Animal Acts
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I.

This is just about dogs. I want to warn you. The title is not a metaphor. When I say this is about dogs I mean: \textit{this is about dogs, period}. Some of my friends got excited when I said that I was writing about the dogs. They thought that was just the beginning of the first sentence, and I would take them on a journey. I would lead them through some woods, the dogs all around, but there was a path that led to a house I had been building and I would take them inside and leave the dogs outside. They would stick around: if you introduce a literary device at the top of the show it has to come back. The house would be full of dark wood and deep meaning, and it would have a nice view of the human condition.

But this is not about the human condition. A lot's been said about it. I have nothing original to add.

I was in such a house once, and it didn't go well. I was invited to the house of a rich art collector, as opposed to the homes of all the impoverished collectors . . . See, those kinds of snide remarks are a sign that I should perhaps have declined the invitation, but no, I went.

The house was so beautiful, you almost didn't know it was a house; it was so well situated in nature. This show isn't about nature either. But the house
was crouched behind the garden and popped out at the last minute. Glass. How do you get inside?

Someone opened the door I thought was a window and let me in. Drinks appeared and I drank them and we talked about art, and we talked about art and we talked about . . . art.

Then it was time to leave. I was shown to the door, but the hostess was not very specific. I just took a guess, and I made a bad guess and ran into a wall. I left the beautiful house and rushed back to my battered-up lesbian Toyota and proceeded to bleed all over it.

See, that’s another thing this show is about. It’s about my compulsion to insert the word “lesbian” into any sentence; it’s what I do. I have lesbian Tourette syndrome. I am like the compulsive stenciler who sees any vertical surface as an excuse to do some more stencils.

And I also come from another place and time. Let me set the scene for you. I come from the place and time where vaginas roamed the earth. Not like it is today in your culture when the vaginas stay underground until one day in February when they all pop out to see if they catch their own shadow.

Of course that is a figure of speech. Vaginas don’t have eyes. You know that. That’s why we have the clitoris, which is the eyes and ears of the vagina, and watches over the vagina like a shepherd over a flock.

I come from the place where what I just said makes sense. Feminism is on the radio; you can dance to it, everyone does. In this time, there is no lgbtqa-what-am-I-leaving-out community; we all lie down under the tattered pink canopy.

But this is not a utopia. There are deep divisions. There are the cat lesbians. There are the dog lesbians; there are the lesbians who go both ways and the asthmatics. If you don’t align yourself with one of these groups, you have false consciousness. Take your patriarchy and get out of here. You don’t need an actual dog or cat or even an inhaler, you just need to say where you stand. “I stand with the dogs!” Or: “I stand with the cats!” Or: “I go both ways!” And: “I can’t breathe!”

II.

The word “pet” is rickety and old. The door won’t close. The animal noses out and asks for a new word. Who is she now? Who are we to each other?

“Guardian” is the PC term. I hate it like I hate the word “partner.” They both reek of manila envelopes.

I’m the owner. I pull out the checkbook at the vet’s office, the groomer’s, the pet supply store, and the dog show. Guardian? It’s not like she’s going to
grow up and pay for these things herself when she hits eighteen. It’s not like she’s going to hit eighteen.

I look at the leash in my hand. It’s a leash, and it’s something else. What?

Esther and I decide we need a bigger couch, a sectional. A part of me dies. But we want to be able to get all nine animals on the couch with us. It’s a cushioned boat; we drop anchor in front of Rachel Maddow. I don’t really know what Rachel Maddow looks like because the fifty-pound poodle has decided he’s a lap dog.

Ready, the Norfolk terrier, is perched like a whiskered parrot on the back. We’re pirates together. Lilo, Ready’s sister, is wedged between my thigh and the armrest, giving me the look that says: “I’d like to crawl inside your hoody, burrow up so my head came out of same hole as yours.”

But the cat got there first. I’d like to walk around all the time like this, with a cat down the front of my shirt.

My nose is healing nicely, thank you.

