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A Team in the Face of the World: Dogs as Narrative Agents in Memoirs about Life after Loss

My first dogs, Rory and Tig, arrived in my life while I was in the middle of a long-term relationship with an abusive partner. I never could have predicted that the necessity of caring for them would often be the sole reason for getting out of bed, for stepping outside, for taking a walk. Even through the haze of deep depression, I'd watch them explore the neighborhood on our outings: Tig tucking his head and tail low and charging in focused pursuit after geese; Rory sensing movement under the grass and, reminiscent of a fox, leaping in the air and then striking the earth with both forepaws. Our walks became a kind of meditation, and as my mind quieted, my bodily senses rose up: I could breathe with rare ease, feel my shoulders drop, my mind clear. Seeing them delight in the world around us and sensing their happiness that we were outdoors together, were reminders of why I might want to continue living.

Prior to reading Mark Doty's *Dog Years*, Abigail Thomas' *A Three Dog Life*, and Caroline Knapp's *Pack of Two*, I had not associated memoir about dogs with literary nonfiction, nor had I considered how memoirs that grapple with such intensely human experiences as trauma, loss, and breakups could be made more compelling by centering the role their dogs played during these times of emotional upheaval. To varying degrees, the occasion for each of these three memoirs is loss, but what ties them together is that the narrators answer that loss with the adoption of dogs. *Dog Years* opens with the decline of Doty's husband Wally and his death from AIDS. *A Three Dog Life* begins with a catastrophic accident: Thomas' husband Rich is struck by oncoming traffic while chasing after their beagle Harry and is left with a

traumatic brain injury. And, at the start of *Pack of Two*, Knapp writes of the sudden loss of both of her parents to cancer, her nascent recovery from alcoholism, and the ending of a long-term romantic relationship. In the wake of these losses, each narrator grapples with how to heal and move forward on their own, and, for Doty, Thomas, and Knapp, their dogs are the central force that helps them to do so.

Shortly before Wally's death, Doty brings home a malnourished golden retriever puppy, Beau, under the pretense of the dog being for Wally, but it is Beau who helps both Doty and their older retriever, Arden, survive Wally's death. Not long after Rich's accident, Thomas adopts Rosie, a dachshund-whippet mix, and a stray hound, Carolina. In the wake of the death of Knapp's parents, the loss of her primary coping mechanism, and amidst ambivalence about her partner, Knapp is overcome with the desire for a dog to love her and to love. She goes to the shelter and arrives home with Lucille, "a most ordinary-looking dog," who becomes the organizing principle of her life (5).

These three memoirs evoked several craft questions for me: How do dogs serve as narrative agents in memoirs about human feeling and transition? What is it about dogs that helps the humans in their lives survive loss? How do these authors write about dogs without succumbing to sentimentality? What craft tools do they employ to engage readers in the content about their dogs? And what distinguishes them from the plentiful commercial memoirs written about dogs? Certainly, Knapp's, Thomas', and Doty's mastery of craft is crucial—using descriptive and embodied writing about their dogs to create fully fledged characters, who they position as narrative agents within their memoirs, also while avoiding sentimentality. Doty offers us a theory about why sentimental images tend to feel flat and uninteresting:

The greeting card verse, the airbrushed rainbow, the sweet puppy face on the fleecy pink sweatshirt—these images do no honor the world as it is, in its complexity and individuality, but distort things in apparent service of a warm embrace. They feel empty because they will not acknowledge the inherent anger that things are not as shown. (15)

Dog Years, *A Three Dog Life*, and *Pack of Two* do not gloss over the pain that spurs the writing of these memoirs. Doty's rage at the injustices experienced by the gay community during the AIDS epidemic, his personal loss of his partner to this horrific disease, and his despair in the face of the coming loss of his dearest companions—Arden and Beau, are on the page. Knapp's struggles with alcoholism, the sudden death of both of her parents, her fear of intimacy, are all there on the page. The graphic account of Rich's accident, Thomas' reckoning with her forever-altered husband, her darkest and most shameful thoughts, are all there. In contrast, the sentimental pretends that darkness doesn't live alongside the warm and fuzzy, seeks to disassociate from pain and grief, and lures us into a place where death and despair do not exist. These three authors don't airbrush their shame, fear, anger, and distrust in favor of vague, happy memories of being with their dogs. No, they lean into the fullness and complexity of their lives and offer with keen specificity their darkest moments as well as their most hopeful to us, the readers, as a gift that allows us to see ourselves reflected in their pages, to feel less alone in our own experiences of loss and love, despair and delight, rage and relief.

