How to Die

The dog was in a coma when we arrived at the hospital.
I lifted him, limp, from the carseat and placed him
on the cart.

They took him inside to examine him,
then wheeled him back out to me, ready for the injection.
My son and I knelt around him for a few minutes,
thanking him with words and touches
for being a good dog, and for being our dog
his entire life.

And then, just before it was time, he opened his eyes,
which were so blind now, and so tired from his ordeal.
Then he licked the knuckles on our hands,
so solemnly, then drifted back to sleep.

When I die I hope I am not in such pain
that I can't look eyes on you, and thank you,
the way he did, grateful in the last hour
for the life that was given to him,
and the travels he took, and the joy he had.

Forget everything else, my dear ones.
Forget what a fool I sometimes was,
how selfish I could be at times,
how unsatisfactory some moments with me were.

But know that I loved you every day of my life,
the life that we shared together,
the travels we took and the joy we had,
the children we made and held in our hearts,
and know it was you who gave all this to me.

It was you, and don't think
I don't know this.

Hey

I feel bad when my dog,
well rested, well bedded and fed,
takes after animals that live in the cold,
Those creatures that are hungry, exhausted and frozen.
With what despair must they greet the dog's approach!

But then I think, Hey.
Those creatures had their chance.
When the floods came, long ago,
The wild animals returned to nature.
Had they remained they would all be domesticated now.
We'd have guard-dog lions and shepherd eagles
And sharks and pythons living on farms and canals,
Enjoying nice treats and rubber toys
And sleeping in comfy beds.

But only the opportunists remained on the boat,
some dogs, some cats and a handful of rats.

Everything else said, we'll try the odds
Living independently.

They made their choice so don't try to hang
all the unfair battles since then,
the moans in the darkness,
the blood smacking in the snow,
on me.

Selling My Dog to the Circus

I felt the relationship had gone as far as it could go, so I took my poodle dog to the circus to sell her.

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both of us. I know that you have a yen for the glamorous life."

She placed her head between the seat back and the window, watching the store lights go by.

"I hate my legs," she said.

Two Distinguished Poets at the Dog Park

Two associate professors from rival community colleges
are walking their dogs.

Daemon wears the shepherd's cap from the back pages of
The New Yorker, \$79.95 plus shipping.

Albion is topped by a Syrian burnoose from the Fall
Global Conflagration catalog.

Their dogs walk ahead of them, snuffling the bushes.

"I was flipping through the late poems of Lermontov last
night," Albion is saying. "I feel they have been
underestimated."

One of the two dogs, an Italian bulldog, is squashing a
tennis jaw in his mandibles.

"Cannes," the poet calls out in dismay, "don't you
remember what the last tennis ball did? Oh my lord, \$700
to cut it out of you before it blocked your intestine and

killed you. Give me the ball, Cannes."

The poet makes gimme gesticulations with his fingers.
The dog looks briefly in the master's direction but
continues to mash the ball.

"Cannes, I must insist you surrender the ball. Very well,
we'll do this the hard way." The poet slips his fingers in
the dog's mouth and wraps them around the slimy ball.
The dog refuses to surrender it.

"Cannes, this is your last chance. Release the ball!"

The dog blinks languidly but maintains its fearsome grip
on the toy.

"God damn it, Cannes, do you want me to get the shock
collar out? Is that what you want?"

Bypassers are starting to slow as they witnessed the battle
of minds underway by the pond.

“Here, let me try,” says Albion as he approaches the two, kneeling sympathetically in front of the dog and taking his head in his two hands.

“I know how it is for you, Cannes. The ball releases a lot of tension, doesn’t it. Tension that builds up in a dog and that seeks resolution. You know, old friend, this ball seems like your friend right now, but after they slit you down the middle to remove it, it won’t seem like your friend, will it?”

The dog pants gently, but will not surrender his prize.

Albion turns to Daemon, solemnly. “I’ve done all I can.” He looks toward his own dog, Sasha, a Bouvier des Flandres, chasing butterflies and bounding about like a spring lamb.

“Oh look at her,” he exclaims. “She’s like an angel from another realm!”

