

DAVID RABE

"So primal, so dark
and unredeeming it
should be considered
taboo, and is therefore
irresistible . . . an
extraordinary, powerful
piece of literature."

—Thomas Moore, author
of *Care of the Soul*

Recital of the Day

A NOVEL



Recital of the Dog

Plays

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Goose and Tomtom

Hurlyburly & Those the River Keeps

In the Boom Boom Room

Screenplays

I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can
(based on the book by Barbara Gordon)

Casualties of War
(based on the book by Daniel Lang)

Fiction

Recital of the Dog

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DAVID RABE



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As we know, it is not the conscious subject but the unconscious which does the projecting. Hence ~~one meets with projections, one does not make them.~~ The effect of projection is to isolate the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is now only an illusory one. Projections change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face.

—C. G. Jung
Alchemical Psychology

Every angel is terrible.

—Rainer Maria Rilke
Duino Elegies

BOOK ONE

DOGS

Chapter One

Before I lost my ability to paint, I spent hours each day slamming and smudging colorful oils on canvas in patterns that appealed to me. Shapes emerged more often than not and with them my breath came more easily. In my brain a sense of painful constriction diminished. Quite frequently, feeling this flow of air and relaxation, I know I smiled. But then I killed a brown-eyed, ragged mongrel dog and even now I can feel his muscle tearing in my bones. He bounded into the air. My rifle sight slid along beneath his leap. With the cows rumbling somewhere off to my left, I fired. I thought, as I watched him recoil, smashed and yelping, that I might paint him. He was a study in fierce but failing optimism. If desire could have saved him, he would have run from that field.

Instead, he took a sequence of wretched poses. At least that's what memory has for me. I see him reeling with impact and inventing a series of physiological strategies intended, no doubt, to extricate him from the disaster that had befallen him. Strictly experimental, they were of no practical effect. The bullet had already struck. The wound was mortal. They are nevertheless fixed in my mind, a set of stunning contortions: one forepaw bent, the other straight, left ear folded, eyes full of alarm, rear legs angled out in perfect alignment. Then I blink and there he is again, his mongrel's tail wrapped around his ass and curled under his belly like a furled flag. Next he floats with his torso bent at the middle, his eyes full of glassy incomprehension. On he goes, front paws over his ears, hind paws pointed skyward, his back to the earth, stomach to the heavens, eyes filled with an odd repose. When he hits he tumbles down a slight incline where the sun has burned the dirt to dust. Then he lies there brown and still.

As I say, my first thought was that I would paint him, and I have tried, but over and over the brushes fall from my hands. I stand, looking down from the height of my head to the floor, where the brushes lie unmoving once they have escaped my fingers. At first I thought I had grown clumsy, or inattentive, and I was simply dropping them, and I persisted, stubbornly, but I met the same results each time. Suddenly I was frightened that I was experiencing the first symptoms of some terrible disease, a disorder in my nervous system. I made an appointment with the local doctor. It was not lost on me that my fingers dialed without the slightest difficulty. I could comb my hair, brush my teeth, hold a spoon, a knife, a cup, a glass. I could drive my car. The only things that I could not control were my brushes. I felt embarrassed and ashamed, and called to cancel the appointment. I vowed to forget about the dog and to go back to work immediately on the project that I had begun only days before the creature appeared in my life. This was a series of family portraits whose exact style was yet to be determined. What I had so far was a male figure, the shoulders caught in a pair of black slashes, the torso tilted so that it seemed about to slip out from under the faceless head. Streaks that could become hands were gesturing toward me, the pale oblongs of upturned palms seeking some missing item. Reaching toward the canvas, I felt a tingle, then a kind of jolt. My fingers opened, surrendering to a fuzzy numbness, and the brush floated out of my grasp. Undeniably, the effects of my problem had spread, crippling my ability to render any subject at all. It seemed my only hope was to let some time go by, and I tried to reassure myself that, if I could just hang on, this whole nightmarish episode would disappear.

