

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

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Messmate

It's 1 am and nearly one year since I began sleeping on the living room couch to be with Bo, our 16 year old pit bull-lab mix who can no longer go eight hours, or even 90 minutes, without a bathroom break and is too frail to traverse the stairs. We're in Southwest Virginia where the mountains are tender and the woods are unkempt and houses have an unusual number of cars parked out front. Bo lived with us in South Carolina, Nevada, and Illinois, too.

I shift my hip out of the crevice between the cushions and reach over the edge of the couch to stroke Bo's puppy-smooth ears. His skull rises and falls as he pants. I stare into the darkness and wait for his staccato breathing to recede into somnolent oceanic snores. Listening, I slide my hand down to his ribs and over his spine where his back end has atrophied and started to curve in on itself like a nautilus. There's a lull in the panting, and I close my eyes. Bo's thigh quivers under my palm, and my eyelids part as the scratching begins. Bo's toenails against the baseboard. He is having little spasms, like an athlete after a brutal training day. Or maybe he's dreaming about the time he barreled through the woods off-leash. We could hear him crashing through the leaves as he ran loops between the trees circling back to us every few minutes before launching into another ecstatic orbit. He wasn't running away. He was just running.

These days his legs last only about 20 feet from the house. On the wooden kitchen floors, he's Bambi on ice, legs splaying every which way. His balance and strength are better in the living room where he can lean on the couch for balance as he shuffles to his bed, a gray fluffy rectangle surrounded by extra towels in case he has an accident.

He's had only two accidents.

But, now, when Bo's torso bobbles beneath my hand and he lifts his head, I toss off the fuchsia fleece blanket that I've had since freshman year of college, slip into my husband's sneakers, slide open the back door, and return to Bo, whom I scoop up and take outside. Tonight is easy because it's May and clear. The few mosquitoes are nothing compared to the freezing rain and snow back in December, then in January, then in February, all the way through March. There's more grass than mud now, and it's a luscious grass of which the Virginia earth can certainly be proud. There was no grass in Nevada. We moved there in July and one afternoon set off on a walk across a rocky, tawny patch of desert. In sixty seconds, Bo began high-stepping like a Lipizzaner stallion. He danced from paw to paw, and then plopped down on his rump holding three legs off the ground, quickly switching which foot touched the sand. I don't remember how we got back to the apartment. Bo's paws showed no effects, no blisters, no cracks; my conscience, however, was scalded.

In the night-dampened Virginia grass, Bo stumbles stiff-legged in a tight circle. Not because he's pre-poo sniffing in the standard dog choreography, but because he's confused and lopsided with age. He circles, tires, bumps to his bottom. I tip back my head and watch strands of hoary cloud float across the Black Beyond. There's, perhaps, one star. Then another. I

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

walk to Bo and trace my finger from the middle of his broad, golden head down the groove between his eyes, over his whitening snout. He leans his face into my palm, and I massage his hamstrings with my other hand. He used to have ham hock legs.

I lift up his back end and keep my arm under his abdomen hoping that he'll go the bathroom. He doesn't. So, I set him back down into his nautilus spiral and watch the sky again. After a few more unsuccessful lifts, I completely pick him up and pace back and forth across our 15-foot patch of grass, holding him across my chest as if I'm in one of those Sunday school classroom paintings of a Bible character cradling a lamb. When I was carrying him like this down the sidewalk yesterday afternoon, he spontaneously started pooping. The college guy who lives next door quickly got into his truck. I continued on my way, briefly depositing 70-pounds of fragile canine in the grass while I opened the front door. After ferrying Bo to his bed, I returned to bag up the trail of brown dollops.

No dollops tonight, so I carry Bo back to the living room, slip off my husband's shoes, and pull up the fleece blanket. I stare into the darkness, listen to the breathing, the scratching, and then we do the entire routine again. After the third trip, I make us toast. Two slices that I tear into pieces—one bite for Bo, one bite for me. Bo gobbles his bites and smacks his lips.

The word companion comes from the Latin *com* ("with together") and *panis* ("bread"): *Companio* means "bread fellow," sometimes translated as "messmate." Our nighttime snacks are usually toast but sometimes dog muffins haphazardly concocted from bananas, peanut butter, honey, whole wheat flour, and a bit of baking soda. We eat together, strewing crumbs on the carpet for my husband to vacuum on Saturdays.

I was a mess the week of my dissertation defense. It was the first week of December, and my husband was traveling. I cried in the same pair of black sweatpants from Monday night until Friday morning when I finally took a shower an hour before the defense started.

"She's having some sort of nervous breakdown," my younger brother—also a PhD student—told my mother over the phone having been asked by my husband to check on me because I kept wailing and hanging up on him and my mom. Besides my brother's matter-of-fact gentleness, what got me through that week was Bo, who was then 15 years old, deaf, and able to walk to the stop sign at the end of our street. Bo took care of me by letting me take care of him. We were falling apart and moving forward together. Messmates, indeed.

Annie was Bo's first messmate. We adopted Annie and Bo from Howlmore Animal Sanctuary in Columbia, South Carolina. Annie, a black lab German shepherd mix, was petrified of humans and aggressive to other animals. But when Linda, the sanctuary's owner, walked into the kennel one morning she found Bo in Annie's pen. Annie was stretched out on her side, her black jowls slack on the cement floor, her leisurely blinks a marked contrast to her typical rigid posture, raised hackles, and frantic barking. Apparently, Bo had scaled the chain link fence between their pens in the night.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

We adopted them both. Annie developed an affectionate possessiveness over us; pawing away books when she wanted attention, wedging herself between my waist and elbow if I was petting Bo, curling up on our bed pillows with her snout tucked into her feathery tail when we went to work. She remained a spooky maniac in public, her rear end at odds with her head. At the sight and sound of anything wheeled, such as a stroller or tricycle, her haunches cowered toward the pavement while her shoulders lunged forward. Her back paws sweat as she stumbled backwards, her head lurching to the right and left against the leash as she slung a cacophonous mixture of barks in every direction. People with something in their hands, on their heads, or over their eyes particularly unhinged her. Seeing a skateboarder with sunglasses and a backwards baseball cap made Annie crash into our legs, tangle her leash, and gnash blindly at Bo's neck.