Albion’s smile disappears as he watches Sasha initiate a series of dives into something on the meadow floor. He

looks at Daemon and they say, simultaneously: “Rotted fish!”

Sasha is like a professional wrestler, dropping violently again and again into the sepulchral ordure, absorbing its foetid excesses into her forehead and shoulders. Already the filth was stiffening her coat, causing it to coruscate in the afternoon sunlight.

“Sasha, do you have any idea how repulsive that is! I forbid it! Sasha! Sasha!”

The last loud call echoes across the glade, bounced against the walls of the city ravine, causing whole flocks of birds to exit their roosts in the fir trees, tout ensemble.

At the parking lot, Cannes disgorges his tennis ball, licks it once, and vaults into the back seat of the Prius.

Albion kneels with Sasha at the water fountain, rubbing the filth from her coat with his Drakes London field bandanna.

They drive back into the city with the sun just setting, painting vermilion the rocks and rills alongside the highway.

“I have been enjoying the recent issues of *Magisterium*,” Albion says. “They are achieving something remarkable with language.”

“I have some submissions with them right now,” Daemon replies, freeing his ponytail from his collar. “I have a good feeling about it.”

And in the back seat, the windows down, the two dogs grin indiscriminately, eyeing the roadside for movement.

Lost Dogs

A poem Daniele and I wrote together, 1993

We went to walk dogs at the Humane Society.
Our first dog was Fred, a 4-year-old basset hound.
The first thing you noticed was his ears,
which were so big, like big drips tumbling out of a faucet.
Outside Fred was a kind of a pulling machine,
dragging us around the park,
the mud, the wet grass and puddles,
not caring what we thought and just barely aware of us,
pulling on his leash, sniffing every tree
and marking it, smelling every smell he could smell.
I can picture Fred in a home of his own,
making slow circles before lying down to nap,
and shuts his bloodshot eyes.

Our second dog was Ricki,
a Pekingese football of a dog,
bouncing this way up and down.
After Fred Ricki hardly seemed to pull at all,
and he was so happy trotting through the rain,

feet moving invisibly under his shaggy coat,
water spraying off him when he sneezed.
He was like a robot dog, a toy,
with a face that looked flattened by a rolling pin.
Ricki belonged to a grandma, who died,
and now he was trying to start all over again.
I could imagine Ricki in a home of his own
skittering up and down a staircase,
so excited because his master was coming home from
school,
a little girl of six.

Our last dog of the day was Rusty,
a mix of Irish setter and Lab.
His coat was short, the color of rust,
and his legs seemed longer than they needed to be,
wonderful for walking or running
but awkward in getting turned around.
Rusty was the most beautiful of the three.
His face seemed to shine with a sad gratitude.
In his cage he seemed so depressed,
but out in the woods he came alive.

I could easily see Rusty as a happy dog
dashing back and forth in some backyard somewhere,
and none of this sadness ever happened.

All three dogs were violently excited
when we opened their cages to take them out.
But all three were calm and peaceful
when it was time to go back in.
If I had a wish I would wish that each of the three
could have a home, and someone to depend on,
a friend, and long walks every day of the week.

February 1993

The Horror of Hidden Falls

My mom, before she left for a lengthy trip to Kentucky, paid off her car lease and gave me the keys. It was a pretty red Taurus with honey-colored upholstery. We were grateful for the gift, but unsure of her one qualification:

“Don't let the dog in the car. I'm coming back in the winter, and I want it to be in good shape.”

We agreed, but we knew we would likely violate the order. Because, how do we get our big poodle Beauregard to the park, which he likes, without driving him there?

So I violate the request, and after a month, no great damage was done to the car seats. I'm down at Hidden Falls with Beau. He is looking up at me sheepishly, my signal that he needs to take a dump. I take out my plastic bag, and wait for him.

The pedigreed champion squats in a primitive shape – his ears lower even further, emphasizing the humiliating nature of the task. But there's a disgusting hitch in the action, as Beau can't quite shake free of the thing he's getting rid of.

