First Communion, 1973 (obviously a white-tie affair).

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THE DEATH OF ANIMALS

R. Clifton Spargo

"It's not like the grief you feel for a person," she declared, "it's much, much worse." She said this in direct response (though not in the moment) to all those people who tried to remind her that it was only a pet that had died. She said it implicitly to her mother with whom she'd been fighting the last few weeks, so angry with her for having had the audacity two days after the dog's death to ask Anne to be assured that, whatever mutual hurt and misunderstanding might come between them, the love for a child was an "unfathomable gift" and also unrelinquishable, and if Anne wanted to understand her mother's love she should compare it to the grief she now felt for her little dead dog and multiply it many times over. Nothing could compare to the loss her mother would feel were her daughter to die.

There were other, even more outrageous statements made in the days that followed the death of the beloved cocker spaniel Baxter. For instance, Anne compared her present grief to her rape at knifepoint more than a decade earlier and said that her dog's death was a greater suffering. "At least," she said, "I knew I could get myself back after I was raped. I always believed that about myself, even when it was happening. If I live, I remember thinking, I will still find a way to be happy. I'll find a way to be happy so that this man will not have the final word on my life. But there is nothing I can do about my dog. I can't ever get her back." By the week's end she'd modified her language

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and said that Baxter's death was absolutely the worst thing that had happened to her for twelve years.

But perhaps it is not so surprising that Anne should compare the death of her dog to that awful and central event—the rape itself like a great caesura in her existence, a division in time according to which all events must ever since be dated as prior to or after. For it was only a matter of simple calculation (one often performed by Anne) to figure out that Baxter was born no more than ten days after Anne had been raped in late November 1990. The only reason Anne's math could not be more precise is that Baxter's papers, as if the world meant to erase the evidence of her marvelous arrival, had been lost early on by the sister who'd owned Baxter for well over two years before giving her up with great reluctance upon entering the Peace Corps. Though it had taken Baxter a while to become Anne's dog, their affinity had been great and immediate. For many days after she first met Baxter, Anne could not stop talking about how her sister had a dog like a little person who ran up to you and barreled her head into the side of your body to get your attention or slapped your hands away (by repeatedly raising her right paw and clawing at your fingers) whenever you hid your face from her. In the subsequent years in which Anne fought off the trauma of the rape and tried to keep at bay the recurrent nightmares, she took great comfort in the memory of childhood dogs and in stories told to her about her sister's little dog far away in California who charmed everybody she met. When the dog finally became Anne's almost three years later, it felt as though a great weight had been lifted (at least that was how she recalled it in the years afterward), as though the joy she could now take every day in her dog's delightful antics meant that she had finally got her old self back.

She could not see how she could go on. She could not see how she could ever again be joyful without her dog to come home to. "I can't believe this has happened. I'm so angry about it. She had so much life left in her. On the day I left town she was wagging her tail, so full of herself, just prancing as we walked down the street." Anne had been traveling when her dog died, and Baxter had been staying with a close

friend. "Maybe I didn't really believe she was sick. I know I heard it, I heard the doctors, but I couldn't believe them—she seemed so happy, so unfazed by her coughing or by the times she found it hard to breathe. Always the very next moment she'd be bounding after me, demanding water or attention."

In her haste to get back to Baxter, Anne left a trail of things behind her, an assortment of personal items forgotten in public restrooms and hotels, train stations and airports. In her grief she left earrings and lipstick (these at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York), a sterling silver pillbox shaped like a miniature suitcase, a novel by Joyce Carol Oates, a blue-suede Chanel glove (noticed only after she'd arrived in Chicago and pulled the remnant glove from her coat, unable to find its mate anywhere), and finally the charger to her cell phone (left behind, she finally surmised, at United Airlines' Gate 18 at LaGuardia Airport). Anne hated losing things. Items left behind were evidence of life slipping from her grasp.

In grief Anne said many of the same things over and over again. Several times she stopped her crying and remembering and held her fists clenched together and said, "I want my dog, I want my dog, I want my little red dog"—a defiant chant without belief, yet guided by absolute determination. Or she said, "Is she actually gone? Is Baxter dead? Did this really happen?" Or, "I know I'm repeating myself. I know I must be boring. I don't care. I don't really want anything anymore. What do I care if I'm interesting, what do I care if I'm interesting to you! I just want my dog."

