

Blessing of the Animals

Here's the first thing you should know:

When I sit next to my dog Abbe just before she falls asleep, and I stroke her fine-boned head, she turns just enough so that her nose somehow nuzzles between my wrist and my sleeve. She breathes in some scent she's found there—perhaps the smell of my pulse. I keep my hand very still then, her nose glued to my wrist as she snuffles and sighs. The whole house goes quiet, all of us just breathing: the couch and the cat, the vase and the tulips, the mirror and the broom. All of us just here, just now, in the trance of a dog who knows nothing, yet, but grace.

That's the first thing you should know.

But let's start in church, a Unitarian church a mile from my house—white siding and the requisite signboard out front posted with fine, literary sayings printed on massive sheets of paper. I have a postcard of one of those signs I've kept for years pinned to my bulletin board: "You are constantly invited to be what you are"—Emerson. For some reason, it's just the message I need more times than most, this permission to be myself. I've passed by the Bellingham church many times and attended a few secular events there, though I've never gone to a service. But I like the Unitarians, with their cheerful sense of justice, and I even considered myself a pseudo-Unitarian/Jew/Buddhist when I lived for a time in Salt Lake City.

Now, many years later in Bellingham, I've read a notice in the paper about the annual "Blessing of the Animals" ceremony this Sunday. And because Abbe is six months old, and because she is full of vast enthusiasm for any enterprise that involves new people and dogs, and because I'm still in that eager New Dog Owner phase where I'm delighted for any opportunity to show off my puppy, I gather her collar and her leash, her treats and poop bags, her water bottle and bowl; I give her a quick brush down as she turns herself in tight circles, trying to grab the brush's handle in her mouth. "We have to look nice for church," I say, in that mothering tone I've taken to so easily, too easily, my voice a little hoarse from constantly being elevated to such a high, unfamiliar pitch.

At the last minute I remember my cat, Madrona, and since it would not be a blessing to cart her to church, I quickly print off

my favorite picture of her: she kneels on my improvised altar, paws tucked beneath her chest, a tiny brass Buddha in the foreground—just being her prickly, bodhisattva self. She often paces into that room when I'm sitting, brushes the full side of her body against the curve of my crossed legs until I pet her once or twice, then she settles down on the altar, assuming her place as a deity to be worshipped.

No one has to invite her to be what she is. My cat knows she's bigger than the Buddha, that she could kick Buddha's ass if it came down to it, and I've often entered this room to find that serene little figure knocked on its side, his tiny hands still formed in a perfect mudra of peace.

Here's the second thing you should know:

I've had only one other dog in my life, a Great Dane named Sheba. Tall, of course, with a smooth brindled coat, but I couldn't truthfully tell you her color, because I remember this dog only in black and white. All the photos, gray-scale: Sheba, a puppy still, a silhouette in the barren backyard of my parents' new home, circa 1960, in the nascent suburbs of the San Fernando Valley. Soon there will be tall eucalyptus trees, a Doughboy swimming pool, a jungle gym that starts to rust the moment it's assembled, but for now there's just this skinny big dog, a newly planted lawn, some saplings lined up by the fence.

I can't yet talk, can't yet walk; in the photos I'm just a blob of a being with big eyes and a spit curl quivering on the top of my bulbous head. After my father drinks his Ovaltine and his Tang and goes to work, it's just me and my mother and my 3-year-old brother and this big lanky dog—a pack of four in the clean new house, wondering what to do with ourselves.

The dog doesn't wonder too hard. She knows her job: to protect us all from whatever dangers present themselves. She follows my mother everywhere—from kitchen to bathroom to bedroom to yard. She barks at the sedans cruising up our cul-de-sac, cocks her head with suspicion when the phone rings. She nudges the little baby in my mother's arms when she cries.