But that was more than a week ago, and my hopes have only diminished with every passing hour. I feel adrift, my spirit caught in an aimless trance. In the last few days, hoping to distract myself, I've entered into a quixotic pastime. When we first moved to this place, leaving the city behind, I imagined

that the care necessary for a few cows and half a dozen chickens would provide a respite from my somewhat cerebral labors. I imagined my family drinking fresh milk and eating fresh eggs. The chickens proved annoying, and after the second month I sold them. The cows, however, I have managed to keep, or was driven to keep—something in their big eyes ringing a reciprocal chord in me. Now, I'm spending more and more time in their company, the four Guernseys, who seem my comrades and are somehow complicit in my predicament, for they stood witness to the deed. They were present when I killed the dog.

I can't remember exactly how the practice started, though I think it had to do with an impulse to reexamine the ingredients of the event itself, the sunlit afternoon, the cows, the dog. The rifle I had already put away in the basement, and the dog, of course, was gone. I remember seeing the cows off at the distance, afloat on the wavering green. I was on my way to feed them, planning to do no more than fork hay into the muck in which they stood. Perhaps what attracted me to them was the way they seemed so unaffected by what they had seen. All I know is that, once I mingled with their browsing heft, I was reluctant to leave. Though there were only four of them, they offered the consolations of a herd. My mind surrendered to an ache of animal yearning that was assuaged only by my association with their shifting flanks and slobbering breath.

From the first moment I stepped among them, they comforted me, and so they comfort me now, milling around and pursuing their interests contentedly as if nothing in their lives is strange, not even my extended visits. Bemused, I stroll about among them. If not exactly happy, I do at least feel hopeful amid their mooing stink and bulk. I lean against a dowdy hip. I fork hay into their trough. I run water into their tank. When two of them flop down in the mud, I flop down beside them. Together we lie beneath the shade of the trees, watching the shadows of the leaves ruffle the ground. Their brown eyes peer into mine with a benign absence of comprehension, the thick slop of their brains quiescent and porous in regard to the ethical consequences of the deed that brought us to this moment.

When I see my wife approaching, I rise and walk to the fence to meet her. I know she's worried. I smile as best I can. Before she can even begin to ask the questions that have brought her down to me, her eyes narrowing with concern and curiosity, I start to talk excitedly about how fascinating the cows have become to me. "Their color, their texture. The way the light dances in their eyes. It highlights their noses. The wetness, the moisture. I'm beginning to see what could be a rich and evocative subject in them," I say.

"The cows?"

"Yes, yes." I remind her of the way that certain of my celebrated predecessors found inspiration in the desert flowers of New Mexico; Mount Ste. Victoire; the water lilies of Giverny; the dancing girls of the Moulin Rouge. The cows, I say, will be my subject. I know I'm lying, but I feel entitled. I feel that my predicament has liberated me from most normal constraints. I can almost hear the doubt buzzing in her brain. But she seems to doubt everything about me recently. Her attitude toward everything I say, every word out of my mouth and everything I do is shadowed with suspicion and a tinge of mockery. She seems to have decided that my personal concerns are an expression of rudeness to her explicitly, my obsessive work habits are an affront, my need for frugality a deliberate attempt to burden her with an irrelevant financial insecurity.

"Good thing that dog decided to leave them alone," she says.

I look at her as if she's changed in some drastic way. "Yes."

"What happened to him?"

She seems weirdly cheery. I'm staring at her, searching for hidden aims beneath the gleam of her smile in an easy manner.

"I don't know what happened to him," I say.

"I sort of miss him."

“What?”

“He was impressive, racing about, the cows all—”

“The cows didn’t like it.”

“Well, no. They’re cows.”

I stare at her again, this time determined to expose the malice behind such an attitude, an indulgent and unsavory breeding ground. I’m struggling for a way through the perfection of her smile when she nods sincerely and says, “I hope it works out.”

“What?”

“The cows.”

“I think it will.”

“I hope so.”