"I keep thinking it's a mistake," she remarked, "that it's just a lie. I keep looking back to your face when you told me in the car that she was dead, and I keep telling myself, Maybe he was lying to you. If only it could be true that you were a liar, that you were a cruel and awful person who had told me my dog was dead without really knowing it for a fact, without really meaning a word you said."

Grief is boring. People repeat themselves endlessly, all words become the same expression of what cannot quite be said, all language exhausted by the sameness and imprecision of the present tense. The

past is a weight pulling words out of address and its directedness into the eternal listlessness of sorrow. There is no future in grief, no foreseeable point at which this feeling of indifference to one's own pleasure will relent. The luster of living has left the world—departing in the form of a dead mother, a dead lover, a dead sibling, a lifeless twenty-five-pound red dog.

"I just want her back," Anne said. "I'd give anything to lift her into my arms and feel the weight of her. She was never heavy, she seemed to lift herself up and keep herself aloft, holding onto me that way she did, you know, sometimes folding her paws across your shoulder as if it were she who were hugging you. The shape of her is etched in my memory. I can feel how she fits and where her head goes and how her rounded, cooperative little body settles into you and suggests this is her place, now that you are holding her she is perfectly satisfied. I want that again. I can't believe I'll never see her alive again and all I want is to hold her." Anne was on her way back to Chicago where Baxter lay waiting not at home or even at the friend's house, but already frozen in the morgue of an animal hospital at which the friend had delivered her. Having died the night before in her sleep, Baxter was stiff and cold and prepared for annihilation, but not before Anne could hold her one last time. The secretary at the animal hospital tried to talk Anne out of seeing Baxter. "She's already frozen," she said. "It might be hard to see her."

"I don't care," Anne said emphatically. "I don't care. I have to see her and say goodbye. She was my dog and I love her."

"I hate it that they froze her without my permission," she said to me.

"They have to do that, it's the law."

"I can still hate it. I can hate the way that secretary spoke to me, as if I could ever not see my little perfect dog. I can hate that Baxter's dead, that she was sick and died without me holding her, that they froze my dog without ever asking me if they could."

Anne judged people by their love of animals. The secretary at the animal hospital, for example, was easy to hate because she did not love animals enough. This was a simple division: us versus them. Biblical

goats versus the sheep. Even our metaphors of last judgment depend on the love or unlove of animals.

All of Baxter's many veterinarians (there had been three of them by the end) were correctly caring and appropriately regretful: they were a part of *us*. But the secretary belonged to *them*. She illustrated a principle Anne did not trust. She could not trust people who too easily classified pets versus people, finding pets so obviously less important. Anne made heartfelt pronouncements about psychopaths and serial killers who started out by torturing cats and dogs. She believed that the love of animals was a threshold unto the love of persons, that there was a continuum of affection for living things and that you could not easily decide whether the love of a dog mattered less than the love of a person. "Think of all those studies about how people who have dogs and cats live longer," she used to say. "Animals are company, sometimes I think they're the only real company in the world. Everybody else is always busy or leaving. We've all got our separate lives and sometimes we can't really stand each other very much, but the little creatures of the earth are always glad to see you coming."

Anne was not Catholic, but she revered Saint Francis. He was one of the people in history who got it. Sartre was not. Once at a party she'd been in an argument about whether animal rights belonged on the same ethical plane as human rights, claiming heatedly that animals had souls, when one of her interlocutors, a doctor in his late forties, had reminded her about the famous French philosopher. People who love children and dogs too much, Sartre had said and the doctor repeated, love them so as not to love the other people they see about them every day.

"What does he know?" Anne said abruptly and ended the conversation. (Privately she was performing an act of division, placing Sartre among those who did not understand, recalling how she'd been so fascinated in college by the relationship of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and how she'd kept *Being and Nothingness* at her bedside for much of her junior year, getting through the first hundred pages or so and always wanting to come back to it, able to decide only now upon the basis of this new information that she could give up her goal of one day

finishing Sartre's famous work. Because he did not love animals enough Sartre could be surrendered to the underworld of resolution, yielded back to the immense terrain of things you would leave undone in your life, of the books you would leave unread when you died.)