Mark Doty's *Dog Years*, Abigail Thomas's *A Three Dog Life*, and Caroline Knapp's *Pack of Two* together illuminate how living alongside a dog reveals essential ingredients for moving through grief and creating a new life after significant losses. These ingredients include daily routines of care and connection, the imperative of the walk, and the formation of the pack. Each in their own way, Arden, Beau, Harry, Rosie, Carolina, and Lucille guide Doty, Thomas and Knapp out of their grief and into a present-focused, sensory world where they experience delight, playfulness, and "a sense of being a team against or in face of the world" (Doty 98).

Daily Routines of Care & Connection

In *Pack of Two*, Knapp uses metaphor to describe the intimate relationship that is built between a human and a dog through daily routines of care and connection. She writes:

Here I am with my dog. Me and my dog. The closeness feels like a private bridge, extending from human to animal, a causeway that nobody can cross in quite the same way you do.

The causeway is constructed of ritual and repetition and simple moments, of behaviors discovered and then executed exclusively between human and dog, and there is something exceptionally restorative about crossing it day after day. (211)

Knapp mimics the metaphor of the private bridge in her language and sentence structure by closely joining together the subjects “human” and “animal”/“dog” with the conjunctions “and,” “with,” and “to.” In this passage, she also highlights how “ritual and repetition” become part of the language of the human-animal bond and notes that the work of crossing this bridge between species is not taxing but “restorative”; that there is something about these daily moments of cross-species connection that offers reprieve from the burdens of the human world.

In *A Three Dog Life*, Thomas writes about how the routines of caring for her dogs help fill the void left by Rich in their home. Here Thomas explains how, after taking Rich back to the care home where he lives, the rituals she and her dogs have developed soften the harsh reality that Rich is never coming home:

The house feels lonely when I first get back, although the dogs are barking and jumping their greetings. I feed them, put down fresh water. ... When I go into the living room the dogs follow, Rosie hopping up on the cushion behind my back on the big red chair, Harry and Carolina curling up on either end of the sofa. The blue chair where Rich sat stays empty. It takes maybe half an hour for me and the dogs to fill the house again, but we do. (115)

At the start of this passage, the separateness of the narrator and the dogs is emphasized. Whereas the dogs are excited that the narrator is back, she is acutely aware of Rich’s absence. But as she moves through the rituals of feeding and watering the dogs, the narrator and her three dogs become a “we” powerful enough to banish the loneliness that permeated their home just half an hour before.

Doty remarks on how the necessity of caring for his dogs after Wally's death is his salvation during a time when he could scarcely meet his own needs:

[W]hen it came to taking care of myself, I never felt so completely incapacitated. But somehow it was exactly right that I had someone else to take care of. Here was the golden anchor—steady in terms of need if not behavior. . . . If I'd planned it, I couldn't have done a better thing to save my life. (87)

Similarly, Knapp reflects:

Lucille as companion. Lucille as agent of structure, the being who'd get me out of the house each morning and night, out to the woods each weekend. And Lucille as a kind of guide dog, the creature who'd be by my side as I began to create another kind of life for myself, to look at what it might mean to create a life in the first place. (189)

For each narrator, living alongside their dog(s) and the daily routine of caring for them shifts their focus away from the loss of humans in their lives and towards the present moment experience of caring for and connecting with another living creature. Interestingly, all three narrators use the metaphor of an anchor when describing how their dogs become a touchstone during the tumult of grief: Beau is "the golden anchor" (87), Harry is a "solid anchor" on the end of the leash (38), and Lucille is "a small anchor, a steady presence" (218).