Back at home Bo would pacify her by thoroughly but gently masticating her ears. He didn't fear her rage or hold grudges. He just molded his titian body alongside her ebony one in the dog bed, chewed her face, and took a nap. We were all sleeping in the same room—an upstairs normal bedroom with a king-size human bed—when Annie died unexpectedly in her sleep at age 12 after a typical day with four walks and two meals. She never declined; she just disappeared. Unlike her life, in Annie's death, there was no mess.

After Bo and I finish our toast, I re-settle on the couch. I open my eyes surprised to read words on the spines of books stacked on the ottoman. It's morning. I must have been asleep. That means Bo must have been asleep, too. Keeping my eyes on *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and *One Good Earl Deserves a Lover*, I listen to the stillness. Wait for Bo's serrated breath. Wait, straining to hear through the solid, uncut air. Wait as the room turns blurry. Is he gone?

Finally, I tilt my head and let my vision catch the tip of his tail. About halfway up his tail is a crusty bald spot. Around the spot his fur is red-gold at the outer tips and snow white at the roots where it connects to his splotchy pink and black skin. Usually, my husband covers Bo's bald spot with bag balm and Thera-tape, but we let it air out last night. Bo has been on thyroid medication for a decade, but the bald spot is recent. There's also Thera-tape on his front left forearm where his dewclaw fell off last week. A yellowish glob of bag balm has dried on the edge of the tape.

My gaze travels past the snotty glob to the Shar Pei-like wrinkles on his shoulders, up his thick throat, to where his black lip is rolled up exposing the canine tooth that's been chipped as long as we've had him. Over his still, still back. Down to his ribs. Down to the jagged white scar where a grapefruit-sized tumor was removed six years ago. They said his cancer was spreading on a 19-out-of-20 scale. To prevent Bo from opening the sutures after surgery, my husband clothed him in t-shirts that he fitted with binder clips. Bo survived the crop tops and surgery. He's also survived an enlarged heart for which he's taken medication for the last three years. Plus, he broke his right front elbow our first autumn in Virginia and has bursitis in his shoulders. But I've heard him yelp only twice, a short high-pitched wobbly yelp at complete odds with his once chiseled frame and square jaw formerly capable of cracking avocado pits. He snatched the avocado pit when it rolled off the cutting board one evening, and I was

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

terrified that the shards would slice up his intestines and kill him. He was fine. That was four years ago.

These days he doesn't hear the sound of food dropped on the floor or even leaf-blowers outside the window. Now that he's deaf, storms aren't an issue. But he used to have panic attacks at the slightest groan of the sky, at a subtle shadowing of clouds. I could feel his organs rattling in his torso as, quaking, he tried to bury himself in the space of my body. Thunder shirts, lavender, and Tramadol were not effective.

His initial storm-induced panic attack surprised us. In our first spring of having the dogs, Bo had massacred toads on our evening walks, popping them with his teeth and then foaming at the mouth from the poisons in their skin. He had dragged me down the street to chase a jogger he thought was sketchy — dragged me face down on the pavement with enough power to rip holes in the front of my jeans. He, with maniac Annie, had killed a feral cat, crushing the animal in his jaws as my husband tried to save it (and, subsequently, received nine rabies shots). One night when my husband was traveling, I woke to find Bo sitting upright on the corner of the bed, facing outward with his posture slightly forward and eyes locked on the front door. He was utterly still, utterly silent, utterly flexed. Utterly ready to annihilate anything that came through the front door.

This morning Bo is utterly still, utterly silent, utterly...what?

And then he breathes. One smooth sigh that soon settles into chuffy panting. And on we go. This morning he's not interested in his plant-based, weight-control dog food, so I give him more toast. A bite for Bo, a bite for me.

To me companionship has always seemed trite, a tepid version of friendship. Pallid and feeble compared to passion, that fuel of the 21st century. It's follow your passion, not be with your companion. The only people who need companions are debutantes avoiding ruination in regency romances and old folks needing a hand with their Ensure each morning. Surely not a 40 year old who practices yoga and reads Merleau-Ponty and has a PhD. A PhD that means I am trained to sniff out "significance." Surely, companionship is too mundane to be "significant."

"I don't know if Bo is going to make it until next week. I can't imagine that he'll still be here at the end of June," I tell my brother. I've been warning my family of Bo's impending death for the last year. I've been hoping that he'll have a soft landing, like Annie, that the sleep will come to him instead of us having to choose euthanasia. What's the criteria for a meaningful dog life? Given the boundaries of human perception and consciousness, how can I fathom what Bo (or if Bo) experiences? Does human exceptionalism, that anthropocentric situatedness of my contemplations, constrain my definition of what it means to be alive? Is my ontological anxiety — my existentialism — in relation to Bo ridiculous because my viewpoint is and can be only human?

Or does our sharing of bread and accepting of each other's messes indicate some sort of interspecies ligature? A connection that spans hot sand and wet grass. A togetherness as real and modest as a crumb from the toast we just finished for breakfast.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

I think it's only Wednesday...three full days before the crumbs are vacuumed. I knead Bo's ears, and he sighs.