There was an altercation in bed last week. About who got to sleep next to my face.

And my nose got in the way. Makeup makes it worse, so I tell the class
Charlie Manson jokes. I consider the Norfolk terrier breed standard. And decide it applies to owners as well: “Honourable scars from fair wear and tear shall not count against.”

Esther is also carpeted with poodles and a dollop of terrier. We are close but not touching. Presto, her standard poodle, is lying between us, touching us both. Occasionally Presto will growl at one of the dogs. Or even us, suggesting we all get off his couch. Esther won’t have it. “It’s not your choice, buddy.” She’s not angry, she’s Jack Webb. She collars him and puts him into one of the four dog crates in our living room.

Our name for this is “family time.”

But this is our name. Esther warns me about the pet people: you can’t trust them.

These are the people who have animals but always insist that their pet is “just a dog.” Or “just a cat.” We’re not pet people. We’re dog people. Gradually the people without animals have faded into the background.

Be careful when you talk about the dogs. Good advice. But I’m a care¬less person. I get introduced as the “crazy dog lady” at parties where I stand around like the Sarah Palin supporter at the antiwar rally.

I do it to myself. I can’t resist telling a beloved former student that I’m very excited about a “new canine exchange student” arriving. She explodes: “You can’t have more animals! Your life is out of control.” She just finished house-sitting, so she knows what she’s talking about.

It’s not like it’s a new thing. My life is a composition only in a John Cage sense of the word. Determined by chance and lacking music. But full of sound and silences that I decide to call “music.” Like we decide to call this “family time.” With or without the dogs we are no kind of family. Do we even want to be a family? We don’t know. The word makes us dizzy. For the moment, we are held together by the dark crescent of a poodle.

III.

Growing up. Michigan. The sixties into the seventies.

If you wanted to see a bunch of animals you had to get in a car. Sometimes you would even have to pay or get a note from home. Outside of town was a petting zoo that used to be a working farm. It was creepy. Like some Ye Olde Timey Shoppe where they made candles. What if the bus left without you?

Seeing deer was a special event. Something we saved for warm Saturday nights.

All of us quiet in the Buick. But not our usual Hughes quiet, no faint odor
of disappointment. It was a good Sunday—best quiet. The one intended for
church.

But my family spent their prayers on deer. When one of us whispered,
“There’s one,” we’d stop and look to see the others. Even if we couldn’t make
them out we knew the deer were never alone.

I asked my parents for a horse, and they gave me a piano. Then said I had
to share with my sister. Now what? I thought my family didn’t believe in mu-
sic. The next year I asked for a pony. Just a small one I could keep under the
bed. My parents sent us to Christian leadership camp. Which is nothing like
a pony. Even my poor sister had figured out not to ask for anything.

What did I know? I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know who we were.
We always had enough, we had more than enough. But we were just middle
class. A horse was too much. A horse was so much more than a piano.

A horse is so much more demanding than Jesus.

I heard rumors of bears. But no one I knew ever saw one. But I knew
people who knew someone who had a brother who saw a bear.

You can measure the history of last two hundred years by the growing
distance between us and other animals. You can measure it by noticing that
I have to stop and remember to say “other” animals. The animals that disap-
peared forever.

The animals that worked for us, replaced by machines. Of course this is a
small piece of history, barely enough to keep you warm at night. The history
of the industrial north.

If you look beyond that, you see our story is punctuated by theirs. Their
tracks, their bones, their nests, their scat. All of it a kind of creole. At once
familiar and foreign.

The point is our story is so knotted and tangled with theirs. If you want to
talk about history, you’re going to have to talk about animals.

Is it my imagination or is the distance shrinking?