That baby eventually begins to grow, to leave her mother's arms and get down on the floor to crawl, to walk, to run. This puts her at eye level with the dog more times than not, and Sheba herds her around the green shag carpet, places her body between the baby and

the screen door to the patio. The dog is just the right height for a toddler to pat with her fist, to pull herself up, to walk under the archway of those enormous knees. Eventually this girl will haul herself onto Sheba's back, squeal *giddyup!*, and the dog will comply, moving slowly, swaying like a camel. When the girl is ill, she'll recline into Sheba's belly, both of them licking salt off their upper lips. Both of them will feel relieved when the fever has passed.

When I'm eight years old, my family (which by now includes a baby brother) will go on vacation somewhere, a long car trip to a place like Carlsbad Caverns or Sea World or Sequoia National Park. Sheba is too big to go, so we leave her at a boarding kennel, and I remember watching for too long the closed gray doors of that kennel from the way back of the station wagon as we pulled away.

For some reason, I remember that Sheba dies while we're gone. I remember driving up to the kennel; I remember the heat waves rippling up from the black asphalt, waiting in the car as our father strides through those gray doors, then is gone longer than seems necessary. We roll down the windows, whine for ice cream; my mother fans herself with a map. My father finally appears, *sans* dog, his face white, his mouth set in a grim line of displeasure. He walks slowly, too slowly, back to the now silent car.

But now I know this whole scene is inaccurate, a figment of memory. My mother tells me it all happened at home: alone in the house with Sheba, who is vomiting bile, everyone else at school or at work, my mother wrestles the 130 lb. dog into the car by herself, sobbing and cajoling, telling her it will be all right. She takes the dog to the vet, who calls later in the day to tell her Sheba has died, a twisted stomach, something that happens often to the big breeds. I must have come home from school—a school, where I'd recently been admonished *not* to sing the Star-Spangled Banner with my classmates because my voice was too off key; a school, where even the game of four-square had become dangerous, the heavy rubber ball bouncing with more force than necessary into my box; a school where my only solace was reading time, when I cocooned myself with words not my own. I must have come home, expecting to bend my whole body over Sheba's back and lie there, a rag doll, allowing school to subside, and instead saw my mother's distorted face, her eyes rimmed with smudged mascara. She must have told me, in whatever way you tell a child such things, that Sheba had been put to sleep.

Put to sleep. It's such a kind phrase, a gentle nudge. After all, I was put to sleep every night of my childhood, with kisses and hugs and promises of a good day tomorrow. And every morning, Sheba lifted her ponderous head, turned her caramel gaze on me as I woke. For those few moments—before the world rushed in to let me know its demands, to let me know I might not be up to snuff—I existed as nothing more than an object of adoration, a body to be loved.

That's the second thing you should know.

Let's return to church, or not even the church yet, but the parking lot, where already there's a certain giddiness in the air—*dogs in church!* Even for the short car ride, Abbe's curled herself onto the Navaho blanket and gone to sleep (she hates car rides and has learned quickly to simply pretend it's not happening, a skill I've come to wield in my own life as well), but as soon as the car stops she's up and wiggling in the back seat. Have I described her? She is a short-haired Havanese, a toy breed, with an apricot coat and a black-tipped, narrow snout. She looks, as most passersby comment, exactly like a miniature golden retriever, all fifteen pounds of her. My vet says it best: a golden retriever in a dachshund suit, with her short, slightly outturned legs, her triangular ears that flop over or stick straight up depending on her mood. Her eyes are dark and big and shaped like Spanish almonds.

As I clip on her leash and pull her from the car, I'm already watching out for other dogs—the border collies and huskies and goldens trotting up the sidewalk, pulling at their leashes. All the people smile, even those untethered. One woman comes up to me and says, "It's so nice to see who's coming to church today." I'm not sure if she means my dog or me, but it doesn't really matter—we're one unit, for now. Abbe, as she always does the minute she gets outside, has her nose to the ground, her legs pumping, sniffing away. She knows something's up, something that involves dogs and more dogs, and she couldn't really care less about me on the other end of this leash. When we get to the steps, I pick her up to take her inside.