The Walk

For the narrators of *Dog Years* and *Pack of Two*, the walk serves as a central bonding ritual. "A walk is a walk and must be taken," writes Doty, who sees his daily outings with Arden and Beau as a grounding routine that forces the narrator to get outside (of the house and of his grief) (87). Knapp describes how her walks change with Lucille on the end of the leash: "Walks are slower: you find yourself ambling up a city street instead of racing to a destination, the dog stopping to sniff every third leaf, every other twig,

every bit of debris or detritus in your path” (7-8). Knapp brings our attention to the shift from the fast-paced human world driven by productivity to the leisurely, scent-focused world of a dog. On the sentence level, the word “ambling” and the repetition of “every” functionally serve to slow down the reading of the sentence.

Knapp and Doty both discuss the healing that occurs simply by observing their dogs wilding in nature. Knapp and Doty sense their dogs’ unbridled joy, and vicariously they too experience an otherwise difficult-to-access delight. Doty describes watching Beau as he explores the world around them on their walks: “Beau would race the paths with his paws thundering; he’d lift his head to sniff the wind, taking in all it carried: evidence of snow and, someplace in these woods, a fox; the salt and fish oil tang of the bay. I’d watch him breathing in the world with such delight” (87). Beau becomes a vehicle for the narrator to reconnect to his sensory awareness, and both experience a momentary reprieve from grief and genuine contentment. Similarly, Knapp remarks on how the basic act of witnessing Lucille in the outdoors, in one example as a puppy stalking an ant, fills her with positive emotion: “I watch this, and I smile. Smile and smile and smile” (19).

Like young children, dogs appear to live largely in a present-moment, sensory world, and, if we allow ourselves, we can join them there. *In Pack of Two*, the narrator reflects that while living life alongside a dog, their present-moment orientation “rubs off on you, cues you in to sounds and smells and sights, eases temporal human concerns” (212). Knapp then describes just such an experience with Lucille: “I’ll . . . watch the way her whole body is attuned to what’s happening that very instant—what smells are wafting her way, what sounds she’s picking up, what insect is flitting across her field of vision—and I’ll think: Ah, *right now*; that’s what it’s like to live right now” (212). In this passage, Knapp brings attention to the immediacy of this experience with the words “attuned,” “very instant,” and “right now” as well as to the sensory with the words “smells,” “sounds,” and “vision.”

Doty, too, elucidates how walks with Beau and Arden bring him relief from overwhelming grief by drawing him into the here-and-now:

Walking—a way of being in the present, taking what comes, relinquishing, to some degree, control of what’s next, simply following the paths—seems to lift me a little. . . .

Walking is an affirmation of physical life. We’re in the world, we’re breathing, we’re together.

(90-1)

In this passage, the walk becomes a metaphor for a different way of existing, one where Doty can let go of many of the burdens of the human world, cede control to his dogs and the walking path, and practice coping with the unexpected. Doty’s repetition of “we’re” emphasizes that what is healing is the essential togetherness of hiking alongside a dog; Wally may be gone but because Doty and the dogs are together, he is not alone. “With the two of them,” he writes, “I’m joined to something else, perception expands, not just stuck there in the world in my own bereft, perishable, limited body” (91).

The Pack

Dogs, who have been living and evolving alongside humans over 30,000 years, are our oldest nonhuman-animal companions. Dogs are social creatures and some scientists say they have passed this pack mentality onto humans. For the narrators of *Dog Years*, *Pack of Two*, and *A Three Dog Life*, their dogs impart a sense of comfort and protection that help them create new lives for themselves in the wake of loss. All three narrators draw attention to their familial connection to their dogs by referring to themselves as part of a “pack” and by using the first-person plural point of view. Knapp refers to herself and Lucille as “[u]s, that pack of two” (227); Thomas reveals “I was a card-carrying member of an animal pack” (74); and Doty writes, “I suppose there’s something to be said for joining a pack. We have a sweetness about us, we have a sense of being a team against or in the face of the world” (98).

