Top of Form

Bottom of Form

**Ghost Dogs**

**BY**[**ANDRE DUBUS III**](https://www.thesunmagazine.org/contributors/andre-dubus-iii)

Our dog seems to know that he’s nearing the end. In the mornings or at night and often in the afternoons Rico does something he rarely did much of before: he takes on the stairs and hobbles his way up them and scratches at our closed bedroom door. My wife, Fontaine, will let him in, and he’ll follow her for a few steps, then sit on the rug. He’ll look up at her or at me. Then he’ll look off at nothing. And then he’ll lie down. More than anything, he seems to want company.

He whines a lot, mostly at the front door to go outside, but then he’ll barely leave the porch, barking into the night, and within a few minutes he’ll be scratching at the door to come back inside. He often seems confused and forgets when he’s eaten, even when he’s just eaten. His hearing is going. His eyesight, too. He is a small dog, a rat terrier mix, and he has a small face, as do I. My wife and grown kids say we look just like one another, especially now that I have a gray-and-white winter beard and Rico has a white snout. Sometimes when he follows me down the stairs, we both take our time, favoring our aching knees. He’ll be gone one day. Maybe soon. But the thing is, I’ve never allowed myself to fully love this dog. I wish I could. Why can’t I?

Iwas five, maybe six years old, and we lived in a rented farmhouse in the cornfields of Iowa. Though I did not know it at the time, my father had just left the Marine Corps to attend the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. His rank had been captain, and some of my earliest memories are of living on Marine bases: My father’s dress blues. His clean-shaven face and head. His bone-handled sword in its silver sheath. The cotton in his ears when he left for the rifle range. And my lovely mother, twenty-five at the time, crying in the doorway, holding my baby sister while on the floor my older sister and I were building a cabin out of Lincoln Logs, and my mother wiping at her eyes and saying, “They shot him. Oh, God, they *shot* him.”

I thought it was my father she was talking about, the man who shot guns every day, but it was the president, whoever that was.

Our first dog was big, and my father named him Gunny, short for gunnery sergeant. Looking through the torn curtains of the years, I see a German shepherd, though he could have been some kind of mix. What I remember clearly are his testicles and his tail, how both were always swinging, the dog in constant, loud motion, an overexcited bundle of muscle and fur and the daily joy of being alive. And I remember my father yelling at this dog. Trying to discipline it. To curb it. To calm it the fuck down.

One morning I was standing with my mother on the linoleum floor in the kitchen of our rented farmhouse. Out the windows on one side were the endless cornfields, though it was winter and there were only flattened brown stalks lying across frozen furrows. Out the other window was the pigpen and the pigs, who terrified me because one of them had bitten our landlord on the knee. He showed us his scar once, pulled his pant leg up to his shiny pink kneecap, a half-moon of stitching across it that looked to me like a baby’s head.

My mother’s voice was beseeching, and then my father was standing in the kitchen with us, his face reddened the way it got whenever he yelled, and he was yelling now, calling our dog words I did not yet know. My father’s mustache was thick and dark and he wore a coat and at his side was Gunny. A rope was tied around the dog’s neck, and his expression is one I’ve never forgotten. He looked both scared and also on confused alert, as if he was about to be called to do something only he could do.

My mother’s voice was in the air, but I recall no actual words, just sounds of pleading. Then my father and Gunny went outside, heading for the cornfields, Gunny’s tail wagging. My head felt hot and my eyes ached and there was one shot and then another and we never saw Gunny again.

Iknow how much people love dogs, and I know most who hear this story will hate my father, a man who went on to be loving and generous and kind in many ways to many people in the decades to follow. So I’ve kept it to myself until now. But it seems I may also have kept it *from* myself, buried it in some dark ditch of my psyche where other difficult things are buried.