Anne was consistent. She was not unwilling to do the math on people she knew, even people she had once loved. A boyfriend in college had fallen by the wayside when he pronounced himself entirely indifferent to the charm of dogs. On the other hand, animals often redeemed people she did not like. George Herbert Walker Bush could not be all bad, though she found this hard to believe and was troubled by the heft of contradiction in herself, because he visibly loved Barbara's famously ugly brown and white springer spaniel. Anne even had a book of photographs of Millie at the White House, which she kept hidden most of the time, but brought out as a conciliatory gesture when she had some of her old right-leaning high-school friends over for cocktails and recollection. As long as they did not talk about welfare or war, as long as they praised Baxter and admired only the George Bush who rolled on the White House lawn with Millie and her puppies, these old friends could be included for the day among the *us* who saw the world as it was supposed to be.

On another occasion she'd been at a dinner party when a man named Kyle began telling a story about an ice-fishing expedition. From the way he told it it was clear that Kyle delighted in the story and could barely keep from leaping ahead to the misadventure that lay at its end.

Some guys Kyle knew had gone ice fishing one time up in Minnesota. The lake they'd visited was frozen solid so they drove his friend Steve's brand new Jeep Cherokee out onto the middle of the ice, unpacked their gear, and let his golden retriever out the back. Kyle stopped to remind everyone how generally stupid golden retrievers were. It was a friendly, playful dog, not yet a year, still a puppy, and it ran from man to man grabbing hold of fishing poles and tugging at their gear. Meanwhile one of the men had taken a stick of dynamite from the back of the truck in order to blow open the hole in the ice

from which they would fish. Stepping away from the jeep, he lit the stick of dynamite and threw it far out onto the frozen lake. As the stick sailed over the retriever's head, the dog caught sight of it and gave chase. Steve panicked and started shouting at his disobedient dog to stop this instant and get back here, goddammit, but the dog kept right after the dynamite, eventually scooping the stick up in his jaw, sliding with his feet spinning on the ice until he came to a halt, and then turning and running back toward the men who were all standing in a circle and beginning to look desperate. "Well, one of the guys starts shouting, 'Holy shit!,'" Kyle reported, "and turns on his heels and runs right off the lake. The other guys in the group understand that the stick of dynamite has at least a two-minute fuse, so they're thinking there's still time, and meantime the dog has come running right back to the owner and stands before him with the dynamite in his mouth—like something right out of the Roadrunner, but the crappily trained dog won't give up the stick. He's wagging his tail and crouching down on his front legs, sticking his ass defiantly in the air, just waiting to be chased, and Steve is shouting at the dog, Come on, boy, come on. Just give me the fucking stick, and he's getting more and more desperate until finally he lunges for the dog, which is exactly what the dog's been waiting for. Knowing now that this really is a game, the dog starts running in circles around the guys, and they're all losing their cool and grabbing for the stick, while the dog growls and dashes from side to side, the guys falling on their asses on the ice."

Kyle stopped himself because he'd begun to laugh too hard and he did not want to ruin his story. Several of the people around the table were laughing nervously, others more openly, but Anne was sitting immediately to Kyle's right with her jaw clenched in a grimace because she knew the dog didn't have a chance. "Those stupid men," she said afterward, but it was unclear whether she referred to the men inside the story or the men who sat listening at the dinner table.

"By this time several of the guys are pleading with Steve to give up on the dog and get the hell off the ice. Only he can't bring himself to surrender so easily—after all, it's really a pretty cool dog. So he makes one last lunge for the golden retriever, which only makes things worse.

This time the dog bolts under Steve's outstretched arms, heads for the Cherokee, and runs underneath the front wheel carriage whence he stares out at Steve who has followed his dog to the Jeep, pleading desperately, 'Come on, boy, fucking shit goddammit, this isn't a game.' But of course it's just that to the dog—a game, and he's having more and more fun. Steve is reaching under the Jeep as the dog darts from front to rear and back again, and a buddy of his comes up to him and pulls at his jacket. 'Steve, Jesus,' he says, 'we gotta get out of here,' and Steve's calling the dog and giving him up and backing off the ice, and it's just now occurred to him what's going to happen. 'Oh Christ, what about my jeep?' he says. Sure enough, the dog stays underneath the jeep, and the dynamite finally blows, tearing a huge hole in the ice and plunging the jeep straight into fucking Lake Okawakamama or whatever the hell it's called."