Usually when I arrive at new places, I divert my gaze until I know what I'm supposed to do and when, who is safe to talk to and who is not. I'm always afraid of doing something wrong. But with Abbe in my arms I don't have to worry; most people look at her first anyway. She looks back and nudges them with her nose, sniffs deeply

to find out who they are, finds everyone extremely worthy. In the vestibule, a mass of people with name tags turn our way, and exclaim over Abbe. They say how cute she is, what a good dog, and all I have to do is agree. Nothing else is required. Me, with all my complicated history, my jumbled disposition: I'm just an afterthought. It's as if I'm holding in my arms some small, furred portion of myself, a micro-me, who knows exactly who she is and where she belongs. This self radiates confidence, a word that means, in its purest form, simply to go with faith.

Here's another thing you should know:

For a long time, without quite knowing it, I blamed my parents. For years I kept that erroneous image of the boarding kennel in my head, and using kid logic, I suspected they had brought Sheba to the vet to die, that they had grown tired of her, that there had already been some kind of *arrangement* made, a notion I probably conceived from daytime television, hours of which I watched every day after school. It was not a suspicion I ever voiced, or even quite knew I carried, and my parents were gentle, loving people who would never do such a thing. But all I knew was: we never got another dog. Shortly after Sheba died, all three kids were trundled into the allergist's office and pricked with blunt square needles that reported our allergies to canines, cats, horses, ragweed, dust. We became a household without a dog, the backyard empty save for the Doughboy, the jungle gym, the now plush grass that rippled against the eucalyptus.

I still read books like a maniac. I read books while doing everything else, even walking down the street, even in the car, even though it made me sick. And I loved best dog stories, tales where the human and animal connection bordered on telepathy, where adventures escalated in thrall to those snouts sniffing the way ahead. I was dog-less, but dogs still accompanied me wherever I went.

Other animals appeared to fill the void. Most specifically, a family of gerbils, and one of them bit the palm of my hand so hard she hung there for several seconds while I screamed and whirled away. Another ate her babies right in front of me while I watched. There were turtles and hamsters and goldfish, none of which lasted long enough for me to form any attachment. There must have been other dogs on our street, but I have no memory of them; in my mind,

our block becomes quiet and barren as a scene from the *Twilight Zone*. Sure, kids still roller-skated up and down the cul-de-sac. Sure, we still played hide-and-peek in the dusk. Sure, we still lived as a suburban family, and we crossed the empty field to the 7-11 for Slurpees, the sweet ice soothing our hot throats in the summertime. But something seemed missing, something had gone awry.

Then there was the duck. Why we had a white duck in our backyard is still a mystery, but there he is, swimming in the Doughboy pool, waddling beneath the walnut tree. Bright orange beak, marked with the hint of a smile, clacking open and closed. Webbed feet slapping the wet pavement. And quacking, quacking, quacking, as a duck is wont to do. I kind of loved him. We named him, not very imaginatively, "Daffy the Duck." His feathers were sleek and slightly oily, and he stretched out his neck and flapped his wings like an ungainly hummingbird when he saw you coming. I screeched open the back screen door first thing after coming home from school, and there he'd be, lifting himself out of a metal washbasin, waddling as fast as he could to greet me. While he was no Sheba, the quality and consistency of this greeting won me over, made the walk home from school more bearable.

But naturally the neighbors complained. All that honking! And at 5 a.m.! So one day we hoisted Daffy into the way back of the station wagon and brought him to the pond at Reseda Park. I'm sure I cried, because all the way there my father wove tales about how much *fun* the duck would have with his brethren, how he would make new friends *in no time at all*, how he would fly to *fabulous*, exotic places in the winter time. My mother nodded in agreement, but reached an arm over the front seat to pat me on the head, a gesture I took to be secret commiseration as much as consolation.

