

November 2019

Dog People

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Recommended Citation

Nunn, Catherine (2019) "Dog People," *The Anthology*: Vol. 2019, Article 27.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/anthology/vol2019/iss1/27>

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A stranger holds his thumb down on the needle's plunger and pushes slow like it hurts, or like it's taking all his strength—shoving out life and filling death in—as he euthanizes the white and sable Shih Tzu on the blanket.

You cry. The nurse cries. Bailey cries. The vet watches, intent, then un-loops the stethoscope from around his neck and presses it to Muppet's side a couple times before giving a single nod.

You heard from somewhere that suicide rates among veterinarians are high, unusually high. Maybe you'd wanted to be one. What do you want to be when you grow up? A vet. What kid wouldn't? Someone who would get to play with kitties and puppies as their job, who could think about all their adorable patients during the morning commute.

The drive to the vet's office was thirty minutes on a Friday. Muppet sat in the front seat in Bailey's lap, panting and antsy, turning his head all the way around to look when you spoke because of his blind eye. She wanted you to be there, so you drove and parked, carried the blanket.

You haven't become a vet and don't plan to. Her vet—some old, balding yet soft-bodied looking man, seems to have beaten the statistics. You drove her to the office, and he drives his thumb down and pushes out all the life that only ten minutes ago existed to eat cookies and sniff, to come when called, a recall of bouncing crooked legs and tail.

Those sorts of things must be trained. Hours on end, just you and dog. It's no wonder we grow to resemble each other. That dogs—like humans at the ends of their lives, can fade or disappear, little dog-shaped gaps in routines or visits you try not to see coming.

Almost like—at work, in the middle of your shift, your sister's boyfriend calling because your fifteen-year-old golden retriever isn't doing so good. You know. You saw. You'd been making plans, but summer is busy and you're working, like it's any excuse. He calls.

She's given up. Life is hard, her body aches, you aren't there to scratch at the spot of velvet behind her ears until she trembles, unable to contain herself. So much joy. You tell him to take her in because if your sister's boyfriend can see that she's ready then she must be.

After few ice cream scoops are handed out at the drive-thru window, he calls again. You get your vet on the phone since she's your dog, and there needs to be a discussion. She has sores from

laying in one spot and refusing to get up. She has no reason to get up, because you're not there. Treat the sores or her pain, she might be fine, but there's no medicine to fix her life or yours.

Go ahead, you tell the vet. The dog is fifteen. She must be ready.

You picture the little room at the vet's office you told your sister's boyfriend to take her. It's real tiny in there. Not a whole lot of décor, just business, counters and examining tables, old timey photographs of children with fuzzy dogs. The vet stands over your golden girl and pushes, and you imagine it's like a pleased sigh going out of her tired, sore body, while your sister's boyfriend stands nearby like you think he did, hands in his pockets. You hope he said a few words. A soft goodbye. Good dog, as dog people say.

He builds a little cross and hangs her blue collar on it. You go by a few days later to see your other dog, and you don't know where on the property he put it, but you don't ask. You couldn't say goodbye then. You aren't sure how to say it now.

It's just that speaking to dogs is nonsensical, except humans talked to dogs so much they learned to read tone, then bodies and faces, expressions and gestures. It's been studied that wolves don't turn to humans for help nor can they follow pointed fingers like dogs do. Dogs give up on difficult problems almost immediately if a human is nearby to solve it for them.

You point now for your border collie mix, Ari, to swim after her toy into the murky water of Lake Wateree, then give up on pointing and decide tough parenting is better. It never occurred to you that some dogs aren't built for swimming right away. She's a doggy-paddle-school dropout.

You carry her into the water for her first swim then plop her in. She sinks. You are waist deep in disgusting brown lake water, and your brand-new shelter mutt bobs vertical and goes under. Both hands yank scruff and scoop under her chest; you haul your pathetic failure of a dog out of the water, both of you gasping for air and shaking.

The next summer you stand knee-deep in nasty brown water at Lake Kendall in Camden, holding a toy out, Ari adorned in a hot pink life-vest. You throw out the toy and cheer as she paddles determinedly by you, out farther than you could swim if she started going under but she won't—you paid twenty-five bucks at PetSmart to ensure the life of your ninety-five dollar investment at the local animal shelter.

Some popular Instagram dog accounts leave their followers devastated by posting about freak accidents. A German shepherd, someone's lifeline—a service dog—bolting after a deer in the yard, crossing over a busy street. His handler calling him back to her into the path of a semi-truck. Working-line dogs, Malinois and Dutch shepherds, going ahead of their owner on a snowy trail they've traversed hundreds of times, skittering out onto a frozen lake then busting through. Two of the dogs climbed out. Two more—unable to make it as their owner watched from the shore.

Dog people, those people were, real ones. You can barely get Ari to heel properly; she throws her butt out every time as the instructors in your obedience

class look on. Paying old, the real deal sort of trainers, one-hundred-fifty bucks to watch your shelter mutt fail at heeling in an advanced class—what sort of dog people are you?

The O.G. dog people needed dogs for work but there were also dog people who felt less alone with a few dogs at the camp-fire, who heard the warning barks on fields at night in the midst of their flocks, who pressed faces to damp fur in the middle of a blizzard, hunkered down with their team and lived to see another day—Ari peers down at you in the mornings with impudence and then yawns, such an important job she does, making sure the first thing you see when you wake up is a stupid brown dog face staring back at you.

You paid ninety-five dollars for that. The correct term is emotional support. Yeah, she's your emotional support animal, you bought her, and she couldn't even swim properly and she pissed on the back porch when she was a puppy because the morning dew was too offensive for her dainty princess paws at seven in the morning.

Muppet reached a point where he was having accidents in the house. Dog people learn to recognize signs. One old dog thing, like old people, is piss in the house where you don't want it to be. Sometimes there's a deer. Or a frozen lake that you see too late because the dogs are already inside of it, one of their bodies still yet to be recovered.

You don't even know if there is a body under that cross and blue collar. Of course, there must be, but you didn't see it get put there, all you did was say a few words over the phone. After adopting Ari, you posted on Instagram: is this the right decision, this puppy, when there's two elderly dogs needing care already? Two old dogs who, within the same year, are euthanized as their lights go out, as you sit at work or class and try not to think about it.

When Ari dies, you pray it won't be a freak accident, that her body will be safe, and you will be next to it. All dogs deserve that, but not all of them get it.

Ari stares when she wants something. Training. Food. Mental stimulation, physical exercise. Big brown eyes. Give me the thing, human, I demand it of you.

You speak back. She understands tone. Play? Work? Class? Something exciting.

Her body wiggles with life, a full-body shiver of pleasure, of mutual understanding. At night, she curls around your body like a peanut. You roll over, you touch her warm flank once to feel her breathing, to spoon her because it's amusing, and she lets you.

Dog people know other dog people when they see them.

They listen to the dog. They train a recall so perfect the dog turns from chasing a deer back into oncoming traffic, they trust them to go ahead on the trail, they watch the plunger drive down, they do their best to love every dog that comes into their life the same as the one before, their hands are waiting in deep water.