Anne looked fixedly at Kyle, who was not a subtle man, and asked, "What about the dog? Wasn't he very upset about his dog?" There was a forced steadiness in her voice, and anyone who could read people would have heard the contempt she was barely suppressing.

"Sure he was upset about the dog," Kyle said. "But it was a brand-fucking-new twenty-five-thousand-dollar jeep, and it was at the bottom of the lake."

Later that night Anne held Baxter in her arms and remembered the blown-up golden retriever and tried to keep the two dogs separate. "Oh, you're so lucky," she scolded Baxter. "I don't think you know how lucky you are."

As the weeks passed after Baxter's death Anne worried about disloyalty. "Every day that goes by that I don't weep anew for her I feel unfaithful. Maybe I didn't love her enough." She still cried for Baxter, but the grief overtook her in gentler and more forgiving waves, and Anne could not quite forgive herself the fading of her own desperation.

In response she began to organize her memories of Baxter and pulled as many photos as she could find of her immensely photographable dog (most dogs, of course, are photogenic, but Baxter enjoyed a special relationship with the camera; she seemed always to be looking at you

through the lens and the temporal distance of the picture itself, searching for the eyes of photographer and viewer alike, searching for that reciprocity she expected whenever her name was called). Spreading the photographs about her on the bright red patterned rug of her loft, arranging them in three- and four-foot lines, with each photo overlapping the next like a deck of cards spread before a skillful poker dealer, Anne would pluck out a photograph randomly and surmise the precise moment when it had been taken. "Look at her here," she would say. "When could that have been? Look how young she is. That must have been about a year after we got her." In the photograph Anne is leaning back on a couch with Baxter's behind propped on Anne's lap, the dog's head and torso held slightly aloft the way one holds a baby to one's face, and Anne holds her face forward and Baxter is doing the same and of course licking the person she loves. "Look how happy I am," Anne said. "After I was attacked I wouldn't have thought I could be that happy again. I remember the exact day when I felt it becoming possible. It was more than four years later. It was a beautiful June day and I got out of work early, and I walked south along State Street and the people were all out and Chicago seemed generous and full of possibility and I was singing. I wish I could remember what I was singing, but I can't. I do remember thinking that I could do almost anything at that moment. I had hours of daylight left. I could take a walk to Lake Michigan. I could stop at Buddy Guy's or sit in The Gourmand Coffee Shop reading a book. Of course what I really wanted was to be with my dog, and so I went to her, and maybe then we walked to the lake—to be honest I can't remember what we did, that's not the important part of the story anyway; the important part is suddenly knowing I was happy again as I walked home from work, and that I was walking home to see Baxter."

In the weeks before Baxter's death Anne had become sad again, but mostly about other things, feeling a familiar torpor come over her as it used to after the rape whenever there was too great a downturn in her work calendar or social life. At Baxter's most recent and what was to be her last visit to the cardiologist, Anne had managed to hear the

doctor's words without quite fixing them in her mind. "At this point," he said, "the best we could hope for is six months to a year. The goal is to keep her comfortable. You can see how it's a little larger than last time." Here he pointed to an x-ray upon which Baxter's gray blur of a heart could be seen quite prominently pushing at her rib cage. "That's why there's a little more coughing, a little more discomfort. It keeps pushing out and taking more space in the chest cavity and squeezing at her lungs. We'll increase the doses and put her on two additional medicines, and that should help."

Anne heard six months to a year and took those words as a promise, secretly plotting for Baxter (who seemed otherwise so vital, so youthful and full of attitude) to deceive her doctors. When Baxter died in only two months' time, Anne felt cheated by the doctor. "I can't believe it," she said. "He promised we'd have more time. He said she'd live until summer."

She wanted to call the doctor and ask him what had happened. Maybe he could explain what had gone wrong. She would not listen to reason, nor be told that it was pointless to ask a veterinarian about a dog that had already died.

"Did I do something wrong, Doctor Whitley?" Anne asked him. It was not the first time this thought had crossed her mind. She gravely feared having let her dog down. "Did I do something wrong? You said she'd live longer."