She glides away, climbing toward the house, her thoughts drawing her head down between her rising shoulders. My relations with her are shifting. Her praise of the dog has swept away some failing linkage between us. Her mockery of the cows feels alienating. But she doesn’t know what’s happened, I think. She’s just talking.

Still something hurt and violent slashes across my understanding of her. It’s a physical sensation like a movement of bones in my chest. She’s a tiny figure, receding from me as she strides the pasture, something valuable retreating with her. I loved her once. I wanted to be with her more than anyone else, we loved each other, our little boy was born. Now we peer at one another out of irritation most of the time, a cynical bewilderment building up behind almost every exchange.

When she pauses at the front door and turns to look down on me, I try to see myself from her vantage point. There I am on the wrong side of the fence, mud splattered on my shirt and face, my pants rolled up to my knees, my arm looped around the huge soft throat of a cow whose big eyes glow nervously with our unfamiliar intimacy. To view my behavior from her perspective is disorienting. I feel as if I’m betraying myself somehow. I hasten out of the pasture and up to the house, where I take a quick shower. I shave and brush my teeth and change into clean clothes.

It’s later that day, somewhere toward the middle of the afternoon, when I see the Old Man. Something about him strikes me as odd. I’m driving around, looking at the light as it changes with the shifting of the clouds, the passing hours. The west, the north, the east, the south. Each has its particular texture and value and evolution. I’m chasing a twinge of color down a two-lane not far from my home, the fields of corn racing by, when I pass him. He’s tacking up a sheet of paper on the splintering walls of a barn.

Seconds later, I realize that the figure I have just shot by is not just any old man, but the old man who owns the dog I shot. I don’t know him well; we’ve never spoken, though his farm is situated near mine. Once a huge and thriving family business, it now goes largely untended. He lives there alone and leases out large sections, I’ve been told. Why didn’t I go to him? I wonder. Tell him what his dog was doing. Why didn’t I go to him and talk? I don’t know. It never occurred to me. I could talk to him now. I could stop and tell him what has happened. When I start to consider this passing thought as a genuine option, my tongue goes dry like feathers in my mouth. I speed away, happy when a turn in the road thick with trees sweeps him from my view.

But on the following days he intrudes into my life again and again, and always he is attaching a sheet of paper to some object or wall. Though I don’t want to think about him, his constant reappearance makes it impossible to ignore him. In the morning, I see him deploying his sheets of paper on the buildings that form the main street of our town. Around noon, he’s hammering away at a telephone pole miles to the west. Late that afternoon, I spy him crouched at one of the endless fence posts that line the roads of the countryside, nails in his mouth, a hammer in his hand, a sheet poised to be attached.

Of course I'm curious to know what he's doing, but it feels prudent to keep my distance. I'm in the rest room of Jake's Filling Station, having stopped to gas up, pee, and get a candy bar, and I'm feeling defiant, I'm feeling enraged. I'm washing my hands and vowing to isolate myself from the Old Man and his sheets of paper, whatever they are. I don't know what he's doing. The hell with him. I'll go home and stay there. Pushing the button of the hot-air blower on the wall, I start turning my hands.

It's dusk when I step outside. Coming toward me across the pavement is a sheet of paper, skittering along. I recognize it as a dislodged poster, and the way it's headed toward me feels spooky. When it sticks against the stanchion of a sign advertising the station's gas price, I stare at it. Then it pirouettes, moving once more in my direction. It's several yards off to my left and about to go fluttering past when I lunge and snatch it up, feeling annoyed.