Animals keep slipping into extinction, but others are coming back. When
I drive to work in the morning I evict the deer from my parking space. I
remember when Canadian geese were beautiful. And temporary. Now they
are everywhere, laughing at us. Black bears waddle through backyards like
they’re one big salad bar, all they can eat. Last year, rumors of a coyote sighted
at Central Park. Then confirmed sightings at Columbia University. How did
a coyote get to Manhattan? When last I checked, it was still an island. On
NPR someone says he took the GWB. Says it like with an air of boredom as
though it were obvious. I can see it, a coyote pretending to be shepherd mix.
Trotting just behind a jogger so that the drivers imagine a leash.
All my friends want to be farmers. I threaten Esther with goats. An article about raising chickens in the *New Yorker* gets everyone worked up. Chickens are cool.

Chickens are the new black.

**IV.**

So why a Norfolk terrier?

I wanted a piece of my childhood to take with me, something portable and nontoxic.

And a cairn terrier might not fit under the seat. I needed something just a little bit smaller; I turned to the smallest of the working terriers, the Norfolk terrier.

My mother decides we’re going to get a cairn terrier, announces it one day, already a fact, like it’s a fact that the “yellow race” have their sights set on Saginaw, Michigan. And are about to take us over.

I’m ten, and three other dogs have already bit the dust in our house. One got hit by a car. Two went to “farms” owned by close family friends we had never met.

My family loved animals. But love went to waste in our house. It was the milk we forgot to put away at night. In the morning we drank it. We pretended it was still good.

We were ashamed of our love for animals; our love was big, and they were so small.

And we were supposed to love each other. But we didn’t. So every once in a while we’d kick the cat.

What chance did a small dog have in this house?

*The Wizard of Oz* was on all the time in the background. I didn’t really like it.

It was too scary and too boring at the same time. But you couldn’t escape it. It got stuck in your head, this idea that once upon a time there was a girl who did something. We’re not talking about marrying a rich man. We’re talking changing the world. And she doesn’t do it by herself; she does it with the help of her cairn terrier, Toto.

We all know Toto. He isn’t a companion, a prop. She saves herself by saving Toto, and they take turns from then on, saving each other.

She learns you can survive a loveless childhood if you have great shoes.

And the other thing you know is that there is no Dorothy, there is only Judy Garland.

A dark complicated young woman strapped into the role of a girl. She
knows they really wanted Shirley Temple. She knows they might cut “Some-
where Over the Rainbow.”

But she makes it out of Kansas. She makes it into color, into a world of
people who recognize her: “Hey, that’s Judy Garland!” She gets to the Em-
erald City with a trio of drag queens and her little dog too. Then the movie
takes a turn. What’s scary is not the monkeys or the witches. What’s scary is
that Judy goes back. She makes it to the Emerald City, but they make her go
back to Kansas! Judy Garland had no business ever being in Kansas.

How do they get her to go back? They guilt trip her. “Oh, your aunt is
sick.” Your aunt?

You mean the woman who never loved you, that woman? You mean the
woman who collaborated with Miss Gulch in the attempted extermination
of Toto, that aunt? Fuck your aunt, Judy.

She doesn’t listen. She loses the shoes. She wakes up in black and white.
Insisting that she is really Judy Garland and that there is another world. But
no one believes her. In the last frames, Toto jumps up on the bed. She gets to
keep Toto. We get to keep our terrier.

She somehow manages to survive being loved by us.

V.

“THIS IS WHAT A FEMINIST LOOKS LIKE.”

Says my t-shirt. The label says: “Made in Mexico by Jerzees. 50% polyester
and 47% cotton.”

Do they think we won’t notice that doesn’t add up? Do they think we
won’t call them on it? Hey, Jerzees, I want my 3 percent!

This style is what I would call your basic t-shirt: it could fit anyone, com-
fortably. And no one stylishly. But anything could happen in this t-shirt. It’s
not tight, it doesn’t bind, you can really move in this t-shirt.

I think that’s the selling point, that’s what I would push. So many peo-
ple think that feminism is really constricting, it rides up, gets stuck in your
crack, but I would point out that this is “active wear”!

You could also sleep in this t-shirt. I like to sleep in t-shirts. I like a longer
cut.

I like something that covers the pubes. I don’t like the thought of getting
out of bed and seeing myself in a t-shirt that says this is what a feminist looks
like and then . . . pubic hair. That’s just me.