I must explain the problem with poodles. Unlike other dogs, their coats never stop growing. That's why they need grooming. But poodle hair grows everywhere, including the hairy hindquarters, right up to the abyss. What is happening has happened to me before, usually about two months after a grooming. It is the day the hair back there has grown to just the right length to obstruct the free flow of poop.

Still hunched over like a hissing black cat, Beau looks back at his butt, at the suspended poop, and then back again at me, imploringly. Then he steps in a half-circle and stumbles into a patch of burdock.

"Oh, Beau, you stupid dog!" But it wasn't his fault. It's just the way his butt worked.

I am sorry to say that things got worse.

Usually I have something like a paper towel or plastic bag with which to perform the poop-dislodging procedure. I have used a decaying newspaper found in the woods, an empty McDonalds coffee cup, even a set of three check deposit slips with my name and address in the upper left-hand corner, fanned out to maximize their surface.

I used a handful of fresh-fallen snow once. Beau crossed his eyes over that one.

But today, all I have is the plastic bag. I use it for a few seconds, then for some reason I don't want to keep using it, and the problem is still not solved, and all I have left is two twenties, which I don't feel like breaking.

Exasperated, I uproot a fistful of grass, and use that to improve matters. It is a mess, but at least we succeed in getting the main poop portions out of the dog and into the world at large.

So we're limping back to the car, him on the leash, his backside still badly blotched.

But then I remember: my mother's new car. I see it ahead of me, gleaming brick red in the first rays of October sun, like in a commercial. What a beauty!

I may not know everything about this cockamamie thing we call life, but I knew this: My mom won't like if I smear dog shit all over her upholstery.

So I open the trunk, take out a blanket I was saving for deep-winter survival, tuck it around the back seat. There isn't enough to cover the backrest part, just the seat

cushion. So I leverage the dog, very slowly, onto the blanket and sit him down.

"Now you lie down!" I tell him sharply. He complies with the request. I start the car and head up the 150-foot high hill leading out of Hidden Falls and back up the river road.

The shift in horizon causes Beau to stand up, with his butt touching the honey-colored backrest. I glance at the upholstery, at his butt, at him.

"Lie down!" I command in the rear view mirror.

He stares at me. "Beau, you lie down right now!"

More stares.

"Goddammit Beau, you get your ass on that blanket and lie down right now!"

He is paralyzed with uncertainty. Oh, we have only practiced the "lie down" command all of 10,000 times. But now he's frozen in the high beams of my fury, and he can't recall what it means. "Lie ... down ...?" Is that the one involving chicken? Where's the chicken?

"Lie down!"

Nothing.

I stop the car, put it in park, open the front door, get out of the car, open the back door, grab the dog by his neck and hindquarters and force him to his knees (and elbows) on the car seat.

"Now you LIE DOWN."

He lies down. And he stays that way, like a sphinx in disgrace, all the way home. Whereupon I lead him inside, take him down in the basement, fill the laundry tub with warm water and soap and load the curly blue animal in, and spray, and sponge, and scrape, and brush, and then finally, both of us exhausted, I let him out.

He dashes up the stairs, shaking the water from his legs and butt, and makes a beeline for the studio couch. I let him go, and lean against the basement wall and sigh.

Dog Prayer

In the morning and the night

You are my life's delight

Till I fail and lose my sight

I know it will be all right

I just want to be with you

I just want to be with you

I just want to be with you

I just want to be with you

Dog on the Lawn

Beau staggered out of the house this morning and stood on the lawn, huffing and puffing.

He is in heart failure, I guess. Rachel used her stethoscope on him -- 125 beats per minute, about 30 more than normal.

One of the curious things about dogs is that they make the same face when they are in trouble as when they are really happy. Panting heavily, tongue out, teeth peeled bare and grinning.

Great joy and heat stroke look about the same.

I coaxed him to step toward me but he couldn't. His legs wobbled beneath him, His chest heaved.

After half an hour I lifted him up, like a lamb, and carried him in and laid him down.

I just sat with him for a while, running my fingers through

his coat, patting him on the hollow spots around his ribs.

I was snuffling, but it wasn't too bad. I was reminded of the first day we brought him home, 15 years ago, and we did the same thing, he and I -- lay our heads together on a beanbag chair, the one with the leopard skin spots, and closed our eyes and slept.