At first glance I laugh. The contents of the paper are an insult; they're preposterous. The death of the dog, which the Old Man knows only as an absence, has caused him to attempt things for which he is embarrassingly unprepared. At the center there is a detailed sketch of the dog, utterly unsophisticated and childish and somehow offensive. How dare he try to draw the dog? The rest is commonplace: a list of the animal's habits, a description of his physical traits, the offer of a small reward. At the bottom a phone number is nearly gouged into the paper. The crude lines, the blotches of shade are all struggling to render some emotion I cannot name, but the effort annoys and irritates me at the same time that it makes me jittery. It's weird, but I'm feeling dizzy. A chill comes racing out with the fading daylight. I can feel gooseflesh puckering the skin all over my body but particularly on my thighs and shoulders, as I'm seized by an urge to rush home and paint. I want to paint this dog and the Old Man who is his master. I want to paint how I feel in this instant. I hasten to my car and race off as if the pavement on which I had stood had just exploded. I am inspired, my sense of mission sharp, firm. I am convinced that I will find in this subject a limitless depth. I've tried before, but this is different. My earlier attempts were doomed because I had no intention of including the Old Man. That's why the brushes jumped from my fingers. But now I will succeed, my talent and implements serving me well. Sitting on his back porch, awaiting the return of a yelping speck of joyous dog, the Old Man has been savagely affected. I must communicate a vacuum at his center, a sense of funneling darkness. A kind of deprivation in bold strokes of oil. In my fingers, I taste the pleasures I will find in my production of his shape. He must seem a chunk of earth come alive, yet eroding. He must seem to be falling backward into himself, as if there's an open sore in his belly into which his spirit is being retracted and covered over in a swirl of scars.

But as I reach the door of my studio, it's as if the night turns into a walk-in freezer. My arms seem slabs unrelated to my body. My hand, moving to turn the knob, hangs in the air, flopping like a fish. I slap at the door. What is this? What's going on? It's just a dog, I think. A goddamn dog. I can't even open the door.

At home, I hear the sounds of my wife and son watching cartoons on the living room TV. Before them the screen is a flashing boil of color, against which their silhouettes are sculptured busts on the chair and footstool. I skulk away, leaving behind me the twilight geniality of the living room they share. In the kitchen, I telephone an old friend in the city, hoping to catch him in his third-floor walk-up situated several blocks north of the apartment where we used to live. It's only a year since I forced us to depart, hoping to find inspiration and peace in a steady diet of rustic solitude. I used to regularly climb at sunset to the rooftop of our building. Around me spread brick and granite, the steeples and other elements of an insensate vista infecting me with a disaffection I felt I must get away from.

When my friend finally answers, his clipped "Hello" prompts a torrent of words from me as I try to explain what has happened. Soon I'm asking him to drive up. I need to talk. As I make this plea, I hear an emptiness in my voice, a tone I cannot identify as my own until I connect it with certain nightmares whose exact content escapes me. When my friend at last gets a chance to speak, it's clear he

understands how upset I am. His manner has changed from something dismissive to a stance of loyalty and mission. He has a business dinner scheduled, he explains, but he will try to rearrange it and come back as soon as he can. When the phone clangs at me an hour later, he is at a gas station on the turnpike, already well on his way.

We meet at a local restaurant, whose unfortunate origin as a hunting lodge is evident. The floors are a raw planking, shellacked and sealed. The stained knotty oaken tables are overlooked by the heads of eight-point bucks mounted on the knotty timber. Their sightless eyes are like bubbles underwater. I do my best to explain the way things happened, trying to be both efficient and clear. I feel I'm making a quick pass over the facts, a kind of sketch to be deepened and filled in.

"This is the worst sort of thing for you—it just throws you," he says.

"I know. I know."

"If only you hadn't done it."

"Well, sure." I'm dissatisfied with what I've said so far, and I'm searching for a better version. The trouble is I don't know exactly what it is I'm trying to describe. It's more an ache of feeling than a set of ideas, and though shame isn't everything I feel, it's certainly prevalent and difficult to talk about. To the extent that my mood is characterized by these unsettled qualities, it's highly distracting. I'm trying to transform into words this knot of sensation and emotion that feels essential, like a prerequisite to understanding anything. Gradually, I see that what I'm wrestling with is my sense of my life as something wrapped around something else, like tissue around an unknown object. The enclosing material feels thin and soft and expendable, while the thing it conceals emits an imperious aura.

"What did I say?" I ask him.

"What?"

"What did I just say?"

"I thought I was talking."