I got the t-shirt when I gave the keynote address at an annual feminist
conference. I was honored to be invited. One of the organizers gave it to me
and I put it on, over what I was wearing. Of course I did.
Then I gave the speech. And as I was talking, I noticed that I was the only one wearing the t-shirt. This was the conference t-shirt. What was up with that?

Let’s face it: it’s an ugly shirt. It’s unnecessarily ugly. This shirt is to graphic design what FEMA was to Katrina, making a bad situation worse. Let’s discuss the font for a moment. It’s a blocky, san-serif mess that suggests a cement factory. The lettering is dark navy blue on a dark heather grey. No contrast. It’s illegible. It’s like you’re giving a rousing speech in the middle of nowhere. It’s not heather, it’s fog. It’s not a call to arms, it’s a cry for help, you are lost in the fog: “Help, help, help! I’m a feminist, nist nist nist! And I’m all alone!”

So there’s a talk back. The first question I’m asked is by an organizer of the conference. She says that feminists have such a bad image, and younger women think that you have to be a lesbian to be a feminist and you have to be dowdy, and that is why she asked me, she hoped I would do something to disrupt that image, but I have only reinforced it.

This is the woman who gave me the t-shirt. And she is also a lesbian.

I’m remembering the Wow Café in the in the early eighties. How we called ourselves “a home for wayward girls.” How we joked that we were feminists who had been kicked out of other feminist organizations for having the wrong haircut. How it wasn’t a joke.

Listen, I don’t remember what I said, but I do remember what I wore. But that is what we say. That is all people listen to when women speak, what you wear. That’s my takeaway from the last two years of watching Michelle and Hillary and Sarah: she’s got arms, she’s got ankles, you can’t wear yellow, you can’t wear blue, those aren’t her clothes, that’s not her hair, look at that ass, look at those boobs, she’s too tall!

So I wore a nice outfit—I got a cut and color, I got all the hair ripped off my face and then I painted my face back on, I went to Weight Watchers and I hit my goal weight! You knew that I was a lesbian, that’s all I am, a goddamn lesbian with eyeliner. I stand up in front of a bunch of people and say: “I’m a lesbian!” That’s what I do, that’s it, that’s my shtick. I say a couple of other obvious things, but the kinds of things I can only say because I’m leaving the next day! I’m not yelling. I’m not! Well, maybe I am yelling. You paid me to yell at you, to get up here and say what you couldn’t: this is what a feminist looks like!

VI.

Esther and I aren’t the first lesbian couple to postpone reproduction till the eleventh hour. I’d been on Esther’s case about it for a while, but she wasn’t
the dog and pony show

buying it, always muttering something about breeders and how she wasn’t one. But then someone she really respected, Helen or Sassie or Cathi, I forget, said it would be irresponsible NOT to do it. And the doctor said, well, what are you waiting for? Like many of you, we knew we’d have to rely on technology.

In our case, we’d need technology because we wanted to breed a male dog. Our black standard poodle, Presto. The only place in the world where females are more valuable than males is in animal husbandry. Females sell for more than males; most males are neutered and, depending on the species, eaten. Before I wanted to breed Presto I had really wanted to cut his balls off. The last male poodle we’d had, Errol Flynn, had been neutered late and was a problem in the dog run. He had preferences, not about sex, but he had a look, he liked a zaftig, slow-moving yellow dog. I thought I had it under control until I overheard a woman warning others as I approached the run: “Here comes the clueless lesbian with the poodle rapist!”

The balls didn’t come off, because he was Esther’s; I took him for walks and took pictures of him in sunglasses. Esther thought the testosterone gave him more pizzazz in agility. Plus, she liked the look of them.

Esther, who proudly wears the label “butch,” and who has given up correcting people who call her “sir,” who winces when she remembers attempts at heterosexuality, says: “I just like to look at them.” I, on the other hand, the femme, with a checkered lesbian history, was . . . well, I guess I was the castrating bitch.