When I was seven or eight, we lived in a house that had a pool and pastures and a herd of sheep and three dogs that the landlords left with us for a year while they were away. Two of the dogs were dark-brown German shepherds, the third sleek and black. Their names were Duke, Duchess, and Robin, and they would follow my brother and me out to the woods where we played, often sprinting with us across the fields. They would lie with us on the floor of our living room while we watched *Batman* or *The Green Hornet*. They would bark at the wind and rain pelting the windows. They felt like family to me. So why were we one day driving away from them and that old house and pastures, the dogs’ faces in the windows watching us go?

The next year we got a golden retriever our parents named Steagle. He was big and gentle, his fur long and, yes, golden. This was the late 1960s. We lived in a rented cabin in the woods of southern New Hampshire, where we had a wide deck in the shade of pine trees and a yard that sloped down to a lake. In the summer we swam in the lake, and in the winter we slid around on its snow-crusted ice. Through the woods on the other side of the house was a slow-moving river, its banks soft with marshy reeds. There were many moments of joy in this place: building lean-tos and tepees with my brother deep in the woods; fishing from our dock with poles made from tree limbs; running with Steagle through the pines or rolling with him on the rug of our small living room. This was also the room where the Vietnam War was on TV every night. Where dead boys got zipped into body bags under whirring helicopter blades. Where men named [King](https://www.thesunmagazine.org/contributors/martin-luther-king-jr) and Kennedy were shot in the head. Where there were riots in faraway streets. It was the room where my young mother and father argued louder nearly every night till one day our father drove away. And it was the room where my mother told me that a good friend of theirs, a poet who taught with my father at a college in Massachusetts, got something called cancer.

The poet’s kids — two girls and a boy — were our friends, and I heard from the boy that in the last months of his father’s life he had a hole in his side where his shit would flow into a plastic bag taped to his ribs. And somewhere in all of this Steagle got sick and had to have an operation my parents could not afford, but they went through with it anyway, and the doctor left an open hole in Steagle’s throat that was supposed to heal on its own. Steagle did not seem to know it was there, but I could not look at that dark hole in my dog’s throat, for it was somehow also the hole in my friends’ father’s side. It was all the dead boys on TV. It was the darkness where my mother lay crying alone in her bedroom every night. And it was my father’s absence from our small cabin in the woods.

I have written a memoir that covers some of these years, but I don’t think I ever mentioned Steagle in it. And soon he was gone, too. He went outside and never came back. And maybe it was then that I began to close my heart to these animals who had started to become frightening to me. No, not to them, but to my love for them. My love.

Afew years later my mother and sisters and brother and I were living in a rented house in a half-dead mill town on the Merrimack River. My mother was working in Boston for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, forcing slumlords to rid their apartments of lead paint, and every night she’d come home tired but with the flush of knowing that what she had done all day had some kind of value. Our dogs then were two sisters we’d named Sonny and Cher, part collie, part German shepherd.

This was the winter before the Watergate hearings, and I was thirteen. Our mother could not afford to spay our dogs, so when they went into heat, our strip of yard became crowded with sniffing, whining, barking males. And then Sonny and Cher were both pregnant, and soon enough they had nine puppies each: eighteen big-headed, tiny-eyed creatures I could not help but love instantly.

In the corner of the living room we set up nests of blankets where both mothers lay on their sides, nursing all those puppies and resting when they could. But one afternoon, not long after the puppies came, the snow turning to slush in our front yard, we let Sonny and Cher out to pee, and they never came back. Neither of them. Ever.

My brother and sisters and I must have looked for them. We must have walked up and down the streets calling their names, but I don’t remember doing so. What I remember is my burning belief that somebody had taken them, because how could these two mothers just leave their babies like that? All eighteen of them, their tiny eyes nearly sightless as they whimpered and whined and crawled over one another, searching for the big, warm bodies that were gone.

What happened next I shoveled into that dark ditch of my psyche, and then I covered it with heavy stones, and it wasn’t until more than twelve years had passed that I remembered what I’d made myself forget.