Anne confessed that she sometimes forgot Baxter's medicine. She listed every time she could think of that she had forgotten the medicine or given it to Baxter late or been remiss in giving her water or food, going on at some length, her memory a litany of self-accusation. Each example occasioned the specter of another, and the wrong she had done Baxter came into clearer focus, perhaps irrevocably into being, as she contemplated what she now saw as a history of neglecting a creature she loved more than anything she could think of. The doctor explained that a few missed doses of medicine here and there could have no great effect, that they had only been trying to stall Baxter's death, not prevent it.

"I wanted to be there," Anne found herself explaining. "I wanted to

hold her in my arms and say goodbye. I can't believe she died while I was out of town, all alone in the middle of the night."

Baxter had not been altogether alone. She'd been well taken care of by the friend, whose name was Stacy and who had lived with Anne and Baxter for a short while several years back. On the night of her death Baxter had slept on Stacy's bed with Stacy and her two cats, in good company. At some time in the middle of the night, however, she had gotten off the bed and found a pile of laundry in the corner of the next room and, coughing up blood (for how long, nobody knows), she expired, alone.

"Without me," Anne said.

I must tell you another story about the death of animals. It comes from a woman Anne had befriended. Her name was Pierra and she was a vegetarian. When asked at a party how she'd become a vegetarian Pierra had said that as a child she often went to visit grandparents who lived in rural Ohio and that her grandfather, although a divorce lawyer who for years had traveled daily to Columbus to conduct his business, had believed in farms and their capacity to teach people virtues not easily obtained elsewhere. He had bought a farm soon after establishing his practice, keeping about him always a few sheep and pigs and some milking cows, for the benefit of his children and then his grandchildren. On the day in question Pierra's grandfather had decided to demonstrate for them the natural rhythm of life (and death) on a farm. So he took the children to a nearby chicken farm where they, without quite fathoming what they were doing, played a part in choosing their dinner. Each child selected a favorite chicken, and the live chickens were loaded into a wooden crate and placed in the back of the grandfather's pickup truck to be taken home and have their necks snapped. Pierra's two older brothers understood what would happen a little sooner than had Pierra herself, who was only eight at the time. "You know what comes next, don't you, Pierra?" the older brother asked. At that very moment her second brother pointed to the back of the truck where one of the chickens (it was Pierra's chicken!) had escaped from the wooden crate and was now strutting

freely over the undulating red metal floor of the pickup's bed. The children cheered aloud. When the grandfather heard their cries, he stopped the truck, went around to the back, and discovered the freed chicken. He returned the chicken to the wooden crate and rotated the crate so that the side that seemed to have the widest space between woods slats would be trapped against the bed of the truck. Again the grandfather drove off and the children stared disappointedly through the back window, until they noticed that their heroic chicken was again freeing herself, her neck slithering through an even narrower slat, her entire body soon emergent and full-plumed in the wind. Again they applauded the chicken's arrival. Pierra called it a magical bird, her older brother said she was a Houdini, and the grandfather stopped the truck once more in order to return Houdini to her crate. Twice more the chicken performed her escape act, the last time even jumping off the bed of the truck. In their alarm the children had gasped and worried aloud that Houdini was dead, whereupon the grandfather had spun the truck around and gone back maybe three hundred yards to find that Houdini had landed spectacularly unhurt at the side of the road, and was now strutting happily in a gully between the road and a cornfield.

Each time she got out, Pierra commented, the chicken was surviving her own death, or trying to at least. None of it made a difference ultimately. Houdini was slaughtered and served to them just as the other two chickens were later that night, at which point, eating her dinner without any taste for it and with a sense of defeat that was not private but rather large and objective, Pierra had become a vegetarian. Did her family let her decide such a thing for herself, even at such an early age, someone asked. Well, no, Pierra admitted, she'd had to keep it secret another eight years, until in the middle of her junior year of high school she'd declared herself a vegetarian and her mother had said, "That's nice, dear," trying thereafter to serve her daughter first chicken and then turkey and even ham before she finally realized how many things there were in the world that were animal carrion.