I did some research online and discovered that you can buy prosthetic testicles, called “nueticals.”

“You’ll never know the difference!”

Then I fell in love with Presto, he was a fast car Esther was learning to drive, and I fell in love with agility, and Presto was such a sensible dog. The good dad neither of us had, respected by the others, but never getting into schemes involving the cat.

An opportunity arose. The Capital City Cluster, held every Thanksgiving weekend at Michigan State University, in the livestock pavilion. They have conformation, aka a “beauty contest,” as well as agility and obedience. They also have clinics, which offer low-cost examinations. Eye exams, heart exams.

When it came to breeding, Esther and I considered ourselves green but didn’t realize we were completely clueless. We knew enough to not call the procedure the vet would perform a “hand job,” but rather, “collection.” We had a vague notion of what would transpire: there would be a female in heat, called a “teaser bitch,” and Presto would meet her long enough to become
aroused but not long enough to mate or, as we say, “cover the bitch.” The sperm would be frozen and stored in vials called straws.

We decided to put off the collection till the end of the day after Presto had finished his agility runs. All the dogs get treats of their favorite food after runs, called jackpots. This would be the ultimate jackpot. Plus, if he wanted to smoke and go to sleep, he could.

In retrospect I see we were like so many other lesbian parents of boys—we were working overtime to compensate, to prove we could nurture a healthy sense of his masculinity. Even though we know that dogs have sex, but not sexuality or gender.

Presto is not my son.

Nevertheless, I am very excited. So all day I’m telling him, this is your big day, buddy! Boy, are you really going to have fun! I’m taking my son to the whore with a heart of gold, and I’m really happy about it, we’ll pay through the nose, she won’t get anything out of it, but I want to buy everyone in Lansing, Michigan, a drink.

Time comes, there’s a line, like the cafeteria line at school. Bored looks on all, animal and human. The romance starts to evaporate, even the romance of the idealized whorehouse. Presto seems . . . not bored; anxious, excited? We bring him in, and a vet tech shoves the business end of a cocker spaniel in Presto’s face as the vet grabs his penis, remarking: “Not a very impressive erection.”

This is my son! I’m enraged. Too angry to speak. “Let’s see what you got! Impress me! Think it’s going to be easy because I’m a grizzled old dyke, you got another think coming! I was locked in an elevator with the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe for ten years, and it’s going to take a lot to impress me, Bud!”

Presto makes a sound, not a sound of lust or even a bark. He looks at Esther: get me out of here. The vet barks, “This dog has a job to do and you are not helping.”

We can’t look at each other in the hall. We’re idiots. We’re the feminists who took their son to a whorehouse and the pimp gets all the money. We’re the failed breeders. We’re called back into the room, where, once more, aspersions are cast on Presto’s virility. We are told that the sperm count is good, the sperm seem healthy, but there isn’t a lot of ejaculate.

Esther says if we came to the vet’s office, would Presto have more time with the bitch. “I think he wanted to get to know her, he felt rushed,” she says.

“This is the way it’s done, ladies.” The vet called us “ladies.”

A couple of weeks later we are called. The sperm died when they were
frozen. No, we won’t be getting our money back; no, we won’t get a free do-
over. It takes a while to face our dog friends. When we do, we are bombarded 
by questions: How did they die? Well, sure it makes a difference! You didn’t 
ask? Did they shrivel? Did the heads come off?
I didn’t know there were so many ways for sperm to die.
“What kind of extender did they use? “ Apparently sperm is like the 
vodka splashed into a glass and mixed with cranberry juice, or orange juice 
or tonic. Sperm by itself is not a party . . . Some sperm are allergic to certain 
extenders . . . What was used? There is so much I don’t know. Like the fact 
that sperm could have allergies.
There is more that we don’t know. We visit a dog breeder friend in the 
hospital, where she is recuperating from heart surgery. Her half of the room 
is crowded with dog people, all breeders. Full of advice. Carol, who’s just had 
surgery, says you have to train the dogs to be collected.
“How do we do that?”
“Bring them to our place, there’s always someone in heat there. And I am 
very good at it,” she says.
“Actually, I’m better,” pipes up her partner in dog crimes, Ann.
“You’re a little rough.”
“Some of them prefer that.”
Let me remind you, this is a semiprivate room. A thin polyester sheet 
divides it in half. There is another bed, another woman; I don’t know what’s 
happened to her, something worse than open-heart surgery. At which point 
Carol ups the ante. She describes a Christmas at her house, with dog friends 
and a few dogs. One of them sees Carol sitting in a chair with a cup of egg-
nog in her hand. Dog does the math, comes over to Carol and ejaculates 
into the cup.
Says Carol: “That’s a trained dog. That’s what you are shooting for!”

