Little Dog

NONA CASPERS

LITTLE DOG'S HEAD HAS BEEN TILTED RIGHT, just slightly, for five of her nineteen years. A blob of black fur lying on the hallway floor, flat out, paws in front of her sphynx-like, spine aligned and supported by redwood planks, snout resting between her paws. I wish Little Dog could lie there forever, as I work in my office and step over her to the living room and walk past her on my way to the kitchen, as I tromp in and out of the flat, up and down the stairs. I greet her, "Hi Little Dog," and she peeps up, licks my hand, drops back to sleep.

Little Dog will slumber in that place most of the day. What is it to be accompanied by that small near certainty? After she eats, I pick her up and carry her down the stairs, and on days when her body won't walk, I carry her around the block and through the park. I kiss the top of her head and playfully graze my front teeth against her scalp. I kiss and kiss, smelling her fur and singing, "Baby cakes; you are the sweetest little baby cakes."

For the past six months, while Little Dog has lost most of her sight and all her hearing, I have been time traveling back to the late 1970s in a new therapy called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). Today, the therapist gives me an article about the neuroscience of human brains and dogs, cortisol calmed by oxytocin. In the late 1970s, when I was a thirteen-year-old girl, I found myself in the backseat of a car with the wrong boy. Like so many girls, I was raped without knowing it was rape. A few months later, my friend's

body leaked water onto the floor in fourth-hour study hall. An ambulance carted her to the local town hospital where poof!—a baby she wasn't prepared to comprehend had been growing inside her for eight months—appeared. We just thought she was bingeing and getting fat, like the rest of us bamboozled and bewildered Catholic girls. My friend disappeared from school and from our girl world, but not from our nervous systems.

I could go on. The girl whose scabbed cuts peeked out from her long-sleeved shirts, the girl who chugged Maalox, the girl whose hymen tore and bled onto the snowy field behind the high school. Had they given consent? My best friend and her sister were bused off unexpectedly to an aunt in a distant town, returning with stretch marks and a new hard-boiled veneer of shame. They were fifteen and sixteen. Was this consent?

And why do I feel embarrassed to write about these girls, my own experience? These recycled, too universal, common to the point of risking banality, feelings of anger and confusion and grief. Wasn't I done with this? Who cares? Therapy, yoga, meditation, swimming. Why haunt me again now?

But I am spooked.

In the park today, Little Dog sniffs the news in the grass while I stand talking with the tall male neighbor whose dog has just died. Gathering details. Preparing.

Another neighbor calls out, "Are you watching your dog?"

"Oh," I say, feeling impugned. "No, I'm not."

Well, it was obvious I wasn't because Little Dog was marching and lurching and wobbling down the path toward the street. Guilt turns to rage so quickly. I shut my mouth.

"She's going home," the woman sings, not looking at me, but also not looking at Little Dog, not stopping Little Dog either, but looking off into the distance, as if she were on some boat heading toward Alaska or the Bering Sea.

I pluck Little Dog up just as she stumbles off the curb. She grunts in protest, either of my obliviousness or sudden intervention.

Since I started the EMDR therapy, I've been drowning in a new world of sloppiness and chaos. Like a teenage girl, or rather like the girl I was, I lose

track of things. I throw my socks on the floor, don't open my mail, forget to move the car for street cleaning and then forget to pay the tickets. This past six months I've lost my phone and my credit card twice. But this is the first time I've lost track of Little Dog.

The trauma therapist gives me tappers, almond shaped, gray plastic devices attached to her tapper machine, which allows her to regulate the speed and intensity of vibration. I hold one tapper in each hand. They vibrate alternating left to right and I close my eyes and see things.

I see the small white refrigerator in my childhood kitchen, my mom's favorite prayer on a magnet (or maybe just the magnet she happened to find): The Lord is Thy Shepherd.

I see my girl self, freestyling in the middle of Big Birch Lake, diving into the cold hazy depths. I lived in this lake every summer, in a green, and then, bright blue two-piece.

I see the thirteen-year-old girl, who was me with Joni Mitchell hair, jump into the back seat of the beat-up car to ride the country roads with my best friend and her high school boyfriend. I smell the Thai-stick and feel the ferociously satisfying burn in the membranes of my throat and sinuses.

At night, I sleep with my arm cradling Little Dog's back. Sometime in the middle of the night she migrates north. I wake up and her head is on the pillow next to mine. I turn my head and she is lying on her back, like me, snout to the ceiling, perfectly still, the way I sleep. Good morning Little Dog, I say, and kiss her belly. She makes a comfort sound, like a sigh only deeper, lodged in the center of her body, the kind I've never heard humans make even during sex when our animal bodies wander free and lurch out of our throats.

I have never loved anyone the way I love Little Dog. I say this out loud at a dinner table. "That's pathetic," my friend says, not to hurt me, but with sorrow. She doesn't understand, I tell her, hiding or thinking I am hiding my defensiveness.