After Rich was struck by a car while chasing Harry, the narrator of *A Three Dog Life* is often faced with the question, “How do you feel about your dog now?” Thomas answers, “It seemed a peculiar question. [...] In the first weeks of Rich’s hospitalization I would often wake in the night to reach for him only to find that the warmth I felt at my side was Harry’s small body. In those moments grief and gratitude combined[.] (37)

Similarly, Knapp tells a friend, “I’m not sure I would have been able to face the loss if I hadn’t had the dog” (9). And when asked by another friend about her experience living alone, Knapp remarks, “But I’m not alone. I have her,” pointing to Lucille (9). Even in the early days of cohabitating with Lucille, Knapp experiences how Lucille allows her to be present to her emotions in a way that was previously inaccessible to her:

I’d let [Lucille] up onto the bed with me. She’d writhe with joy at that. She’d wag her tail and squirm all over me, lick my neck and face and eyes and ears, get her paws all tangled in my braid, and I’d just lie there, and I’d feel those oceans of loss from my past ebbing back, ebbing away, and I’d hear myself laugh out loud. (35)

Each of these writers shares about specific places where their pack comes together to bond. In *A Three Dog Life*, Thomas writes about one of their daily rituals: “‘Naptime,’ I announce, and my pack and I scramble towards the sofa, where we will doze for a good long while, piled on top of each other like a bunch of puppies” (77). In the following passage, Thomas reflects on the healing power of “we”:

Rosie dives under the quilt on my right, Harry on my left, and we jam ourselves together. After a little bit Harry starts to snore, Rosie rests her chin on my ankle, the blanket rises and falls with our breathing, and I feel only gratitude. We are doing something as necessary to our well-being as food or air or water. We are steeping ourselves, reassuring ourselves, renewing ourselves, three creatures of two species, finding comfort in the simple exchange of body warmth. (39)

The intimate space of the bed, formerly shared with her husband Rich but now occupied by her dogs, is a place Thomas returns to in her memoir to demonstrate the familial relationship that has developed between her and her dogs in Rich's absence.

The bed as a site where the pack forms and their attachment grows is also apparent in Knapp's and Doty's memoirs. Knapp reflects on the intimacy of sleeping in the bed each night with Lucille and how she hasn't experienced this degree of closeness since her childhood spent with her twin sister (227). Shortly before Wally's death, Doty writes of pushing an old single bed up against Wally's hospital bed so they can still spend nights together, along with Beau and Arden: "We've made an island, a small, very full home" (79). This island becomes a refuge and a place for the pack to come together in the safety and protection of togetherness.

Writing Dogs

Without words, but through physical togetherness and close, mutual observation, dogs and humans learn one another deeply. The challenge then becomes, how to portray this speechless connection in words and how to do so without succumbing to sentimentality. Doty's, Thomas', and Knapp's memoirs are each filled with intimate and vivid descriptions of their canine companions that bring the dogs to life as multifaceted characters. Early in *Pack of Two*, Knapp describes Lucille in loving detail:

[H]er face the color of ink with a faint grey mask[,] ... her two forelegs are white, one halfway up from the paw, the other about a quarter of the way, which creates the impression that she is wearing ladies' gloves; there is also the tiniest bit of white mixed into the fur at her chin, which makes her look vaguely like Ho Chi Minh[.] (5)

Knapp's description of Lucille is engaging because it is specific in its choice of detail, and lighthearted and playful in its comparisons. She goes on to write, "When you study a dog you love, you find beauty in every small detail" (5). This was also true for Thomas when she first saw Rosie:

It really was love at first sight, although she looked like a handful—high-strung, and nervous. Half-dachshund, half-whippet (a union that must have come with an instruction sheet), she was simply the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. She looked like a miniature deer, a gazelle, or a dachshund's dream come true. ... I knelt down and stroked her silky brown coat, and looked into a very nervous pair of brown eyes. (36)

Thomas' instant love for Rosie imbues the narrator's characterization with admiration, appreciation, and humor. Thomas overlooks Rosie's anxiety and clashing breed-mixture, instead falling for her delicate legs, soft coat, and soulful eyes.