Anne and Pierra had one of those brief, intense but troubled friendships. Pierra was committed to PETA and all their guerrilla tactics, and

there was something almost inhuman about her proselytizing energy, as if she cared more about being right than about changing people's minds. Like Pierra, Anne believed animals should be treated ethically, and she gave money to no-kill shelters, to the Humane Society, and sometimes to PETA, but it bothered her, she said, how so many animal-rights activists did not seem to care about treating people humanely. This enraged Pierra, and she would not speak to Anne for four weeks after Anne made the comment. They made up on that first occasion, but once a friendship has been repaired a fissure resides beneath the visible surface, like a flaw in porcelain, and when Anne mentioned Pierra to others she spoke with greater reluctance than she was used to when speaking of friends. Anne found it odd that for someone who gave so much of her free time to animals Pierra did not keep pets—unless you counted a single chattering parrot, but Anne was just not confident anything you couldn't hug should be counted as a pet.

So Anne waited for the something inhuman in her friend to determine the friendship. It was clear that Pierra could now take Anne or leave her on very short notice, and they had arguments. Pierra insisted that Anne read *Fast Food Nation*, which Anne put off reading because she feared it would disturb her too much. Anne could not remember exactly when the friendship had died. As recently as November she'd had lunch with Pierra, who had reported one of the many episodes in PETA's continual antagonism of an editor at *Vogue* who was considered the prima donna of fur. PETA had gotten to a waiter at a posh restaurant in New York one day, and when he went to serve the editor her lunch he had pulled back the metal top of the tray to reveal the carcass of a raccoon. For Anne, Pierra's obvious enjoyment in telling this story suggested that she did not really care about the poor dead raccoon nearly so much as her principles, and that Anne had been right to let the friendship cool.

In the two days before she could see Baxter's body, Anne invented impossible scenarios according to which Baxter's death might prove to be a mistake. It upset her greatly that Baxter had been put in the freezer, because this seemed to defeat any possibility of Baxter's triumphing

over death. Anne imagined that Baxter would awake in the freezer and that her second death would be worse than her first.

Anne didn't mind that Baxter was cold and stiff. The nurses at the veterinarian's office had pulled Baxter out of the freezer early in the morning and thawed her enough to be viewed a final time. They had tried to arrange Baxter's fur so that she did not look so lifeless. Her head was resting on her paws, tilted so that the left side of her mouth and face were slightly bunched. Her eyes seemed still to stare at you, not nearly so vacant as Anne had expected them to be. Her fur was soft and smooth, and the coldness came from inside of her and emanated out. Anne kissed her dog over and over again. She kissed her most often in the little groove between her eyes and snout, and she smelled the lovely dog scent of Baxter that was still her own scent, a scent any other dog would still recognize, a scent that Anne believed she herself would know if she were to come upon it anonymously. "She looked so beautiful," Anne said. "I could have taken her picture and you'd have thought she was just sleeping. I kept thinking maybe she will wake up. She looked perfect."

"I didn't even mind that she was cold," she said later. "She wasn't frightening to me."

Anne wished she had taken the photograph. Baxter had been swaddled inside of three blankets as if the cold deep inside her had to be contained. Anne wrapped her arms around her dog and apprehended once more that body she knew so well. She lifted Baxter several times off the table. She was heavier than usual and it was awkward holding her because of the seeming flatness of her. Each time Anne put Baxter back on the steel counter she did so gently, superstitiously, as though she feared that having been frozen for almost two days Baxter could be shattered if dropped suddenly.

Anne stayed with Baxter for about an hour and a half. Near the end of her visit Anne summoned Baxter's regular veterinarian to ask her the same questions she had asked Dr. Whitley. "Could we have done anything different, Dr. Snowdon?" Anne asked. "Sometimes I forgot her medicine. I worry about that." Dr. Snowdon said the same things that Dr. Whitley had said, the same things everybody told Anne whenever

she accused herself of negligence, and it was partly the consistency of their replies that made her suspect them. Dr. Snowdon left the room and came back with a catalogue depicting the five types of urn in which Anne could choose to preserve Baxter. Anne would have preferred more options. She wished afterward there had been a plain silver one in the same style as the vase-shaped bronze urn she had finally chosen. When she asked Dr. Snowdon when Baxter would be sent out to be cremated, she was upset to learn that her dog would have to spend another entire day in the freezer all alone. She wanted to come back the next day and visit her again but was afraid to ask.