"Didn't I say that I thought—something about my thoughts? I mean, I feel like there's something true in it."

"In what?"

"The way I feel. Even though it's—its—Wait a minute."

"Sure."

"What I mean is that if I follow it—if I can follow it, there's something true I can get to. At least as far as my work."

"The work is at a complete standstill," he says.

"Yes."

"That's awful." He's downcast, as if the loss is intensely his.

"It's impossible."

"Well, I mean, it can't last forever."

"I certainly hope not." I laugh a little in the wake of that remark.

"You should have told him what was going on."

"What?"

"You should have called the old man, the farmer, and told him what was going on with his dog."

"That never occurred to me," I say.

"Oh."

"It never occurred to me." I glance at the logs that form the walls above the huge blazing fireplace. The heads of the dead deer hover in shadowy bands woven through the rising light. I don't know precisely what I expected from my friend, but I don't think I'm going to get it. I'm as perplexed as he is by the admission I've just made, but something in his response makes me want to get up and walk

from the room.

Still, by the end of our meal I'm feeling better, and when I suggest that my outlook has improved he emphatically agrees. I'm trying to more or less cede the responsibility of critical analysis to him. The fact that we are both laughing at regular intervals is good enough for me. We're drinking sherry and telling jokes about the horrors of city life. It's a tactic meant to serve as an oblique consolation to me. We both know what's going on, and every ten or fifteen minutes I take my cue and reaffirm my happiness at having managed to transplant my family far from the mayhem of the city. But then I start to sink a little. After all, my life in the country has hardly proven peaceful. I gulp the sherry, and he waggles his finger at me in a carefree warning as I order two more drinks.

The following morning I'm cruising down a sun-cooked lane of dirt weaving its way west toward the river, when I come upon the Old Man. He's nailing a poster to the trunk of a half-rotted elm tree. Passing in my battered Chevy, I'm struggling to summon a response of pure indifference but I end up feeling a little numb. A quarter mile down the road I turn around, the wheels throwing up dirt from the shoulder. At the sight of him ahead of me, a savage fury assails me. But by the time I cruise past him I'm laughing at the absurdity of his behavior, and I'm mocking him with my secret knowledge of the truth that no number of signs will ever summon his dog back. Dead dogs do not arise to run or bark or lick the hand of anyone. Reversing my course once more, I roar by him for the third time in a matter of minutes. He never once glances up at me. I leave him enveloped in a swirl of dust.

My land is somewhat closer to the river than his and I end up lingering at its shores and brooding over the way he looked as the road and I conspired to cloud his existence.

Later, I start wishing my wife and I were not quite so distant at such a sensitive, difficult time. The move from the city has been hard on her, and the pity that I feel as I think of her has a concealed dangerous bulk like floating ice. I glimpse a kind of gleaming visitation in which we are many years younger and happily walking down the city streets, hand in hand. Then the image begins to blur, and I'm leaning nearer as if to hear our conversation and steal a clue to our affinity. But as I hover there, a veil of estrangement is materializing between us. Soon I am left wondering if this vanished fondness reflects anything actual or merely the distortions of my baffled yearning. We hardly ever occupy the same room anymore. She comes in, I go out, or vice versa. She is busy with her needs to fill the cupboard, buy groceries, scrub the kitchen, go to work. And then there are her moods, the lists she makes, the phone calls, the night school she is planning to attend. I shouldn't really blame her for any of these things, and yet her actions strike me as precursors of something else, something drastic. Her behavior makes me uneasy. Evidently there are dozens of nursery school and community functions which she must take our five-year-old son, Tobias, for she is constantly driving off. Always she yells her destination out the half-open window of her car departing our driveway, her attention not actually directed at me, the words garbled by the window closing back up, the car disappearing behind the trees.