Likewise, Doty's deep love and intimate knowledge of Arden and Beau comes through in his portrayals of his two cherished companions, even in his descriptions of their smell. In the last days of Beau's life, Doty recollects "[t]he salt-marsh smell rising from his body after a walk in June (there is nothing else in the world that smells exactly like a golden retriever dipped in a salt marsh)" (17). Or after Arden was sprayed by a skunk, Doty brings the reader close: "The pink whorls of his ears, under their lustrous flaps, at least retain the scent they'll carry for all of Arden's life: inexplicably, the nicely sweet odor of corn muffins" (97). Even when writing of the look and smell of a dog's ears, his reverence for those ears and his devotion to Arden are clear in the lyric quality of "pink whorls" and "lustrous flap."

The degree of time spent in proximity allows these narrators to observe and learn each of their dogs' distinct personalities and develop them as full-fledged characters in their writing. In *Pack of Two*, Knapp notes from their first meeting that "Lucille is a remarkably serene dog" (28) and later describes her, full of pride for her stoic pup, "as a creature of eminent dignity and restraint, a serious, watchful presence who always knows exactly what's going on in a room" (45-6). Both Doty and Thomas, who have more than one dog, often highlight the differences between their dogs. For example, Thomas writes, "[w]alking Rosie is like having a kite on the end of a leash while Harry stumps along maturely, a small solid anchor" (38), and of her final addition to the pack, she highlights the seemingly contradictory characteristics that

make Carolina a unique individual: “Carolina Bones was gangly and goofy, with a lugubrious expression that gave her a kind of ridiculous dignity” (73). Here, we see Thomas choose precise words to describe each of her dogs’ bodies in order to also reveal something about their personalities.

Likewise, Doty highlights the differences between Arden and Beau to develop their individuality. “Arden,” writes Doty in *Dog Years*, “came with a meditative, observant disposition, a way of looking off thoughtfully which communicated a reflective demeanor, and an absolute desire to please and indicate that *of course* he knew the right way to behave” (52). This portrayal demonstrates Doty’s respect and admiration for Arden’s mature, controlled character, which contrasts with Beau’s puppy-like personality. Beau, described as having a wild, somewhat naughty streak, nonetheless imbues Doty’s days with unpredictability and delight:

Beau loves, for instance, to steal gloves; he’ll get a tricky gleam in his eye, sidle up as if he wants your affectionate attention, and then get his teeth into the fingertips of a glove—done, interestingly, with great delicacy, so as not to injure the hand, just enough pressure to catch the knit of the glove or mitten on those sharp white canines, and then he’s off, racing delightedly into the snow with your nicest new striped glove in his jaws. (89)

In this passage, Doty takes his time, drawing the reader in with precise details and actions (“tricky gleam,” “with great delicacy,” “sharp white canines,” “sidle up,” “racing delightedly”).

Their contrasting coat colors (Arden is black and Beau is golden) are also ripe for metaphor. In the long passage below, the narrator is grappling with Beau’s sudden decline. Beau who lifted him and Arden out of their depression during Wally’s final days and ushered them into a new life (a happy one with a new person in their lives, albeit one that still feels precarious to Doty); Beau who should have outlived Arden but whose days are now numbered. Doty has just observed the way light enters between buildings on their walk, creating a diagonal of “rosy gold” sunlight in the darkness:

I loved that light, and in some way, it was [*Beau's*] gold—that same warm suspension, held there in the cold air a little while. And then the whole world would seem divided that way, half a haze of golden light, and half an inky, magnetic darkness.