And when we awoke, we belonged to one another.

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 mini cassette 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. She died this year, at age 25. But on the tape her voice sounds so clear, so young and lovely. I had forgotten what she sounded like as a child. 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, with Daniele and me. 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 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.

(1997)

Dogshit

A POEM OF ACCEPTANCE

It was a new pair of brogans you had only had a week
and glorious it was
to stride down the corridor
leather heels snapping below you
crisply like a man who belonged

And then a moment, a simple misstep
and everything transforms.
You feel your foot sliding, you sense a slight change
in altitude, it can't be but it is,
you have stepped in the shit again.

And now you are this other thing.

If only the shit were only stinky
if only it were only slimy.
But the deed goes deeper down than that.
It has remarkable powers of adhesion.
Rinsing it off with a garden hose doesn't work,

because the cold water triggers its waxiness,
and it grips your lowers like the devil's paws.

You know this to be true,
that when you get shit on the bottoms of your shoes
it finds its way into every rubber caracol
like rain soaking into the thirsty earth,
and you blame the shoe but what can you do,
scraping it with a stick is like pushing cold cookie dough,
the mass may part to admit the shit
but you will never get it all off,
there is no spatula ductile enough
to round up every crumb and squeegee it away
the shit has nested, pulsing and warm
like a tumor taking up residence within.

And you could slap yourself because of course
this is why the Japanese take off their shoes,
they're smart and clean, and careful where they step,
the world is full of careful people who know how to walk
without slipping in some animal's shit
and tracking it into the sacred home.

And even though you have done everything,
washed it and sponged it and sprayed it,
done everything but lick it clean,
which, when you think about the qualities of the tongue,
is probably the way you ought to go,
and even though you have buried the rags
and implements, the washcloths and brushes,
the towels and kleenex
and tamped it all down with your sole clean heel,
it's no use, it's your life companion now,
it will have business ramifications for sure,
people will look you in the eyes and then
wrinkle their noses, your dead mother in heaven
sits up in her chaise and she
wrinkles her nose,
and the salty aroma bleeds into each pore,
and every cell membrane in you wrinkles its nose,
the dogshit has metastasized,
and gone to your brain
there is a steaming turd panting at the controls
and it is there for the duration

Now you and the shoe are no longer two,
you have fused into one awful entity,
the fellow traveler that wouldn't stop talking
that imagined it was blessing you with its presence,
and you look at it, dismayed but not
contesting the basic justice here,
that this was coming all the while,
the guy who couldn't be bothered
to watch where he was walking.

The soul dwells outside time

From *Dog As a Metaphor for the Soul*, 2007

clinically signifying
that its temporal lobe
is minuscule
a teardrop in a drum

which is why it is as excited
to see you returning from
the store
as from a dozen years
in jail

to the world this proves it
is an imbecile
and yes, the soul is an imbecile,
but

in the larger realm
it means love does
not parse out its grace

with a dropper

but by the mainspring

straining

inside the machine

that is always

shuddering

for your touch

The soul gets caught up

From *Dog As a Metaphor for the Soul*, 2007

The soul returns to you
entangled in bad ideas.
It has been rummaging in
the hedges again.

There are no shortcuts
for this deprogramming.
Each burr of thought
must be excised
individually.

You berate it with
the wisdom you have obtained.
This curiosity
is not your friend.

The mind does not know
what it knows.
But souls do not

compromise.

It is all or nothing
with the likes of them.

The scent of information
draws them on,
the foolish heart
has no recourse
except follow

Zeppo

At 6: 30 a.m. Daniele releases you
From her bedroom
And you traipse upstairs to me.
I am writing, but
You don't care.
You plead with your midget's grimace:
My canines are floating!

I stand from a now unfinishable poem
And descend two flights, and
swing open the back door,
You lift your leg against the barbecue
And are framed by the early light
And the first green blades of spring
And steam rises from your pee
Like a prayer released straightway to God.