I was in my mid-twenties and living in a small apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan with my girlfriend, who happened to have grown up rich. She was athletic and lovely and smart and kind, and she had a $2 million trust fund in her name — something I could not stop holding against her. That, and her money-blinded vision of the world formed from private schools and ski slopes and sailboats and brand-new cars. I tried not to hold any of this against her, but I did. Once, we visited one of her parents’ five homes, where an aunt held a furry white dog in her lap all day, even through dinner, and afterward, when my girlfriend and I were alone, I called that dog a name I do not recall, only that I said it with venom because I hated how that little dog was being treated like a human being. I hated how my girlfriend’s aunt cooed over it and stroked it. I hated how much this woman *loved* her dog.

We were back at our place, both drunk, and my girlfriend was screaming at me, “How can you hate a *dog*? She’s just a sweet little *dog*!”

“Because . . .” I seemed to need more air than was in the room, and what came out of me next was as much a surprise to me as if I were turning the page of a novel I had never read. I was pulling stones off that ditch and showing my girlfriend what I had no memory whatsoever of ever putting there.

Hours after Sonny and Cher disappeared, the puppies’ whimpering a constant and cruel symphony, my mother called a veterinarian, and then she drove to his office and came home with puppy formula and two plastic baby bottles with rubber nipples. She did not mention how much any of this cost, but I knew it was more than she could afford. She was a woman forever having to decide whether the rent or the heating bill would be paid; if we would pay for our electricity or go to the grocery store; if she should put gas in her car or put a few dollars down on layaway for one of us to get a new pair of shoes. This bag of what we needed from the doctor’s office looked expensive to me, but she said nothing about money; she just got to work pouring formula into the bottles and heating them in a pot of water on the stove. She showed me how to squirt some on my wrist, told me it should feel warm, not hot. And then I and one of my sisters sat cross-legged on the floor to feed these hungry, motherless puppies one at a time while the others clamored blindly over our ankles and knees.

I was a small boy with small hands, but I could hold an entire puppy on its back in my palm, its legs curled close to its belly, its eyes closed as it sucked and sucked on that rubber nipple. If I had ever felt happier or more relieved in my life, I don’t know when. As soon as one puppy had its fill, we’d grab another, until finally the whimpering stopped and all eighteen puppies slept in a heap in the blankets curled around and on top of one another.

That first night, our missing dogs’ offspring safe and warm and asleep, I slept well and woke with only the desire to rush downstairs and feed them again.

But something was wrong.

When I got downstairs, all eighteen puppies were whimpering, only louder now, and my mother was on the phone in her work clothes, a concerned look on her face, a Pall Mall between her fingers. She was talking to that same animal doctor, and it was the first time I’d heard the word *distended*, which I took to mean swollen, bloated, because that’s what those puppies were. I got down on the floor with them, and their whimpering was more strained, and when I picked one of them up, a moan seeped from its minuscule throat, its belly a tight drum.

Then my mother was off the phone. She stood there staring down at me and all those suffering puppies. Her expression was one I knew: it was the one she’d worn just before telling us that she and our father were “separating”; the expression she’d worn when she’d told us of my friends’ father having cancer.

“They’re too young for that formula, honey. They can’t digest it.”

“So what do we *do*?” There was a stark stillness in the air, a horrible flattening of what I saw and heard and felt. My brother and two sisters must have been in the room, but in my memory I see only my mother and all of those puppies.

“There’s nothing we can do.”

Maybe it was my mother’s idea to rub their bellies to try to get them to poop. I don’t know, but I do know that she had to go to work and that my siblings and I did not go to school. For hours we tried holding the puppies and rubbing their bellies, but the only thing that came from them was a kind of keening, their tiny eyes squeezed shut, their paws curled inward.

The first ones died within days. If we buried them, I have no memory of it. What I do remember is staying home from school for more than a week and trying to save every last one of those puppies.

After three or four of them died so terribly slowly and in such obvious pain, I found the veterinarian’s phone number and called his office, and maybe because I was crying, his receptionist put me through. The doctor’s voice was low and kind. He told me that there was probably nothing to be done, but I could try taking a bobby pin or something very small and put vaseline on it and insert it just a bit into the puppies’ rectums to try to “loosen things up.”