In the meantime, the duck fluttered and quacked and drew stares from the passing cars. He seemed quite happy, actually, to be on an outing, and kept poking his cool, heavy beak over the back seat to say hello. When we reached the park, we opened the tailgate, and he jumped out on his own, ruffled his feathers like an old lady straightening her bonnet, and immediately waddled toward the pond, where I could see dozens of non-descript ducks milling about the shore. We had brought a loaf of Wonder bread, and we wandered into the crowd like any other innocent park-goers, threw bits of bread to the assembled waterfowl. Our duck poked at the rim of the waterline, and we watched carefully to see when he would take off swimming.

Now! Once we thought Daffy happily occupied with his new home, we made our escape, strolling with exaggerated nonchalance to our car. *Don't look back*, my father said, that ancient edict, but of course I looked—I couldn't help myself. And there he was, *our* duck, waddling after us as fast as he could, head up high, wings splayed. He didn't look particularly distressed, no sense of *hey, where do you think you're going?* The beak still looked as though it were smiling, as if he were just heading back to the car with us on an unheard command.

He's following us! I yelled, and stopped in my tracks. *Just keep walking*, my father said, his face resolutely pointed forward. I know now he hated this, that we were prob-ably doing something vaguely illegal, and that to leave an animal behind, no matter how misguided the impulse to keep him in the first place, would be anathema to him. But he was a father who needed to take care of something complicated in full view of his children. And he worked as an engineer, and like all good engineers he had come up with a plan, and we needed to work with it, to see it through.

I hesitated, stuck between an awkward love for this white, feathered creature and my love for my father, my fervent wish to ease his discomfort, to make everything *okay*. I was stuck between the imperative to keep walking, to move forward into the future where a duck in the backyard no longer existed, and my desire to stay a little bit longer in the past, where a duck feathered that yard and made me feel cherished. I knew I really had no choice; I was only a child, with a child's distorted sense of obligation. So I did both. I took a quick run back in the duck's direction, flapping my arms, shouting *shoo, shoo, shoo*, and he appeared truly startled—Daffy looked up at me with his beak open, wings frozen mid-flap, and I knew he understood that everything between us had changed. He backed down to the pond, his waddle a little slower, and glided onto the skin of the water. I ran to my father, took his hand, and didn't look back.

That's the third thing you should know.

And now we're finally *inside* the church, with its long polished pews, the chalice on a raised dais, tall windows that filter the light. Abbe and I find our way to a pew in the center, near the back, and sit on the aisle to facilitate an easy escape if necessary. I'm already regretting a little bringing her to church. She's such an excited and sociable dog; it's torture for her to be bound to her leash while so much activity swirls around her. I put

her on my lap, but she won't stay there, and so I place her on the floor, where she practically flattens herself sideways to say hello to the Husky mix in the pew two rows back. The church is filled with roaming packs of kids in the aisles, *dogs in church!* Like heat-seeking missiles, they track down huggable dogs, and mine, of course tops the list. One boy, about ten, strolls down the aisle with a beatific smile, greeting the animals one by one, and when he bends down to pet Abbe he does so with such grown-up control and purity of intention that he seems much wiser than his ten-year-old countenance would seem to allow. He looks her in the eye, fondles her ears, and she sits for him, gazes adoringly into his face.

But the rest of the children, mostly gangs of girls in odd, mismatched outfits—red tights under a purple dress; paisley top with striped jeans—hoist Abbe clumsily in their arms, pummel her with many hands at once. And while Abbe doesn't seem to mind, in fact she loves it, I feel a pang of juvenile possessiveness—*my dog!* I want to say and snatch her back in my arms. But I let them maul her awhile before I gently extract her, saying *she's a little wiggly today, let's give her some room.*

There are many familiar faces here: a former student waves to me from the back row, her large dog sitting docilely at her feet. A colleague sits a few rows over, pictures of her cats clutched in her hand. Others look familiar but I can't place them precisely; it's a Bellingham phenomenon, where nearly everyone looks dimly familiar because you've seen them so often at the co-op, or at the independent movie theater, or walking in the waterfront park. For a while last year I garnered the energy to take some classes, mainly to meet new people, and wound up seeing the same five women wherever I went. At first I found it depressing, but now there's something a little reassuring about it—this small community of the known world.