The Dog of God

The dog of God has no free will.
He lives by the Master's convenience.
Left alone for long periods to fend for himself,
Nothing to drink, not a scrap in the bowl.
Parasites, ear mites, worms in the flesh.
The rapier teeth of a hundred invaders
have left their marks,
And the old whiskered maw is white with the years.
A cataract clouds the left brown eye,
The malformed right perpetually weeps.
His loping gait is long since gone, he limps
And hobbles from gate to gate.
But when the Master returns from business
The hound of heaven staggers down the path
to meet him,
Manged tail clapping with joy.

1979

Fable: The Poodle Who Wished to be a German Shepherd

There was a Standard Poodle who wished to be a German Shepherd.

Everyone admires that I am chic, he said, but no one respects my ferocity.

So the Poodle fashioned styrofoam inserts and placed them inside his floppy ears, causing them to stand up straight.

Then the Poodle walked through the neighborhood with his ears standing up and his eyes almost closed with satisfaction.

But an American Bulldog, with a spiked collar, taking offense at the strange new dog, tackled him and bit him on the haunch. The Poodle, having a soft palate, could mount no defense, and slumped away to lick his wounds.

Oh, said the Poodle, if only I had appreciated my own best qualities, instead of trying to be something I am not!

Prospect Park

The couple on the bench are out of sorts.

You can see in their faces they are on the brink with one another.

Uninvited my old dog saunters up to them,
assuming he will be welcome,
a soft grin on his dazed features.

The couple reach out to him, lay hands
on his scruzzled skull.

Sometimes They Catch Them

It was the spring of 1971.

I was bicycling with my dog across campus.

She was a good girl,

but when she saw little animals

she went crazy.

I remember that the sun was sparkling

through the great oak trees

like broken glass

on the new-mown grass

on the mall.

The bell rang

to end the third period,

and the west doors

of the Humanities Building

opened wide,

and students pouring out

of their Thoreau classes

on peace and nonviolence

clutched their books
to their bosoms
and beheld the sight

of my hound,
standing square
on the endless lawn
pulling the head off
of a bushy-tailed squirrel.

'Your Dog Is Beautiful'

Sometimes at the dog park, I say to an owner, preferably of an everyday sort of dog, “Your dog is beautiful.”

And the owner will look to make sure I am talking about his dog and not someone else's.

And in that moment he will see his dog the way someone else might see him, and sure enough, the dog is beautiful – if not in bearing or contour, then in the joyful way the dog is bounding across the yard.

It may have been a while since anyone said, “Your dog is beautiful,” and this was a valuable reminder of what he has – a special dog, a cut above. That dog that loves you so much is worthy of loving you – because he's beautiful.

It is also a recognition that not everything is always great, having a dog. Every dog has some monumental flaw, designed to inflict embarrassment or disappointment on the owner, over and over again.

But this – “Your dog is beautiful.” It's like a button that resets the relationship.

The owner looks at the dog and is reassured that all this tension is worth it. That he was wise to adopt this dog, and that he has been blessed for his wisdom in doing so.

Sometimes it is the dog that needs praise. People are busy and it's not always possible to give the dog the time and the open space to be happy. The owner feels sheepish about this, and subtly blames the dog for having these needs to sniff and chase. It's sad, but it's what we do.

That is a discouraged dog, and I will kneel before him, on both knees, and massage his neck and throat – never patting down on the head, which dogs find irritating. Of course they cannot understand your words, but they get a hint from words like “good” and “dog.”

You massage them for a moment, maybe removing some gook from an eye, because the dog knows you are OK and will grant you this access. A thumb gently rubbing inside

the ear is usually welcome. Scratch them just above the tail -- everyone likes that, even you.

The dog's life is neurotic, standby equipment for a creature not designed to stand by, one who craves joy in the moment, not down the road. Every time you walk out the door is crushing to him.

And you say, "You are such a good dog, such a good dog."

And the dog looks at you with deep understanding, as if to say, "You know, I'm trying! It's not easy! Not at all! But I love them so!"

And you stand and look to the owner, who has been very flattered by all this attention, and you ask, very simply:

"Good dog?"

And the owner, joyful himself to be seen, and to have his love acknowledged, after so many dull days of walks and feedings and picking up poop, always against the

clock, always with the feeling that maybe it was a mistake, taking this animal into one's house, looks up at you and says:

“Yes. Very. Oh, yes!”