VII.

In his book The New Work of Dogs, Jon Katz says dogs work as much as they 
ever did. But it’s a new kind of work. The work of loving us. We are the sheep 
that drift toward the unmapped darkness at the edge. Dogs bring us back 
to the meadow. We take the road less traveled and find it hasn’t been well 
maintained. Potholes and ruts. And no Starbucks. We are not Robert Frost 
after all. Dogs lead us back to a place where we can sit for a moment. Catch 
our breath. They wait till we’re ready to go on.
We wake up early to seize the day. By eleven a.m., the day has soured. 
Everything is hard.
The phone rings. That is hard. Or it doesn’t ring and that’s also hard. Esther is not here and it’s hard. Or she’s next to me and that is also hard. We love each other but it’s work. And sometimes we just don’t feel like working.

I don’t just want to kill time, I want to take time out back and blow its goddamn head off. Throwing your life away seems like the best idea you’ve had. But your dog will bring it back, to your hand. Or try to turn the whole thing into a game.

On Wednesday, November 3, 2004, I went to the woods with the dogs. George W Bush had just been reelected. Assuming you think he was elected in the first place. Antigay initiatives had passed in several states. Including Michigan. And now gay people were being blamed for the election.

I walked by trees whose names I didn’t know. I walked by the river I had walked by hundreds of times before. Without knowing where the river started or where it emptied into Lake Huron. The night before a friend had called and said she knew I felt bad about everything. But I lived in neighborhood that was full of owls and bats.

Another friend sneered: “Is that what we are supposed to do? Escape into nature?”

I picked a park where the dogs must be leashed. Esther has a reoccurring dream where the dogs are lost. She is also lost but that’s not a problem. If she finds the dogs she won’t be lost anymore.

I wanted to see if the world was still a place I wanted to be. If I close my eyes, I can see the planes flying into the buildings. Now this. The story keeps taking turns for the worse. And a big part of me just wants it to end.

The river ran by me the way it always does. The peonies never woke up. The trees did not introduce themselves.

I stopped by the river and could not imagine standing up again. The dogs were waiting for me to tell them what happens next. But I could imagine that I was at a dog show, fighting the panic before I enter the ring, a friend’s advice in my ear: “Forget about the course, don’t run the course. Try to feel your feet.”

I don’t think I’ve ever felt my feet. But I could see them. I could see the place they touched the main road.

And drew no conclusions.

VIII.

At the agility trial, you get a map. It’s different every time. Same obstacles, different order. I had no idea what I was getting into when I started. It was just for fun. I stayed after it got hard.
It’s a world of women, a few men, but mostly it’s women who look like the women my mother was afraid of: the women who “let themselves go.” Or the kind of lesbians I didn’t want to be: the ones who sat in the woods in circles with guitars.

Most of the women are menopausal. Like me. They put their eggs in one basket, and the eggs are gone. And somebody swiped the basket when they weren’t looking.

It’s only seven but we have been up for hours, there is so much to do on the morning of the show. First you have to struggle into your body. If it were up to us, we wouldn’t have bodies, but it’s like the truck, it’s needed to haul shit around. Except we love trucks. Not everyone has one, I don’t have one, but everyone in this room wants one.