Anne had a habit of putting Baxter's name into songs. She might sing aloud to the tune of "Who's walking down the streets of the city, smiling at everybody she meets," and as she came to the end of the verse, "Everyone knows it's—", she'd withhold the name, letting the silence gather before she burst, "Baxter!" This game greatly pleased Baxter, who always looked up at Anne while she sang as though waiting for the good part, her name. She was such a little egoist, Anne mused delightedly. "You're so full of yourself," she'd say to Baxter. "And then she'd look up at me as if she were saying, Why shouldn't I be." Anne liked that about her dog, her sense of entitlement. She liked to quote to Baxter a saying Edith Wharton had once phrased in honor of her own dog: "My little dog, my heartbeat at my feet." When it was pointed out to Anne that Wharton had actually said, "A heartbeat at my feet," Anne declared that she liked it better her way and wished Wharton could have written it as Anne wanted it said.

"I'm afraid I killed her," Anne said for days afterward. "I sometimes forgot her medicine. It got to be so overwhelming. She was taking so many pills, I could barely keep track, pills and elixir all day long. Just the other day I had purchased a notebook to write down her new schedule because I kept getting confused, sometimes giving her the afternoon and nighttime doses all at once, trying also to give her the doses of Furosemide later in the night so that she could make it through until morning without peeing."

The only solace Anne took in those first few days was in blaming herself for Baxter's death. She was willing to stand up under Baxter's judgment. She asked a series of questions, without really listening for the answers:

You don't think I killed her, do you?

You don't hate me for killing my little dog?

Am I a responsible pet owner?

Are you sure?

"I wish I could see her one more time and ask her if she forgives me. Do you think she knows how much I loved her? I'm afraid she didn't know. Sometimes I'd get angry or frustrated with her. She always felt so guilty when she had an accident, but I didn't mind, Baxter, I didn't mind cleaning up after you, I didn't mind when you shat on my wood floors. I told her that only last week one night while I was hugging her. I hope she heard. I hope she understood that I was never really mad. Most of the time I just said it because Jazz was watching and she would learn bad habits." Jazz was a second and perceptibly less intelligent cocker spaniel, whom Anne had taken in when the Humane Society had broken up an illegal breeding ring.

"It's your fault, Jazz," Anne said and hugged her remaining dog. "She doesn't understand, she's too stupid. She's not like Baxter."

"Poor Jazz," she said and the dog licked her face.

Anne sometimes remembered what her friend Midori, who was from Japan and loved dogs as vehemently as Anne did, had told her. Midori understood the distinction Anne wanted to make when she said Baxter was different from every other dog she'd known. Anne had loved dogs before. Since childhood, dogs had been her consolation against an angry, alcoholic father and a world that made allowances for him. But Baxter was different; Anne sometimes called her a person. She said, "Come here, little person," and Baxter trotted across the laminated maple, the spray of her big fluffy paws sounding light and rolling like a handful of marbles tossed across a floor. Midori also had two dogs and a special connection with one of them, and she told Anne that she believed she and her dog Koi had known each other before. It was a corruption of Shinto that allowed Midori to

speculate thus: she and Koi had found each other as dog and person in this life, and Midori had known her quickly and deeply because in a past life they'd been siblings or friends or lovers. Midori also believed that when she lost Koi she would see her someday and recognize her all over again and be reunited, although they might each by then be occupying different bodies.

There were certain permissible ways to think about an animal's immortality. If Anne asked you whether you believed animals had souls, you did not have to agree with her entirely. As long as the animals were granted a great dignity, you could answer her question several ways. An acceptable answer, for example, might be, "I don't see why they shouldn't—that is, if human beings have souls, if any of us survive our death spiritually." Unacceptable (and this was roughly the answer of the boyfriend who'd suddenly found himself denied the privileges of Anne) was the following: "That's merely sentimental bullshit. It's personification. It's anthropomorphism at its worst, inventing gods and thoughtful animals, humanity forever afraid of the hard truth."

In grief Anne was imperious. In loyalty to what she loved she was uncompromising. She wanted to remember everything about her loss. She even tried to remember her own grief. She could not quite reconstruct the first hours when she'd learned of Baxter's death. "What did I look like when you told me?" she asked. She knew she had pushed me back (was this a gesture involuntarily Baxter-like?); she knew she had not wanted to be held. "I feel bad for you having to tell someone such awful news, having to do such a cruel thing, not knowing whether I'd ever be able to look at you in the same way again or revisit that awful train station outside of which you told me the news."