The minister finally calls the assembly to order, or to whatever semblance of order can be achieved with dozens of dogs in church. He says that for many reasons they'll keep the ser-vice rolling right along today—no sermon, for instance, and one dog howls. Everyone laughs, including the minister, who punctuates the end of the howl with, "Exactly!" There's so much movement in the pews, so much noise, and no one really pays attention to the initial announcements: the progress of the pledge drive for the capital campaign, a young woman soliciting donations for her upcoming ser-vice trip to Kenya. We stand for the lighting of the chalice, and a

young woman next to me shares her hymnal for the first song. My hands are full with Abbe, and I don't know the melody, and I'm still a bit shy of singing in public ever since my grade-school quarrel with the Star-Spangled Banner—but I do know it feels good to be standing with an armload of dog amid this human and animal cacophony. So I hum.

Here's the last thing you should know:

When I brought Abbe home—the first dog I've owned in the forty years since Sheba died; a dog I knew was *my* dog just from a thumbnail photo on the Internet—my father was in the hospital. January 3, a Wednesday, and he'd been there since New Year's Eve, when a guest at their party said to him: *You don't look so hot*. They abandoned the homemade éclairs and took him to the emergency room, where he turned out to have a blood infection, and though no one uttered the word *septic*, I knew from watching too many medical dramas that's how it's described—the body now toxic.

So, while my father has antibiotics pumped into his veins, drugs that don't seem to work and then they do, I keep my gaze focused on this new creature in the house: eight pounds of fur and bone and eyes and heart, a creature who immediately takes to sliding full tilt across the linoleum, then standing stock-still in the middle of the kitchen floor, ears akimbo, tongue out, as if to ask what we're going to do next. A creature who sleeps fine all night in her crate, but who keeps me up anyway, just by her presence. A dog who never barks, who doesn't need to, because I'm looking at her every minute. My gaze is so full of dog that when I leave her for one hour to go to a yoga class, she appears as an after-image every time I close my eyes.

And when I call every day to the C-handler hospital to get a progress report on my father, we talk for a just a few moments about his physical condition; he either describes his body's insurrection with a little bit of a bemused chuckle, or he takes on the command of the engineer, explaining the mechanics of what happened with professional curiosity. And then we immediately slide into dog talk. My parents now own two dogs: one a stolid corgi mix—she seems to be mixed with border collie, which makes for a rather odd-looking thing—named Tessa, rescued from a shelter many years ago, and the other a hyper toy-poodle named Maggie, whom they took over from my little brother's family when she proved to be too much for them.

Once all their kids left home—all those allergic kids—my parents reverted back to the dog people they'd always been, and they've had some form of dog in the house for over twenty years.

Halley, their cocker spaniel, lived a long time; he was a good-natured boy, his skin loose and easily massaged with a palm. When he died, my father called me. "I have some bad news," he said, then paused. In that pause, my heart stopped. "Halley's no longer with us," he said, and my heart started up again, beating too hard in my chest. My father's voice stuck in his throat; he could barely say anything more, just repeated *no longer with us* as he struggled not to cry. I had never heard him so raw, filled with a grief he was willing to share.