Alienation of Affection

Daniele paper-trained the puppy in her room.
She who was so squeamish
put up with his poop and his pee.

She guided him through it,
he was quick to learn
and proud to do it right.

One night she came to me crying.
Oh daddy, she said,
I love him so much.

* * *

As the dog grew he began sleeping in my room.
I worked at home, I drove the car,
I was the obvious alpha so he switched allegiances.

* * *

Now she is gone, and he is gone

and I stumble on without them.
Last night I dreamed they were together
in her room again, the one
with the burn mark on the floor,
him at her feet, him panting with love,
her sure of the things that were hers.

Polar Vortex

Outside the wind feels
like a cheese grater against my cheeks.
I am so hunched from the cold
my spine begins to hurt
but look at Lucy in the snow,
rising time and again
like a sea monster raging
through the drifts

The Bag from Cub Foods

My dog is curious but cautious,
she wants to know why the plastic bag
is drifting across the grass,
like a creature of legless spirit,
but not enough to pounce on it.

She knows this thing is out of the ordinary,
and could turn on her with fierce
unconscionable magic, and nothing either
in her history or the history of her kind
has prepared her for the battle
about to begin.

Where does a dog come off being cocky
in a world of plumbing and appliances,
where betrayal is never more
than a sudden yelp away?

Bunny

Before dawn, walking by the railroad tracks in the dark,
Lucy and I come upon a young bunny,
perhaps 15 feet ahead of us.

The dog freezes, as that is her hunting style,
to wait until the other creature moves,
then give chase.

Seconds pass, no one moves.

The bunny knows we are standing there in the dark,
and it is weighing its alternatives.

Two entire minutes pass, the three of us paralyzed.

Suddenly the bunny breaks --

not away from us, as all logic dictates it should go,
but directly toward the two of us,

like a bowling ball headed for the 5-10 split.

Lucy, who had been psyching herself up that long wait
for a moment of glory following

a thousand fruitless, pointless chases,

freaks out and dives between my booted feet

for safety, for protection from

this quick-thinking, unpredictable thing,

which had long since veered away from us,

skedaddling like a furry spirit
through the chinks of the chain link fence.

Lucy Poem

Failing again to make the New York Times Bestsellers list,

I walk my dog Lucy in the park.

She is the kind of dog who never strays from me.

And when I speak to her

I tell her what a good dog she is,

and how glad I am that she stays off the streets.

When I lay my hands on her,

rubbing her soft ears and scratching her shaggy neck,

and stroke her rounded, nearly hairless tummy,

she lets me know I am the greatest

poet who ever lived.

Warning: This Dog Poem Ends Badly

Dogs, when they run, keep their mouths open
because that is how they cool themselves.

They don't sweat like we do,
and that is why the tongue hangs out lopsidedly as well --
heat is channeled from the body to the tongue,
which cools in the open air.

Breathing through the mouth frees up the nose
to do what it must do, serve as supercomputer
for the dog's brain. It is said a dog's nose is 50,000 times
more acute in its subtleties than ours,
and yet they go right up to a turd and touch it
with their damp black raspberries.

It is the rough equivalent of chugging a gallon of LSD.
The nose has even been used to detect damage done by
diabetes

and other illnesses that change the body's pH.

A dog's nose has been compared to an MRI for its ability
to identify soft-tissue injuries deep
in the body, but that should be no surprise because
there is more than one way to scan a cat.

Picnic Island

This was the scene of some terrible battle, I tell myself.

A deer was cornered by wolves here
in the shadow of the Mendota Bridge
and the wolves ripped its body to bits.

Our dogs get in on the act, too, throwing themselves
into the bones and skin and remaining goo,
excited about stealing the smell.

What drama was performed, here where the two rivers
meet.

A year later, I see it differently.

The spot where the deer died, and it is just a spot now,
a flattened place in the grass,
is just twenty feet from the column of the great arch
bridge,
one hundred feet above.

Wolves didn't kill that creature.

She died where she landed, from a fall for the ages.