In the hills across the river, nothing moves but the retreating sunlight. There are no dogs, no cows, no people. As a child, I always wanted a dog. My grandfather had a dog, and that was the only dog I knew well, when I lived with him and my grandmother. Then the dog died, and it wasn't long afterward that my grandfather died, too. Grandpa, I think, trying to remember him but seeing his dog as a big old loose-limbed creature with long red fur. My mother came back for the funeral and she smelled of candylike perfume, and was accompanied by a man who wasn't my father. I didn't know who the stranger was, other than his first name, which I've now forgotten, or where my father was. He could have been anywhere, maybe even dead, for all I knew. Certainly he's dead now—though he might not be. But he probably is, since I'm in my forties.

When I feel that someone is watching me, I stand up and look around and see the trees, the shifting branches and shrubs behind which someone or something could hide. Everything is disappearing in the

dusk. Next thing I know I am overcome with thoughts about dogs; the way they leap gracefully to take a stick from the air with glee and passion; the way they yelp to be stroked, feeling no shame in their need to be touched. In the changing sunset on the water I see reflected how dogs of every breed are openhearted and vulnerable. I can't escape the beauty of their fur and dutiful eyes; the care and diligence with which they learn to lead the blind. I think of their bravery, their courage, their playfulness and joy, which they maintain well beyond their puppyhood. They are deeply affectionate, yet their anger, when aroused and justified—such as when their master is hurt or their master's children endangered, or their tail stepped on—their anger is exhibited boldly. They have saved babies from fires, they have captured criminals. They possess the instinctive grace and muscular spontaneity of the very best natural athletes. They embody loyalty, yet they do not surrender their dignity easily.

On I go, knowing all the while that these are thoughts that should be resisted. Yet they haul at me, dragging me beyond the safety of my own prohibitions, pulling me into a moody darkness beneath the reasonable surface of my own advice. The grave shadows of evening lengthen to cover me like the earth I thought I would spread on the corpse of the dog after I carried him through the deepening trees and shrubs of the forest, his blood staining my shoulders, his drool falling from his slack jaw to my left hand. On my thumb, his spit clung for an instant before sailing away to spot my shoe. Dropping him in a kind of grotto of boulders, I put several rocks on top of him and then fled, leaving him only partly covered.

Now the moonlit river is creamy as drool and its surface remains unstirred. There are no dogs swimming. From the spectral hillsides there comes no barking, and through the grass, over the clumps of stones, and down the pathways, no dogs run. The descending dusk is void of yowling. Although I know it is unreasonable to consider myself the sole cause of these deprivations, I feel complicit. I feel there is no loyalty left on earth, no honor nor simple bravery, no padded footfalls nor sounds of sniffing, no undaunted pride nor affection anywhere.

Chapter Two

I awaken and look at the room through a disrupted wistfulness. On the dresser, the alarm clock jangling. I feel I have been thrust up from a richness I was only beginning to appreciate. My wife having trouble with Tobias. I can hear them in the kitchen, their quarreling voices rising up to me through the carpeted floor. But she has something else on her mind, and it's more complicated than might first appear. I sense it instantly, and for a while I lie there, trying to decipher it, stationed at some midway point between sleep and full-fledged consciousness. The sounds of their quarrel reverberate against my awareness, which trembles like the surface of a pond about to open with something rising from its depths. Though she's railing at Tobias, I feel her real concerns are with me. Her anger is too huge for such a little boy. I know all this almost the instant I hear them. Certainly, I know it before I'm fully awake.

When I stagger down the stairs, seeking coffee, their argument is escalating, his five-year-old resources pitted against her. She wheels toward me. "Did you hear that?" she says.

"What?"

"Can't you help me with him? He does nothing I tell him. He needs some discipline, some serious manly discipline. He needs to be slapped. He needs to be punished."

For a moment I stare at her before turning to Tobias, who meets my gaze with a defiance he cannot sustain. His stance is crumbling. He bolts from the room.

"Oh, you're right," she says. "You're right, you're right. I don't know why I even said that. Thank you for not doing it. What's wrong with me? Can you get him for me?"

"What?" I say.

She's looking at her watch. "Can you get him for me, please? I have to take him over to James's, for a play date. I'll wait in the car."