Nearly fifty years later I can still feel the warmth and slight weight of each puppy in my palm. I can still feel my fingers tremble as I push the tip of my mother’s bobby pin into the open jar of vaseline and then just a bit into the puppy’s rectum, its curl of a tail quivering, its cry a blade slicing through the air.

But even though we were feeding them nothing, their bellies just got larger and harder, and if they opened their eyes, there was a look of desperate bewilderment, then more keening, and then, one at a time, so slowly, silence and stillness.

I stopped eating. I slept hardly at all. I would lie on those blankets with the puppies who were still with us, and they would squirm their way close to my chest and stomach, nudging their noses in search of a relief and comfort I could not deliver.

When the last one died, there was a sudden quiet. That’s what lingers: how horrifically quiet our house became.

What we did with all those small, still bodies, I cannot and will not summon. I do remember finally going back to school and feeling like a boy who had been very sick for a long time, a boy who would be forever weakened by it.

After this, more dogs came into our lives, and I’m sure that part of me must have taken some joy in them, but I remember seeing their presence in our succession of rented houses only as some kind of danger: Like poison under a kitchen sink. Like a can of gasoline near a campfire.

I have written about this time period in my memoir, but, again, I left out the dogs. Why? Because when my daily writing brought me back to those years, I rarely even saw them. Because during those years in the hard neighborhoods of that mill town, my older sister was raped by two men at knifepoint; my brother was sexually abused regularly by one of his female teachers and made many attempts to kill himself, beginning when he was thirteen; my younger sister closed herself off in her room, where she stayed for years. And I, forever scared of getting beaten up — which seemed to happen again and again, my mother overwhelmed and my father largely absent — became solely focused on trying to save myself by changing from a boy paralyzed by fear to a man who fought back. I was my mother and father’s oldest son, and more than anything I wanted to become the kind of man who could protect my mother and my sisters and my brother. The three dogs we owned then — Dirt, Dodo, and Oblio — clearly needed caring for, too, but I was done with that. I would save my love for people only. I would no longer waste it on dogs.

And then, on a warm spring afternoon when I was nineteen, backing too fast out of our driveway in my mother’s ancient Toyota, I ran over Dodo.

Dodo was the oldest dog I’d ever known. He’d been given to us by friends of my mother’s from California who had already owned him for seven years, and they’d gotten him from friends who had also owned him for seven years, most of which they’d spent sailing around the world after finding Dodo in an alleyway in Singapore. He was a strange-looking dog. He had short legs and long ears and white fur with dark- and light-brown spots. He had sad, almost black eyes, and because he was very old, even when we first got him, he spent most of his time sleeping.

Despite having closed an iron door inside me to dogs, I couldn’t help but kind of like Dodo. He needed little attention or care and seemed content simply to be a passive witness to whatever went on around him. He was like an old man, and maybe because I hadn’t grown up around my grandfathers or uncles — all of whom had lived and died in the Deep South, where my parents were from — Dodo’s doddering presence seemed to partially fill a hole I hadn’t known was there.

The day I ran him over must have been on a weekend, because my mother’s car was available. Maybe I needed to drive across the river to the campus where I took classes, or maybe I was rushing off to visit my girlfriend, who lived in that part of town. All I know is that I was in a hurry as I backed up over a bump so large that I lost my grip on the wheel, and I stomped on the brake and shifted into neutral and jumped out of the car to see Dodo squirm from between the tires and into the sunlight.

He looked vaguely confused, and all I wanted to do was apologize to him over and over. He turned and made his way haltingly up the steps, and I rushed to let him in, then knelt to feel his ribs and neck and legs. But all I found were the tumors we already knew he had, and those tumors, not my having run him over, were why I had to drive him to the vet’s office a week later to end what the doctor had called his “suffering.”

My younger sister, Nicole, loved our dogs more than any of us. It was she who fed them the most and who let them out to pee or walked them, even in the snow or rain. Maybe to spare her, or maybe because I had run him over, I volunteered to take our old dog on his last ride.

