My father, in middle age, falls in love with a dog. He who kicked dogs in anger when I was a child, who liked his comb always on the same shelf, who drank martinis to make his mind quiet.

He who worked and worked—his shirts wrapped in plastic, his heart ironed like a collar. He who—like so many men—loved his children but thought the money he made for them was more important than the rough tweed of his presence. The love of my father’s later years is a Golden Retriever—more red than yellow—a nervous dog who knows his work clothes from his casual ones, can read his creased face, who waits for him at the front door—her paws crossed like a child’s arms. She doesn’t berate him for being late, doesn’t need new shoes or college. There is no pressure to raise her right, which is why she chews the furniture, pees on rugs, barks at strangers who cross the lawn. She is his responsible soul broken free. She is the children he couldn’t come home to made young again.

She is like my mother but never angry, always devoted. He cooks for his dog—my father who raised us in restaurants—and takes her on business trips like a wife. Sometimes, sitting beside her in the hair-filled van he drives to make her more comfortable, my father’s dog turns her head to one side as if
thinking and, in this pose, more than one of us has mistaken her for a person. We would be jealous if she didn't make him so happy—he who never took more than one trip on his expensive sailboat, whose Mercedes was wrecked by a valet. My mother saw him behind the counter of a now-fallen fast food restaurant when she was nineteen. They kissed beside a river where fish no longer swim. My father who was always serious has fallen in love with a dog. What can I do but be happy for him?