When she returns an hour or so later from having dropped him off I'm still in the kitchen. As I watch her reordering the various appliances she used for breakfast, scrubbing the skillet, shoving cereal boxes back onto shelves, I try to explain that I am having trouble working but am optimistic that things will soon change.

"Things didn't work out with the cows?"

"What?" I say, feeling instantly uneasy.

"The cows," she snaps as if she's cursing me.

"No." Suddenly I've remembered the ploy I'd forgotten for a second. "It didn't."

"Too bad."

"Well, yes."

"Perhaps you're simply in the wrong line of work," she says, her anger freezing her words into little pellets.

"No. I don't think so."

"You can't work in the city, so we move to the country. Now you can't work in the country."

"It'll pass."

"What's the point?"

"You're in a bitchy mood," I tell her.

"Why not?"

Later that afternoon I grow restless, wandering amid the cows, feeling she's watching me. I jump my car and head off, and I'm startled by the rage I feel when I spy the Old Man. Hoping to distract myself by spending a few hours repairing a window sash, I'm on my way to the hardware store in town when he pops into view less than a mile outside the city limits. Of course, he's tacking up a poster on a telephone pole. I pull my Chevy onto the shoulder and dash toward him, certain that I am going to confront him. Doesn't he know the dog is dead? I'm incensed at what has been happening to my life. My certainty that he is somehow to blame burns in the air between us. The dog is dead, I want to shout at him. The dog was cruel and arrogant. I killed him and I'm sorry, but on the other hand I don't really care. I have to be able to paint. If I can't paint, I'm nothing. I have devoted my life to painting, trying to learn to be technically sound yet free of all doctrine and fashion, no matter how established, no matter how adored. I want to be original, yet sound and organized, and I hate what is happening to me.

I'm about ten yards away from him when I suddenly veer off. It's as if I hit a wall and bounce with a numbing jolt. I end up in an adjacent field. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm taking big long steps. Seeing some butterflies ahead, I decide to pretend I'm chasing them. Just as I'm beginning the deception, the numbness fades enough for me to recognize that I was flung off my original course by the fact that, as I got close to the Old Man, I realized that I had watched him nail a handbill to the exact telephone pole days ago. Now I'm wondering, Why is he back here? What's going on? Has someone been removing them?

Directly in front of me are a pair of monarch butterflies, and I reach toward them, compelled by the logic of my masquerade to try and capture them. All I want to do is to trick the Old Man about my purpose in pulling my Chevy onto the shoulder so near his dilapidated vehicle, but the wings of the one I grab grind to rubbish in my fingers. The second butterfly leaps upward. I swat at it and miss. After a moment I elevate the tiny corpse in a gesture of explanation toward the old farmer, but he is gone. Above me, the second butterfly twitches and departs, a clot of light.

Hurrying to the telephone pole, I stand and study the drawing hanging there. It's not a replacement of the original poster, but a revision, and it's very different. The space of scribbled bone between the hound's ink-drawn eyes has been widened, the tone of the gaze altered to contain a more piteous expression. Unmistakably this is a lost dog, a worried dog, a sad dog asking for help. The nose has been narrowed, the nostrils expanded to convey desperation. The rest is the same, the information, the habits, the reward, the phone number. But the weirdest thing about the changes is that, while the image now bears a diminished resemblance to the actual dog, its purpose as a drawing is much clearer. While the first drawing had been straightforward, somewhat neutral, I understand much more clearly what this picture wants from me. This dog needs help. I must look for him. The trouble is, of course, I know where to find him. My sense of culpability returns and with it comes a chill. When the weather changes, I think, everything will improve. A wind has been brought to bear on me and I feel cold.

Turning toward my car, I want to smile. It's a good idea. Driving along, I keep trying, but it's difficult; it's hard work, and I'm sweating as I rise up in the seat, looking into the rearview mirror and attempting to evaluate whether or not I'm smiling, and if I am, is it convincing?