I picture her browsing up by the highway, and making a
wrong turn

onto the concrete span.

Confused, she continues, until the high beams of a semi
light her up,

and she does what deer have successfully done
for millions of years, leaped over the steel railing to safety,
and danced away into sky.

The Dogs

On their sides in the warm grass after running,
tongues swollen, ribs heaving,
eyes focused not on anything around them
but on the job of having run,
the joy of a workout,
there is no death, there never was.
Everything is perfect.

Forgetting For A Moment

The arthritic dog,
frosted muzzle and chalk in the joints
shudders at the RV steps.

Then he spies a gopher by the firepit
and he's off.

Why the Dog Ate the Dictionary

Maybe she wanted to hurt me
for leaving her alone.

It was her only chance to talk back to words.

Or maybe the book just smelled like my hand.

Hearting the Ape

An ape that goes to work all day
And comes home tired, but ready to play.
An ape that walks erect on two feet
But takes great care not to step on me
An ape that loves me and teaches me words,
And when I am sleeping, does not disturb.
How odd that dogs should live with apes,
are at the door when he comes home late.
Having a thumb is a special thing,
no one gives full body rubs like a simian.
Strange other species, so different from mine,
Thank you for being my valentine.

Dog's Prayer

In the morning and in the night
You are my life's delight

Till I fail and lose my sight
Till I am covered over with white,

Till I can no longer fight,
And I can't lift my head to bite

I know it will be all right
If I can be with you, master
If I can be with you,

Dog Halfway on Bed

She knows she's not allowed on
and she would not cross
that line of prohibition
but that doesn't mean
she won't cheat.

Look at her, standing on her back legs
with her body draped over the comforter
arms stretched out straight like a sphinx
so that her body is at a perfect right angle,
uncomfortable-looking and yet
you can hardly hear her snore.

Little Dog of Maunabo

You are no cutie, no bigger than a Jack Russell,
but what are you exactly?

You have been bred down from too many street dogs.

A dam with bright black spots has lost ground
to a sire ambiguously gray.

Your face has been tattered by too many scraps.

One ear flips up, one down.

Your balls are in evidence,
two garbage cans clanging between your knobby legs.

Why do I get to eat, little fellow,
while you lick your chops emphatically,
communicating everything there is about you,
“I am a hungry little dog.”

Why do I get to eat and eat,
I eat so much it hurts my health,
and each day for you is a battle and a quest.
If I feed you you will come to my hosts' door every day
expecting more, and I know these people,
they have found a way to live without torment

and they have a dog of their own
who would probably kill you, and I don't blame him,
it's the world we live in.

Little dog I would like to take you to a landfill nearby
where you can lick the yogurt containers dry
and swallow the meat that has gone bad,
and grow strong and fat on our waste, except
I know it is a crowded place.

Ollie & Zeppo

When the girl died, the dog had nowhere to go.

Several people offered to take him,

but more to do a kind thing than

because they wanted him.

Then Ollie mentioned that he would take little Zeppo,

the only dog he ever liked even a little.

For several weeks Ollie cared for the dog,

who seemed grateful but aloof, sleeping

on the other side of the room,

missing the mistress he loved so much.

One night Ollie woke up because

the dog had come over to him in the dark,

he was licking and licking Ollie's face and cheeks,

he was licking and licking as if he finally got it,

he lashed and lashed the man out of love.

The Grate on Carroll Avenue

Lucy pauses at the storm sewer grate
and she trembles.

Imagine having a nose
that can process so much information
and having the underworld snoring below.
even a little dog understands
we are living on Cthulhu
and we feel the heave and fall of his ribs
Cthulhu is asleep and nonthreatening now
but there is no mistaking the smell
of dogs and fish and cats and rats,
their meat still trapped between the giant teeth

The Blind Old Man & His Cancerous Dog

The man with cataracts looked up while he stroked the golden retriever's shoulder.

He had just got news that his companion of 12 years had cancer of the stomach and would have to be put down.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," I said. "How terrible to lose your best friend, that you rely on so much."

"Yeah," the blind man said, kneading the dog's ruff. "But I've been through a lot of dogs."