My girlfriend was with me. She was Iranian, and it was rare, given her Muslim culture, for her parents to allow her to be alone with me at all. But she was that day, and I could not enjoy being alone with her. In the backseat of my mother’s car lay Dodo. When I’d called him to come for a ride, he’d perked up and climbed in so easily that I immediately began to doubt we were doing the right thing. But we knew he had advanced cancer, and just because he did not cry out or whine did not mean that he wasn’t in pain. I told myself this, even though I wanted to turn around and take him back home.

At the vet’s office my girlfriend sat in a hard plastic chair in the waiting area while I carried Dodo into an examination room with medicine cabinets above a sink, gleaming floors, and a steel table on which I set Dodo, his eyes on me as if waiting for an explanation. But it was the doctor dressed in white who did the explaining, addressing me in that same low, kind voice used by the veterinarian from that other time, all while he pushed a needle into a small vial and instructed me to comfort Dodo, who had begun to breathe hard, his tongue hanging loose, his dark eyes on the wall and then up at me. It was clear that some ancient part of him knew what was coming, and I could hardly bear it. My body was trembling from my feet to my hands, and then the doctor pushed the needle into Dodo’s right front leg, and Dodo was looking up at my eyes and then at nothing, his head dropping and the room going quiet.

On the drive home I tried to be stoic. I wanted my girlfriend to see only a strong man when she looked at me, a fighter, a protector, but it was like trying not to breathe, and then I was crying so hard I couldn’t stop, and I almost had to pull over.

I kept seeing Dodo’s terrified face, his hyperventilating chest, his head dropping to his paws. And when he’d looked into my eyes, it was with the trust that I, his owner, knew what I was doing, that I must be caring for him somehow. But look at what I’d done with that trust — look at what I’d *done*. My crying got so bad my girlfriend reached over and squeezed my arm, but I felt miles away from her then, because my tears seemed to come from someplace far deeper than that afternoon; they seemed to go back years and years, and they were slowly opening that iron door on my love for dogs one last time before I closed and locked it for good, the combination lock spinning and spinning until it came to a stop.

Dogs became invisible to me. I knew they were in the world and often in the houses and yards of friends, but I did not see them or acknowledge them in any way, even when one was nudging my leg or sniffing my hand or barking at me. They held no more interest for me than a telephone pole. Dogs served some kind of function, I knew, but not for me.

Twenty years later I was a husband and a father, living in the woods with my wife and three children in a house that my brother had designed and that he and I and a small crew had built over three years. Our kids — Austin, Ariadne, and Elias — were fourteen, twelve, and ten at the time. Happy kids. Well-loved kids. It was Christmas, and Fontaine wanted them to have a dog.

I resisted at first, but I soon relented. Maybe from behind that iron door came the muffled echoes of Duke and Duchess and Robin barking at the rain, their warm bodies beside ours in the living room. Maybe behind that locked iron door Steagle was running beside me through the pine trees. Maybe I was there, walking Sonny and Cher, something I used to look forward to and did often.

“OK,” I said. “All right.”

Because we wanted a rescue dog, the process would take more time than we had before Christmas, so we bought a stuffed dog and wrapped it, and when our kids opened it, we told them that this fake animal represented the real live dog that was coming. There was so much surprised joy in their faces that my eyes filled, but then something I couldn’t name began to move coldly through my arms and legs, and I stood and hurried past my kids to start breakfast.

We seemed to forget about getting a dog after that — or, at least, I did. That stuffed dog and my children’s joyfully expectant faces on Christmas morning faded like some dream that had left me feeling unsteady the next day, somehow tilted sideways as if about to flip over into a ditch. A year and a half came and went, and during that time Fontaine bought the dance studio where she’d been teaching for nearly thirty years. When she wasn’t creating her own pieces with her modern-dance company, she was busy running the studio. Our kids’ days and nights were filled with school and sports and friends and homework, and I had my full-time writing and teaching and public-speaking duties, as well as a new book coming out.

Then, on a hot June afternoon, I came home from a book tour, and Fontaine picked me up at the airport. We hugged and kissed, and as she was accelerating into traffic, she glanced over at me in the passenger’s seat. “Um, there’s something I have to tell you,” she said.