I ease into a parking place in front of the hardware store, which is situated between a newsstand and a clothing store whose window display is a trio of soberly dressed mannequins seated around an aluminum and Formica table. The brassy entrance to the hardware store has racks of gleaming saws and tool chests on either side, and I saunter between them, doing my best to duplicate the manner of a homeowner arriving to purchase a sander, a plane, a hammer, some rope.

Hardly have I shut the door, however, when I am face to face with the Old Man. He passes by, his shirttail touching me, and I nearly yelp. He's traveling the aisles in the company of another elderly man, whom I recognize as the owner of the store—the both of them in their sixties if not the

seventies.

“I mean, he’s not your ordinary kind of dog,” the Old Man is saying. “Don’t ever suck up to people like your ordinary dog will, like they got no notion of who they are. You know Barney.”

I fall into their wake, my sensibility overtaken by a fevered interest, though I know I must maintain a manner that is breezy and blasé.

“Barney’s got it real clear what he’s up to,” the Old Man says, “and he’s got his duties down, like to get me the newspaper, or to run up to me and sorta shake all over when I come home, we ain’t see each other for a long time. Boy howdy does he like to have his ears twisted both at the same time. Boy if he comes up to you and he wants his ears twisted and if you ain’t jumpin’ to do it, he’s gonna walk away. Saleena’s his mother—you know Saleena, she’s still livin’ over at the Murphy place. What a bitch she is.”

“Oh, yeh,” says his companion, his voice rumbling through the wall of his stomach.

“You know her—great black curly bitch droppin’ pups all the time like the one and only thing she knew for certain was the world needed more dogs. You know the bitch I mean.”

“Oh, yeh.”

“She’s got spirit, that Saleena. For a mongrel, I mean.”

“You’re damn tootin’. A good buncha dogs.”

“I remember the day I took Barney from her litter—there was these six of ’em and I was tempted by the runt—I got it in me to maybe take the runt, but then there was this little curly one, he got his nose stuck up into the corner of the box and he’s suckin’ on the wood like it’s a teat. So, ‘It’s him,’ I say, and I can feel Saleena lookin’ me over till she decides I’m all right. That’s the kinda dogs they are. Not your ordinary dogs suckin’ up to every piece of shit on two legs that might pat ’em on the head or drop ’em a bone. Not the kinda dogs to run off or get confused or hit by a car.”

“Nosiree bob.”

“So I figure what hadda happen is he was out sniffin’ after some rabbit or lookin’ for a cow to chase and play with and he was comin’ up onto this valley—round them big white rocks over at the mouth of Big Toe Valley—you know the ones I mean. He’s probably sniffin’ a rabbit, thinkin’ he’ll catch it, so he was sneakin’, and you know, his mind’s on what he’s doin’. And there was these city folks campin’ there and sightseein’, and they saw him and, ’cause he was so beautiful, they lured him over with a hunk of raw red hamburger meat, and then they threw this blanket over him is what I figure, and then they threw him in this black trunk they had in the back of the camper they was in, which was blue, and they probably hadda throw out all the clothes that was in their trunk, which one of ’em did, and then they locked it up and drove off as fast as they could, headin’ across the state line, headin’ back toward the city where they come from, the goddamn sonsabitches, to steal my dog.”

“The sonsabitches.”

“But he’ll be gettin’ loose. He ain’t just gonna sit and take it.”

“Oh, no.”

“He’s probably bustin’ loose about right now. Gnawin’ through the rope. Headin’ home.”

“You bet.”

“I better get on home and look for him.”

“He’ll be hungry.”

I have been cold before but it was never like this. The air was always gray, and the sun burned faintly and distantly as it does right now beyond these windows; but there is a gloom in this grayness and the quality of the sun is estranged in a way that no explanation of miles of vaporous space can ever accommodate. Rather it seems that the sun must have been banished to an alien system, where it lingers now, the pulsing heart of a remote galaxy to which I do not belong. Such is the effect of the Old Man’s story upon me, as I stand beside a wall laden with brass doorknobs.

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