Now, as I talk long-distance to both my parents—as they sit together in the sterile light of the hospital and wait for my father's blood to come clean—we chat with an ease and camaraderie that has never been quite so available before. We deflect our gaze toward Abbe, this animal we can exclaim over and love together simply and fully, without complication—and in so doing, feel that love refracted back onto each other. We talk about all those things no one else could bear: poop and pee, kibble and bones, leashes and halters and little doggie raincoats I never thought I would buy. We talk about sibling rivalry (Madrona yowled and swatted the dog within five minutes of being home), and we talk about the more numinous things, the things that can't really be articulated: the feel of a dog's paw, how you can run your hand over the pads of her feet for close to an hour. The texture of her belly, and the weight of her as she falls asleep crooked in your arm exactly like a small, contented person. The smell of her fur, a little like pears.

We can talk about all these things, and so not have to talk about what might happen next for my father. We all like this system, and we perform our parts with gusto. But on Friday the news is not good: they checked my father's heart as a matter of routine and found four blockages, unrelated to the blood infection. The doctors recommend triple-bypass surgery, and soon. It's as if my father's body knew something was up and had to do something drastic to get his attention, put him in the hospital where he belonged.

Over the weekend, I worry about whether I should fly to Arizona and be there on Monday for the surgery. I have a new dog, work is busy this week, it's quite impractical, but what if? My mother says I don't have to come, my father says I don't have to come, but my

brother says, in a mysterious tone: *Make your own choice*. I think about a trip I took with my parents to France last June: we roamed all over Paris, in a heat wave, and as always my pace was invariably quicker than theirs. I had vowed to be a good, compassionate, patient daughter on this trip, but sometimes I couldn't help it, I just strode ahead without them. All weekend, one image flashes obsessively in my mind: my father panting to keep up, sweat on his brow, a crepe in hand, asking me in a plaintive voice: *Can we slow down for just a minute?*

On Saturday I go to my yoga class and start crying during corpse pose; my body's never been one to pretend. Everyone keeps saying how easy heart bypass is these days, how they've got the procedure down to a quick mechanical fix, but I've never heard my father scared before, and now I hear him scared. He's questioning whether he should have the surgery at all; there are risks either way, he's a diabetic, anything can happen. He's upset that he won't have the chance to get his financial papers in order for my mother. He misses the dogs, Maggie and Tessa, and just wants to go home. We keep talking about Abbe, change the subject to puppy whenever we have the chance.

And the puppy just keeps being a puppy. Her tail seems to grow inches every day, and all my friends come by to get acquainted, each time exclaiming how wonderful she is, which in turn makes me feel as though *I'm* wonderful, and I know I'm idiotic with joy. It's an odd state: to be so filled with happiness and so beset by terror at the same time. To be in the middle. I comment to my Buddhist friends that perhaps this is what is meant by the Middle Way, and I'm only half joking, because even as I swerve between tears and laughter, I also feel wholly present—a sharp watchfulness lingers.

On Monday, the day of the surgery, I talk on the phone to my father in pre-op, and since the surgeon is running late, I also talk to my mother and two brothers and my sister-in-law, all of whom ask about the dog, and all of whom seem eager to talk about her, even through the strain in their voices. They ask how Madrona is faring with the new addition. They ask how housetraining is proceeding. I tell them of the baby teeth I find—odd, blood-specked pebbles on the floor. We speak of all the small matters because the big matters too much. And maybe because the moment seems so portentous, or maybe because there is another creature here to absorb our attention, all of them seem to love me a little more easily, to annul whatever hurt

or distance there's been in the past.

My father, it turns out, will come through the surgery just fine, and even a day later will sound more healthy than he's been in years. He'll speak with more clarity, the oxygen flowing unimpeded through his heart. But right now we can't know this, we don't know what kind of future we face. So, for now, Abbe lies next to me on the couch, and I stroke her belly with my knuckles as I talk with my family, the cell phone passed from hand to hand in that far-away pre op room, their voices muted but legible. I think carefully about what words to say to my father, because no words will be enough. The one word I don't want to say: goodbye. I touch the puckered scar from Abbe's spay, a small ridge that disrupts the expanse of her shaved, mauve underbelly. The dog, of course, is oblivious; she has no idea of herself as a lifeline. For her, it's just another day, another good day.