Of course, the square wasn't pitch dark where the light didn't fall, simply a more somber gray and rose. Pitch dark, after all, is a beautiful color, like Arden's rich, black luster. But in me, where I kept and carried that pattern of light, it was different: the world seemed split into radiance and a pure, hungry darkness. Because there was the presence—golden, eager, loving, alert—and there was the emptiness that it countered, and I knew so clearly that [...] *my* gold was disappearing, failing before my eyes, and I had no power to intervene[.] (13-14)

Here, Doty reflects on how golden-coated, energetic Beau has kept the darkness of despair from enveloping him completely. Doty's powerlessness to keep Beau alive is reminiscent of his helplessness in the face of Wally's decline and we can sense the narrator's dread that the darkness will again consume him in the absence of Beau's golden light.

Embodied Writing

The powerful connection that arises between human and dog is fundamentally embodied in nature; it is a connection not centered around words but rather gesture, touch, and sensorial observation. Writing about this relationship, therefore, calls for an attention to the way non-human animals and humans communicate through the language of the body.

Knapp shares about a daily ritual of Lucille's "that seems to speak to a level of connection between us that I cherish":

[S]he is asking me to give her my hand, and when I comply, she will sit down next to me and spend several minutes licking it. She looks like a little fawn at a salt lick when she does this—her ears go

back, her manner is gentle and concentrated, and she sometimes places a paw on my wrist to steady my hand, a gesture that feels delicate and tender and full of affection to me. (111)

Knapp nods to the nonverbal, cross-species communication that develops between humans and companion animals when we are willing to study them as intently as they study us. Earlier in her memoir, Knapp describes a similar gesture of connection between Lucille and the narrator when she returns home after being away:

[H]er whole body seemed to tighten into a smile: the pointed ears drew flat back, the tail thumped against the sofa cushion, the eyes gleamed, the expression took on a depth and clarity that suggested, *Happy; I am completely happy*. ... I crouched down ... and she hooked her front paw over my forearm. She gazed at me; I gazed back. ...

[M]oments like that, my heart fills in a way that still strikes me with novelty and power. The colors come into sharp focus: attached, connected, joyful, *us*. (15)

These two passages are effective because they combine both clear imagery of Lucille's body ("ears go back," "ears drew flat back," "tail thumped," "eyes gleamed") and gesture ("licking [my hand]," "places a paw on my wrist," "hooked her front paw," "gazed at me"), and descriptions of the interior emotional experience Lucille's actions elicit in the narrator. Through these moments of physical connection, Knapp experiences feelings of care, affection, attachment, and joy.

Doty similarly provides the reader with a close look at how the love between him and his beloved Arden and Beau is expressed through physical touch and bodily connection. Doty describes meeting Beau in the shelter and how when he "put the beautiful weight of his head in my hands. / That did it" (76). Later, he writes of "Arden's version of a hug: he buries his face in your chest, as you kneel in front of him, and pushes the top of his head against you, as if to express your love for someone is to disappear into them as far as you can go" (207). The narrator senses Arden's love for him communicated through the joining of their bodies. Towards the end of Beau's life, Doty describes his habit of taking Beau to swim in

the ocean and how, “when we were both worn out, [Beau would] sit on the sand beside me, leaning his damp weight into me in affection and solidarity” (17).

Each of these scenes communicate an instant connection, a deep trust and bond built over years, the many ways dogs touch the hearts of their humans. They are full of physicality (“gazes into my face,” “beautiful weight,” “buries his face in your chest,” “pushes the top of his head against you,” “sit ... beside me,” “leaning his damp weight”) and they show dogs reaching out to their human companions for embodied connection—the type we humans don’t always know how to ask for but need deeply.

Change Arc

All three narrators experience dramatic change over the course of each memoir, and their dogs play a central role in shepherding them through their losses into a life beyond grief. At the start of *Pack of Two*, Knapp is not only still grieving the recent loss of both of her parents but she has also given up her primary coping strategy: alcohol. Knapp shares that she drank to numb her emotions and calm her social anxiety. When she finally gives up drinking, Knapp must look for new ways to contend with her fears. For Knapp the answers come while sitting “outside with Lucille day after day” (41). With Lucille by her side, she is brave enough not to run from feeling or from closeness; she develops the ability to be present to “that torrent of emotion—joy and delight and surprise along with self-doubt and anxiety and confusion” and, perhaps most importantly, “love” (41).