The bodies are tossed into clothes that say: “I just give up.” But they don’t give up.

These are the women who wanted horses. These are the women who were horses, when their friends were becoming girls.

We’re wearing t-shirts that say things like: “Dog needs younger handler.” Or: “My border collie is smarter than your honor student.” You will see a religious t-shirt occasionally. But I never see anything political. I wouldn’t wear my “this is what a feminist looks like” t-shirt in here.

But this is the first generation of women to earn a little money of their own, not a lot, but enough to do this. No one is wearing a skirt. I remember when they first let us wear pants. High school. I remember asking permission to wear pants.

They are hauling in stuff, setting up. Heavy stuff pulled from vans and trucks. Some of the women are bent with age, some of them can barely walk, none of them ask for help. They haul in: every variety of dog containment system, as well as bags full of I don’t know what all. But I know what you won’t find: No chocolate because chocolate is bad for dogs. No raisins because raisins are bad for dogs. No Advil or Tylenol because that can kill dogs.

The judge is talking to us, telling us to remember, “No matter what happens today, the reason we are here is to have fun!”

What unbelievable horseshit.

Who hauls themselves out of bed at four a.m. on a weekend to have fun? No one. These women are like most of the artists I know. Working hard at something that most other people will ignore. They love it but it’s work. There’s a pleasure in it, but not the primary colors suggested by the word “fun.”

“Fun” is what you say to your family, your friends.

Your job is what happens when you are not with your dog.
Your family, if you have one, recedes into the background. Herded into a small corner of your heart to make room for the big one: you and your dog.

IX.

Dogs live in the present tense. They have memories, good memories. You drive around a corner and the car slows down. They know it’s the lake. You haven’t been to the lake in two years. How do they know?

They also have a sense of the future. Or at least they know when it’s dinner time.

But mostly they live in the present. Their vocabulary is heavy on verbs, some nouns.

No modifiers. Unfortunately, they are overly fond of the exclamation mark: “Chicken! Snow! Squirrel! Squirrel! Squirrel!”

How can every squirrel be as thrilling as the last?

And then there’s: “You! You! You!”

I find it difficult to be in the moment. Oh sure, I have been there a few times.

But I don’t see what’s so great about it! I think the place I was last night was better.

I think if we kept going we could find a better place. Why settle for the moment?

Dogs live in the moment, and I watch them. I get the gist.

Raissa’s on the phone. She’s in Ann Arbor and I’m in New York. I tell her, “It’s so amazing to be in New York! You go out of the house, something always happens! Comic, tragic, absurd, but something always happens.”

Raissa laughs. “Holly, that’s just life. That happens everywhere.”

“In Ann Arbor?”

In Ann Arbor, I go to City Hall to get dog licenses. And I also have to get a variance to own dogs. That are not Labradors or golden retrievers. I fill out a questionnaire that asks: “Why didn’t you get a real dog?” “Don’t you know how many dogs there are at the shelter?” “What do you do in bed?”

That is a lie, a big fat lie. Which is a crucial part of any autobiographical monologue.

Why tell your life story if you can’t improve on it in some way? That’s just lazy, where’s the art in that? Or as Tim Miller says: “Everything I’m going to tell you is true. And some of it even happened.”

And what I said about Ann Arbor is untrue, another lie. You can have any breed of dog you want. Ann Arbor is a tolerant place. They practice toler-
ance there without getting really good at it. They will tolerate you having a purebred dog. But not without making that “icky” face they make when they drive by a BP station. And you will practice tolerance, too. When you go to the party and the word gets out you have purebred dogs. And the jokes start in about “eugenics,” then about “mutants,” and “racism,” ending with the “holocaust.” You’ll laugh along. Otherwise you will have no friends, and you will be tempted to get even more poodles.

X.

My best friend, Raissa, is on the phone. Her voice jagged. Sister, her twelve-and-a-half-year-old malamute, has cancer. It’s a slow-growing, nonaggressive tumor. But if they don’t take it out, it will take her. That’s the word we use. “Take” her.