“Yeah?”

She smiled, her dark eyes lit with mischief. “We got a dog.”

“What?”

And she told me how she and Ariadne had driven into Maine to pick up a rescue dog they’d found while I was away. At first I felt a cool disappointment, then fear, and then a sort of mind-clearing surrender: we had promised them a dog, after all. I guess we now had a dog.

What followed I do not want to write about. I do not want to write it because I do not like how it makes me look, not just to the reader but also to my younger self, the boy who used to love dogs. I yelled at Rico so many times over the years that I’m convinced my kids have seen a dark side of me they never would have otherwise. I resent Rico for this, and I want to apologize to him for this resentment. And I want to apologize to him for far more than that.

When our youngest son, Elias, was fourteen or fifteen, he said to me one day, “But, Dad, look at Rico. Can’t you see how *cute* he is?”

“Yes, I can,” I told him, because I could. In that moment Rico, with his small face and brown eyes, his lithe and perfectly proportioned body, was sitting on the living-room rug, his front paws crossed, looking up at us with a kind of sensitive attention, a warm and alert presence that most would find adorable. But I went on to explain to my child that, though I knew Rico was cute, I felt nothing when I saw him. “I’m dead inside.”

My son shook his head at this and went on with his day, but I was haunted by that exchange, because it was clear that he — and his older brother and sister — needed me to love this dog they loved so much.

I wasn’t being fully honest either. When I was in the same room with Rico, I often did feel something: I felt annoyed at his very presence, though I tried to feel the opposite. Except for a few times when he had shit on the floor or chewed the legs of furniture and I’d yelled at him and held his nose to what he’d done, he was a well-behaved dog who seemed to need my family as much as they seemed to need him. All five of us would watch movies together, snuggled on the sectional couch of our TV room, and Rico would snuggle right in there with us, often moving from lap to lap, even to mine. When I’d pet him, he’d bring his nose close to my face and sniff this man he seemed to want to please the most, this man he seemed to fear, too.

I hated this more than anything: that this dog made me feel like a bully, the kind of man I’d always hated more than any other. As I stroked his short fur and muscled back, I tried to send him messages of love and acceptance, but I felt like a liar, like one half of a couple whose love had died long ago. My wife and children glanced over at us and smiled, the hope in their faces cutting me in two.

Maybe because my affectionate pats felt so forced, Rico stopped jumping into my lap, and I stopped calling for him to do so. As one season faded into another, he and I fell into a sort of daily routine that made me feel the way a racist must feel living beside people of color: *You stay away from me, and I’ll stay away from you.* I mean this metaphor, for I do believe that my stance against dogs is a hateful one, a hatred born of fear.

And then one warm summer afternoon — and as I write this, my face heats with shame, though even now I believe I was just trying to stop Rico from what he was about to do, not hurt him — I kicked our dog. I wish I could erase that sentence, but it is true, so I can’t.

It was near sundown, and Fontaine and our three children and I were walking up the main street of our small town at the mouth of the Merrimack River. It’s a narrow street of clothing boutiques and fine restaurants, of pubs and a bookstore and a movie house that shows international and independent films. We could smell the ocean just two miles east, and the geraniums hanging from the lampposts, and Fontaine or one of our kids had Rico on a leash, and he was pulling ahead, sniffing, sniffing, sniffing.

The sidewalks were crowded with men and women and kids enjoying this early-summer evening as we were, though I remember being tired and wanting to get home. Then Rico spotted a man ahead of us who held in his hand a bag of leftovers from a restaurant or snacks of some kind, maybe even dog treats, I don’t remember. I only recall Rico running ahead toward whatever was in that bag, and my yelling, “Rico! *No!*” and my foot swinging into his small, bony rump, and Rico yelping, and my wife yelling my name, and the kids yelling, too, all of them looking at me as if they had never known me and never would.

My remorse was instant, and it was worsened by the man’s smiling at us with startled embarrassment for me. It was clear that my vision of Rico trying to take something that was not being offered to him was wrong. It seemed that the man had *wanted* to share with Rico what was in that bag.

