

Laika

In '57 Sputnik 2 carried her into space
where the first bark went unheard.
Did she lick herself or nip at the whir
of the fan in that cabin? These concerns
were not important to science, unlike velocity,
heart rate, time of death. When my faith
in justice wavers I embrace my inner Greek
and butcher the sky, carve out a swath of stars
catching a curve of light millions of years old
and pretend they are the outline of a dog,
half-husky, half-terrier. I retreat to this fantasia
when another report of animal cruelty
soils further the already filthy news.
It was years before we knew
she didn't last more than five hours
in that wretched kennel, weightless,
and think of the trash she could have rooted,
the black boots she could have shined
with a few well-placed curtsies
in deference to the great mutts of history—
think Khrushchev and Kennedy.
Sweet Laika, it has been decades since my last confession,
and my sins are many: in Kathmandu I herded strays
through the alleys, ticked their foreheads
and paws red, wept in gratitude when they licked my face
because now they might let me pass
through the gates of heaven with only a tender snarl
for having diced garlic, may the bulbs forgive me,
in the kitchens of Laos. I went my whole life
without seeing a dog struck by a car and then it was there—
have mercy upon the pronoun, I didn't get out—
in the mirror, watching the Chevys and Fords,
pounding the pavement with its tail before the truck
hauling from Georgia who knows what,
and it was in that other Georgia, the colder one,
where I entered the life of a minor scientist,
hunting the bakeries of Moscow for tea cake
one day, the trash heaps the next for any dog
the size of a breadbox, one not much bigger

than the tabby at the foot of my bed dreaming
about the injustice of wings, unaware of my past
allegiances, that I was born under the sign of the dog,

that I have lived and died a traitor to my own kind.

Bluetooth

The first time I ever spoke to God
was in a bar next to a movie theater, the old,
charmingly dilapidated kind with sweaty seats

and flat dollar soda; and I think there were two TVs
over the bar, the Cubs on one, Libertarians
on the other, each tribe begging for a miracle
—and it was not a miracle that made me speak
to God, although I had asked for miracles before,
silently, my mind prostrate on its wooden floor,
no, it was the man at the bar next to me who
resembled my father, which is to say, he looked
like me, only nineteen years older, with lush hair
and purple lips from which sprung the words
“You’re the reason I can’t sleep at night.”
Instead of recognizing he was on the phone,
my foolish pride nudged me to say, “I’m sorry
buddy, but I don’t swing that way,” and when
he didn’t answer and point out the absurdly
narcissistic implications of my words,
I was relieved, even though he kept repeating
the same thing because now I could see what
wasn’t visible before, that his ear, the one
whose existence had been hidden from me
had been enjoying a secret life, connected as it was
to the source of his joy or pain or both,
which, as I swallowed my *mea culpa*, began to fill
the room the same way the joy and pain
of the old prophets used to spill forth and out
across the desert when they spoke aloud to God
who was always on the other end listening
because He too was an insomniac and couldn’t
sleep. These days God never gets out of bed
because the bar of His dreams is always better
than the one in which I am sitting and pretending
to have a phone in my ear. If all this sounds silly
then what I said when I pretended to speak to God
about the virtues of the two party system, how loving
a loser is a type of kindness, will sound equally silly,
and if you don’t like silliness, the serious kind,
then clip a phone to your ear and call God
because it was His mind that first thought
of my mind that thought it was a good idea
to speak to God at a bar, which must now make me
one of His prophets, one of the blessed lost
who wanders the bars looking for his father, the one
who says, “You’re the reason I can’t sleep at night”
into a Wrigley-blue tooth that hasn’t worked in months
until some stranger slips onto the stool beside him
and takes the fat, sheepish silence between them

and murders it with chitchat to the Almighty.

Bloodhounds

after Sharon Olds

Once they had been replaced by people
with noses equally capable of navigating
a complex sea of collapsed rebar and concrete
to a single, drifting mote of skin,
they sought other employment. The truth
was clear: we didn't need walking,
shamefully at times, to a dry median

during rush hour, nor training to say Here,
dig here, this one can make it. Out of work,
some hung up their fedoras, put away
the spy glass and went to the country to herd,
but discovered sheep stink, goats too,
and that horses can't be trusted.
In the city, others tried guarding banks
but were too often lulled to sleep
by the dull odor of husbands and wives.
Soon the newspapers began to cry
what dogs could already hear: "mongrels,"
"lazy," "Take our jobs, is what they do."
Slowly, many drifted back to the swamps
of long rifles, of coons piled on a porch
ahum with the nineteenth century. Years later,
when hardly anyone remembered them,
a lone pack did what celebrities do when they fall
from favor, they answered the call of Hollywood
to join the cameras and props on the set
of the new *Singing School*. That first night
we watched them warm up by howling
the vowels: over and over the long O
drew from the black and tan chorus a wail
from the Old World, a helpless moan
that broke the backs of centuries
each time it passed through the sad, bent halo
of their mouths. They were a hit
because karaoke was fashionable again,
as was suffering, as was pity,
and so the episodes kept coming, cabled
week after week into the dark living rooms
where our beautiful, intelligent race sat
in the raw hours, attentive, sniffing the air,
waiting for a sign in those throaty baritones
that we might yet find another life.