That's the last thing you should know.

And now Abbe and I, we're back in church; you can find us in the third pew from the rear, Abbe standing with her front paws on the back of the bench to get as good a view as possible. *Dogs in church! Dogs in church!* And now, it's time: the minister asks his assistants to move down the right and left sides of the aisles, while he descends from the altar and begins making his way up the center, hitching up his robes and kneeling as he arrives at each parishioner with a pet. I can't hear what he's saying—the noise level rose as soon as he descended, and by the way he leans close to each one I can tell this is a private moment, not meant to be shared. And the kids have taken this as another pet-every-dog--possible opportunity, darting up and down the aisles, but somehow maintaining a bubble of calm around the minister, veering away from him in convex patterns.

When I decided to come here today, I hadn't really thought about how the blessing, itself, would be administered—this one-to-one, head-to-head communion. I envisioned more of a parade of the species, with each of us leading our animal toward the altar, blessings dispensed like rain, falling on everyone at once. But this is better. I'm glad to be sitting on the center aisle, since a blessing from the priest is more likely to be potent.

As he draws near, I fumble with one hand in my purse for the picture of Madrona, while trying to get Abbe to lie still in my lap; she stretches out full length, making herself as long as possible,

trying to get close to the floor where the dogs and children mingle. Even the adults in the congregation have caught the fever, and they, too, begin to roam a bit, greeting friends, leaning over the pews to talk. A few rows ahead of me a teenaged girl holds a tiny puppy wrapped in a blanket against her shoulder; the dog can't be more than 8 weeks old, too young to be here, I think, amid so much frenzy.

And then, here he is, the minister, looming above us, a tall man with a whiskered face, his red-and-white robes fluttering in the breeze generated by all the commotion in the aisle. He kneels and asks, *Who do we have here?*, and the din in the church recedes; it feels as though we've acquired a shield, something like the "dome of silence" that used to descend on Max Smart, the spy in my favorite television show as a kid. And I tell him this is Abbe, and she has a sister Madrona, holding out her picture. *Good*, he says, *we'll keep Madrona in our thoughts as we pray.*

And then he lays his right hand on Abbe's head, a head that has miraculously gone still, and now she just looks up at the minister with the same calm gaze she gave to the young boy, tongue at rest in her mouth, eyes half-closed as if in pleasure. He says to her, in a voice low and kind: *May you live a long life of love and peace*, and some other words I can't quite catch because just then my eyes begin to fill—I hadn't expected this—and I'm trying to concentrate, to say the words silently with him, but it's difficult, because in this moment I know how much I really do love this dog, and how this love breaks me. It's as if the minister's reached in and laid his meaty palm right on the muscle of my own heart—every animal part of me that longs to feel blessed has risen to the surface, like koi in an algae-filled pond. Sheba's there, and that daffy duck waddling toward me, and my father's heart still pumping . . . *and may we pray in love, amen*, and I croak out an *amen*, and a *thank you*, and then he's gone, and a pack of children and worshippers rushes into the eddy he leaves behind. A woman asks, cheerfully, *What kind of dog is this?*, oblivious to the tears I'm wiping away with the flat of my hand.

I mumble an answer, feeling a little foolish that I'm so shaken, but what can I say, there are *dogs in church!*, and I gather up Abbe and her leash and her treats and we make our way toward the back of the sanctuary, where everyone has circled up for the closing hymn. My dog and I take a place at the end of the line, the circle here petering out into a ragged spiral. I hold a stranger's hand with my

right hand, Abbe with the other; Madrona is folded up in my purse. I look around the church to see—lined up along the walls, under the windows—a hundred familiar faces gazing into the center, their voices giving blessing to all that is animal, the animals blessing us in reply. I hoist a panting Abbe onto my hip, and we sway in perfect time to a song I have no idea how to sing.