Early in her memoir, Knapp is steeped in ambivalence about her romantic relationship, and simultaneously begins yearning for a dog. She imagines that with a non-human animal she might be able to finally experience “[l]ove without ambivalence. Family members who won’t leave. Intimacy that’s not scary, that doesn’t require a lot of anesthesia” (23). Throughout *Pack of Two*, Knapp notes, how, with Lucille, she’s able to circumvent the difficulties she’s had in relationships with humans. “My human relationships are unpredictable, sometimes volatile, always subject to complication and flux,” writes Knapp, “[b]ut my

dog stays the same, her reactions to me constant. In a sea of changeable emotions and circumstances, she is a small anchor, a steady presence who bears witness to the most private details, the monumental shifts and incremental changes, who remains right there” (218). Lucille’s constancy is key as Knapp configures a life and identity for herself after losing her parents and without the crutch of drinking or the daily support of a romantic partner.

Knapp reflects on the early days of her sobriety and how hazy the future looked: “But at the center I can see the clearest image, the most important one: a woman holding a leash instead of a drink; a woman with a dog by her side, *this* dog” (237). This prescient image becomes reality as Knapp builds a life around Lucille—spending weekends wilding together in the outdoors and cuddling each night. And all throughout, Knapp is learning from Lucille how to experience sensorial delight and embodied peace in the present-moment without the numbing of alcohol. As Knapp’s love and dedication to Lucille grows, her dog becomes a central motivation to maintain her sobriety:

I look at her sometimes at night, and I think about what a mess I’d be if I were still drinking, about how compromised my ability to care for her would be[;] ... [she is] an emblem not just of what I’ve been able to give to another being but of what I’ve been able to give to myself: consistency, continuity, connection. In a word, love. (237-8)

Thomas also undergoes profound changes in the company of her dogs. In the aftermath of Rich’s accident, Thomas eventually must accept that Rich is permanently altered and will never be able to live at home. From this realization, Thomas must envision and then enact a different life for herself:

I put a life together with my family and friends and dogs. I learned to make use of the solitude I now had aplenty. I started writing, wanting to make something useful come from our catastrophe, and working hard, I began to be happy. ... I made new friends, I learned to knit, I watched my dogs play with no leashes. I met other writers, and we began to share our work. (122)

However, as Thomas moves through and away from her grief, she experiences a backlash of guilt. “[O]ne day I asked myself a terrible question. If I could make Rich’s accident never have happened, would I do it? Of course I would. Wouldn’t I? And instead of yes, I hesitated. But by posing the question I had assumed the power, and by hesitating I put myself behind the wheel of the car that struck my husband” (122-3). Thomas ultimately divulges her shame to her sister, who quickly corrects Thomas’ thinking, “But it’s not about Rich’s accident . . . [y]ou don’t want to return to unhappiness. That’s all” (123). Thomas realizes that she can both wish she could have stopped the accident from occurring *and* enjoy her current contentedness, and here she finds freedom: “I love the person [Rich] is now, I love who I am when I’m with him, and I can sometimes hold these two truths in my head at once: I wish he were whole, and I love my life” (124).

Thomas could have centered her memoir around any of the aspects of her new life, perhaps writing or friendship, but instead she wrote *A Three Dog Life*, a memoir driven by the physical presence and daily antics of her dogs. “[M]y dogs make me laugh, and they comfort me, and I’m never bored with them. When Rosie’s head lies on my shoulder, Harry crams himself into my left side, and Carolina curls up like something folded by a Chinese laundry, impossibly small and neat, I am perfectly happy” (74). It is her dog pack that allows her to move through the shock and trauma of Rich’s accident and create a full and happy life.