Little Dog has accompanied me through a divorce and two break ups, a two-year debilitating illness, the deaths of my father, my close friend, and, last year

my mother. My love for Little Dog feels like all the blood is released from my veins, warming every cell, tissue, fiber. The source. The breath. Lately, I've taken to the floor with her, whole mornings with a blanket over our heads. At night, in bed before we fall asleep, I ask Little Dog not to die until the pandemic is over and my haunted synapses chill. More than a few times, I have bolted awake in the middle of the night and listened for her breath. I lay my hand on her chest. Don't die today, I whisper. Wait. Give me more time.

But there's always something.

Little Dog will be the next death. I know that. I know that. But not today.

I hold the tappers in my lap, and up comes the night in the car again.

I am in the back seat stoned to the stars. The windows are black. Black windows, the sacred rural darkness, immense, vast. The headlights make ghosts in the air above the road, our own aurora borealis. The car hums and drops down a hill, into the town park. I see the shadow of the rusted merry-go-round. I feel afraid even before the car stops. Even before the boy in the long raincoat is standing at the window across from me, a boy I have never met, an older high school boy, friends with the girlfriend's boyfriend. The door across from me opens. The boy is suddenly next to me pressing his mouth on my mouth and digging at the top of my jeans. Time collapses here—and then I am upside down, my head and torso dangle off the seat, my head grazing the carpeted car floor and knocking against the door.

The therapist has turned the tappers off. I open my eyes.

People talk a lot about fight or flight, kick-backs to trauma, but we also freeze—the flooding of natural opiates that stifle pain and in a sense leave us paralyzed.

She asks me to go back to the moment just before the boy gets into the car. What do you feel?

I feel afraid, I say. I want to go home, but I don't want anyone to know I'm afraid.

The girl is thirteen, she says. She's a child.

She turns the tappers back on.

The boy climbs into the car, but now, I slow down time. The boy sits close

to me. He pulls off his glasses and turns to me. I look him in the eye. I bare my teeth. I growl.

The therapist laughs. I laugh.

"Is she in pain?" a gray-haired woman in the park asks, when Little Dog turtles past on the paved path, looking like she's about to poop.

"I imagine she's in some pain," I answer, in a shitty tone the woman doesn't deserve. "I'm in pain. Aren't you?"

Later, on the last leg of our massively slow walk around the block, the late afternoon wind blows Little Dog over and I can't help it, I just can't help it—I laugh. I run and swoop her up but wipe out myself and we are both lying on the sidewalk of Germania Street. The sun-warmed comfort of concrete.

Sometimes, when I pick up Little Dog and kiss her and sing the Baby Cakes song, she growls to tell me to cut it out. She growls perhaps to remind me that she is not a stuffed toy or merely my idea of love and constancy, that Little Dog is not mine.

A story Western Buddhists tell: to marry the princess the prince must answer the question of what she wants most. The answer: her sovereignty.

Little Dog, even in this ancient body, will not relinquish her sovereignty. But then there is this: my urge not to respect Little Dog's sovereignty. This morning, Little Dog growled when I picked her up, and I pulled her into me and sang the song anyway.

The impulse to just take what one wants when one wants it, from someone who hasn't offered. To just take what we want, who cares if the other doesn't want it, *we* want it and we want it now. The next time Little Dog growls, I vow I will set her back down.

I'm sorry, I tell her now, while she hobbles toward her food bowl. I won't do it again, I tell her, though it's a little late. I've been doing it for nineteen years, haven't I?

In the next session, an adult version of me shows up in the park, tapping into my brain. She's wearing an Australian cowboy hat I wore when I was dating a

woman from Australia and driving my silver Toyota Yaris. The cowgirl-me pulls up to the beat-up car, headlights beaming.

"She's coming with me," she announces, holding the passenger door open. She shepherds the girl-me into the passenger seat of the Yaris, and we drive off together.

We sit on the end of a dock at Big Birch Lake. I tuck, so gently, her hair behind her ears, and we listen to the water murmur against the dark shorelines.

In the middle of the night, Little Dog makes a sound her body hasn't made before. The vet asks if I can make the sound or describe it.

Let's see if I can find it. Nope.

Later, I call the vet back and tell her the word croak. I make the sound.

"Is she eating?" I tell her yes, and the vet says, "then it's not time yet."

"I'm not ready," I say. "She's not either," the vet says. "You'll never be ready," she says. "She's been with you for half of your adult life."

Half of my adult life.

Yes. Half of my adult life with Little Dog.

She does not want me to touch her. She growls when I make to scoop her up, as gently as I can. She growls like someone with tiny, tired lungs. With the little breath, it sounds short and weak, so weak I can barely hear it. But there it is.

I lie on the floor near her but not too close. I lie on the floor and watch her. I lie on the floor and for a moment, all the blood begins to escape my veins and flood the cavities of my body, then flood out onto the floor.

I must be the adult. I must pull my blood back in and stand up and stand up and stand up. I must find the phone.