It could be removed and Sister could have another good year or two. Or even three, why not? Cody made it to fifteen. Or not. Something else could get her next month.

Twelve and a half is old for a big heavy-boned dog like a malamute.

Then there’s the money. Thirty-five hundred bucks for the surgery. George is laid off as of last Friday. Again. Raissa’s dog training doesn’t bring in much. She could put the money together somehow. Some on a card, some from the emergency fund. But what if something else goes wrong? When George was laid off the last time he fell and tore his rotator cuff. Her son comes home with Ds and slams the door. Music. She could put it together, but should she?

Some think the answer is clear, the grief misplaced.

But there’s no right answer to this question, just a bunch of hard choices.

Raissa, who grew up with four brothers, named this dog “Sister.” Sister led her into a new life in dogs. She cruises around Ann Arbor in the winter, a big sled strapped to the roof of her blue Ford truck, praying for snow. Driving alone for fifteen hours straight is nothing if it has to do with the dogs. Last month she went to northern Minnesota to race with other teams on the frozen Crow River. The bumper sticker on the back brags: “I survived Mushing Boot Camp.” Sister has won more championships than I can name and is the beginning of the line that runs through Raissa’s other four dogs. Raissa once spun Sister’s hair into yarn then knitted a sweater. It must weigh twenty pounds. She says it’s never cold enough in Ann Arbor to wear it.

I remember the moment I thought of Raissa as my best friend. It was another phone call. She was telling me how much she likes Brokeback Mountain. She said it’s her story, of a taboo love in a harsh landscape. The story
of her love affair with her lead dog Atka, Sister’s son. Atka is big and full of himself. He’s too much for a town with so many seminars and stained-glass windows. I think she told me she watched the movie and cried.

And when she said that a hope sprang up inside me: I wanted her always in my life.

Impossible, sentimental. To think that just because you love someone you will always have them in your life.

Don’t the dogs teach us this? Dogs bring death into the house. Every week they drop some half-eaten thing at your feet. So happy, proud: “Look what I got for you! Look! Why are you not looking! I saved you the best parts!”

They watch as you pick it up and throw it away.

XI.

Dogs are what happened when we stopped.

When we stayed in one place. A space opened up beside us. And dogs are what happened.

Before this we lived inside a poem. It wasn’t like the poems we know today. There were no images to follow that would lead you outside the poem. You were inside the poem or you were not.

The poem was a series of actions. We rhymed with all the other animals. We were there for the same reason the wolves were there. This is what we did. We did the work of wolves.

We stepped outside the poem; for a moment there was a hole where we used to be.

But the poem went on without us and all around us.

We sat down. We had no intention of moving. Like the place belonged to us. It’s too early to use the word “home.” But not too early to say the word “mine.”

For one night we were naked and meaningless under the stars. But we couldn’t live like that, could we?

We crawled inside another poem, which was more like a story. Prickly with points of view, thick with plots, resistant to any rhyme.

We could call it history if you’d like. The first line of history: “Everything we do makes a mess.”

Our first words shatter the night into bright heaps. Our first thoughts are sharp and quick. I know I belong in history, I know I am a predator. I see the bones around my bed.

All of these things are actions. The wolves that can see a squirrel change her mind a mile away see the stopping, the thinking, the breaking, and the knowing. The wolves close in.
Lucky for us the definition of wolf is the marriage of hunger to fear. But the hunger walks on four long and silver legs, one leg for each letter of the word “fear.”

So when a wolf trots out of the poem, comes toward us, instead of running away, she is, by definition, not a wolf, but a dog.

Forget what you heard, we did not make dogs out of wolves. Dogs made us.

A dog sees our stopped, naked lives, sees the mess we are making, and chooses us.

One day she shows up with something in her mouth. She lets us take it from her.

Which no wolf would ever do. She hangs around as we break open the world.

Mouth open, tongue out, and let’s call it a smile. Look what she’s brought us. The word “home.”

She begins to invent us.