In *Dog Years*, Doty shares candidly about the deep depression that consumed him in the years following Wally’s death. But in the sensorial world he inhabits with Beau and Arden on their walks, Doty experiences a subtle yet monumental shift in perspective: “It isn’t that one wants to live for the sake of a dog, exactly, but that dogs show you why you might want to” (91). Alongside his dogs, Doty begins to see the world anew, he smells the salty air, smiles at Arden and Beau’s amusing behaviors, and relishes the physical intimacy of their relationship. Beau, in particular, plays the role of shepherding both Arden and Doty through the loss of Wally and into a new life with a new partner.

But when Beau's health precipitously declines and the narrator knows he will lose Beau soon, the narrator describes a scene where he fantasizes about jumping from a ferry with Beau in his arms, drowning them both. "*I have never wanted so clearly to die in my life, I have never felt so little resistance to the impulse*" (137). But again, it is Beau, the "golden anchor" (87), who keeps Doty tied to the world of the living. For as the narrator imagines the possible outcomes of his suicidal act, he shudders imagining that Beau may not die, may try to save him, may suffer. "Somehow my faith in human attachments, my belief in the cementing bonds that hold us all together, just wasn't there," writes Doty, "[i]t was only the trusting silent fellow at my feet ... it was that trust, that day, that kept me in the world" (143).

By the time Beau dies and Arden is nearing the end of his life, something has changed inside of Doty. He writes, "[o]nce, having built myself a carapace against despair, I sank under the weight of that protective encasement. But that shield has been slowly falling away" (196). In allowing himself to be present to his grief instead of fortressing himself as he had in the past, Doty realizes that emotional pain is temporary and despair no longer fills his entire emotional landscape. This profound shift within the narrator allows him to feel Beau's vibrancy beating on within him:

I am thinking of Beau's big paws on these same paths all those years; that sound's still with me, the solid thud of four big paws, the lovely little thunder of him racing ahead. That never exactly leaves. Somehow, *memory* seems too slight a word, too evanescent; this is almost a physical sensation, the sounds of those paws, and it comes allied to the color and heat of him, the smell of warm fur, the kinetic life of being hardly ever still: what lives in me. (177)

For Doty this laying down of emotional walls is a remarkable shift after years of grief and depression, and he nods to Arden and Beau for helping him arrive here: "Despair is one note in the range of feeling that will pour through me, over time, but I do not have to be frozen there, locked in the absence of futurity and of hope. Animal presences remain for me, as they have always been, a door toward feeling and understanding" (197).

Conclusion

Just as Lucille was a guide dog for Knapp, who showed her that an unconventional life, not centered around a spouse or children but around a dog and friends, could be just as full and happy, each of these writers became a guide for me. As I read their memoirs about their intimate connection to their dogs, I saw my life reflected in Knapp's, Thomas', and Doty's writing. These memoirs became a permission portal for me, not only to feel proud of the life I have created and always dreamed of living among a pack of non-human animals, but also to write about it.

Like Knapp with Lucille, only with Rory and Tig do I feel completely uninhibited—free to get down on the floor, tussle and howl, and embody the goofy, playful part of myself I thought I'd lost. Like Thomas and her pack of three, I relish my end of day routine with Rory and Tig, snuggling in close on the couch. After the years of abuse and neglect that had occurred in our home, it is there on the couch—“piled on top of each other like a bunch of puppies” (Thomas, 77)—that I've begun to experience a feeling of physical and emotional safety for the first time. And like Doty, I continue to find solace and renewal in the space of the walk: worries fade, depression lifts, and in their absence, my sense-awareness, the satisfying rhythm of my steps, the deepening bond between me, Rory, and Tig, emerge.

Dogs offer us something that other humans cannot: not only an escape from “temporal human concerns” but also a bridge to the playful, sensory animal-natures within us. Dogs show us that the way through emotional pain is to live fully in the present where we can inhabit the small pleasures of our senses. And, they remind us day after day, that we don't have to face the world alone; we are part of a pack now.

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