The ride home was filled with my wife’s and kids’ justifiable anger at me. I grew up with a father who would not allow his kids to aim any anger at him. In fact, he would so consistently explode in the face of it that we four rarely approached him with criticism of any kind. So in the moments after I kicked our family dog in broad daylight on the busiest street of our town, I was grateful that my children felt comfortable yelling at me. But I also knew that what I’d done had pushed me halfway out of the safe and secure home Fontaine and I had worked hard to give them. I had somehow become the man pulling the family dog out to the frozen cornfields, a pistol in my pocket.

Why had I gotten so angry at Rico anyway? Because it is the hunger and the need of dogs that turns me away so fiercely: *Please don’t ask me for anything*, I want to tell our dog. *Please don’t* need.

That night or sometime the next day, when no one was around but me and Rico, I squatted and petted his head. He let me do this, which hurt almost as much as my remorse, and I told him that I was sorry, that I would never do that again, which I have not in the many years since. And then I said, “It’s not your fault you’re a dog, Rico. It’s not your fault.”

Still, when I am gone from home for weeks and miss my family so much that my bones ache, I never, not even once, think of him. But why is it then, when I’m the one feeding him, that I can’t bear to give him only a cup of dry dog food? Why do I chop up leftover steak or salmon or grilled chicken for him? And if we have none of those things, why do I find some cheddar cheese or expensive Gouda and give him that?

It’s the winter of the pandemic, and there are two dogs in our house. Ariadne, just twelve when she and her mother drove deep into Maine to get Rico, is now twenty-five and a doctoral student in philosophy in Upstate New York. For the past eight weeks she has been home with us, and this second dog, a rescue from Texas, is hers.

Romy is an eight-pound Chihuahua with the tiny face of a newborn deer. Her ears stick up in soft points as she stands on her hind legs and straightens her back and stares at me with curiosity. She plays with chew toys that squeak, and she runs around the house and onto and off of our furniture so fast it is hard to follow her with my eyes. When she’s not doing this, she’s usually curled up in my daughter’s lap. Sometimes Romy will hear something the rest of us — including old Rico — do not, and she’ll lift her small head and bark louder than a dog her size should be able to. My daughter adores this dog, and in those weeks when Ariadne’s boyfriend is not with her in New York, I know Romy is keeping her from loneliness.

I cannot look at that little dog without smiling. One night, while I was watching the news, she stepped onto my thighs, her body so light it felt like some trick of the mind. She glanced at my face, then curled up in my lap, her narrow back to me, her body warming my skin, and it was as if she was scratching on that locked iron door inside me, scratching to get in, though maybe Rico had already begun to unlock it.

It was a late-fall afternoon, and one of us let Rico out to pee, and he didn’t return. Usually he’d roam our yard and woods for a few minutes, relieve himself, kick with his hind legs at what he’d done, then come back inside. But on this day it had been over an hour, then longer, and still he was gone. Fontaine and I called to him from the porch, but there was just our yard and gravel driveway and the empty road where the few cars that passed always seemed to go too fast, and whatever I was doing that day I could no longer do.

I kept walking to the porch and calling our dog. I hurried across the grass and dead leaves and peered into the woods and called his name, but there was only an unrelenting stillness and then a cold fear slithering through me, and I was no longer a man but a boy.

I climbed into my truck and started it, lowering all the windows so he could hear me as I called his name. I drove the back roads for close to an hour. Clapboard houses were set back in the trees, and I kept calling toward them, hoping my dog had found a friend: “Rico! Come here, boy! *Rico!*” Along both sides of the asphalt were ditches, their muddy sides the color of Rico’s fur, and I couldn’t look into them. I wouldn’t look into them.

And then the sun went down, and I had to put on my headlights as I drove home. The gravel driveway was empty, as was the leaf-strewn yard, but there, sitting on the top step of the porch, was Rico, and as I got closer his tail began to wag, and he stood, his head up, waiting for me.