Believing in bargains, Anne bartered for Baxter even after death, especially during the day and a half it took to get back to Baxter's body. Even after Anne knew there had been no mistake and that Baxter was not coming back, she continued to haggle: she'd give up her car, her loft, her savings, anything that was necessary to get Baxter back.

In those first days she wanted badly to dream of Baxter, but she was also afraid of what it would be like. As she endured, vigilant in her

grief, relenting only at dawn when the daylight seemed to punctuate an exhaustion she'd been unable to feel until that very moment, her brief sleep treated her ironically. Anne slept shallowly, always at the surface of the day, worn out by a waiting that would not cease, wanting to awake and be told it had all been a lie. She found herself in unrecognizable houses with several floors to them and a great many rooms and doorways. She dreamed of being upstairs while gates and doors were left open below her. She dreamed of animals fleeing houses, of learning too late about her own or someone else's negligence. In her dreams she searched for the escaped animals. She did not find them and so, as she awoke, she was not sure it was Baxter she had been looking for.

On another night she had a vivid dream in which she was standing at the side of a highway when a man arbitrarily shot a pug. Later Anne guessed the dream had pieced together two infamous incidents, one in which a man in the throes of road rage had run a woman to the side of the road, stormed her window, and then reached across her lap in order to grab her Pomeranian and throw the poor dog into traffic, to be immediately struck by two separate cars and killed; and a second in which two policemen had mistakenly pulled over an average African-American family, ordered them out of the car, and, fearing reprisal from a toy poodle, shot the dog dead in front of the children. In Anne's dream the man who had shot the dog handed it to Anne and she said to him, "This is not my dog." He replied, "Just hold it while it dies." Then Anne watched as the dog in her arms struggled to breathe and she became hopeful, thinking it might still live, and began calling people to help her. No one came and eventually the dog's neck went slack, its head tilting brokenly, as Anne attempted to hold the body and prop up the neck simultaneously. She was again calling for someone to help her when the neck altogether snapped off in her hands and she awoke.

"Shall I tell you my theory?" she said. "After I was raped I was so devastated—you were there, you saw how it was. I look back at that time and I almost can't believe it ever happened. How could I spend

entire weekends in bed, not wanting to see anyone? Do you remember how you would come to my apartment and the trash would be piled up in the kitchen and I didn't care? I tried the best I could. I went to work and I smiled and everybody asked how I was doing and all my women friends said over and over again that I was so brave, but I kept thinking to myself: *They don't really know what it's like; I'm not brave, I'm just getting by.* You cleaned my apartment and drew me baths, I remember all of that. You were a great help. But my spirit was gone. Somewhere during the middle of the rape my spirit had fled my body and it would not return. For a while I thought that maybe with you or through you I could put together a new self, a new person who was different from the one who had been wounded, but I didn't really want that. I wanted my old self back again, and you couldn't give that to me."

She paused. The words had come in a great rush, and they were all a prelude to what she had really wanted to say, which was this: "You know how Baxter was born so close to the day I was attacked? Well, my spirit was out there wandering the world, and it wasn't mine anymore, and I think it went and found Baxter. When she came to me, I recognized her right away. Always she had that effect on me. Everything else seemed far away, unimportant. She used to claw at the door of the bathroom whenever I would get depressed and lock myself away. She'd demand to be let in—she could be such a pill, she would not take no for answer. I like to think Baxter showed up to take care of me; she was my spirit come back to me."

Baxter was missed by lots of people in the dog-friendly neighborhood of Printer's Row. She was asked after at the pharmacy, in the dog-grooming shop where Anne left Jazz, at the cleaners, even by a homeless man from whom Anne regularly bought *Streetwise* and into whose hands she sometimes delivered the leashes of Baxter and Jazz while she darted into the White Hen or Starbuck's. "Where's your other one?" he asked, and Anne told him. He could not believe it, she looked so young. Until she was ten years old Baxter had regularly passed for a very young dog, even sometimes for an Irish Setter puppy.

It was the lightness of her walk, the visible air of exuberance, the way she lifted her paws ladylike and full of dignity and huffed deep in her chest when other dogs, no matter how big, got in her way.

Cards and e-mails arrived from Anne's friends—from all across Chicago, from as far as New York and California and London. People said what people say about grief. "I know how hard it can be to lose a beloved pet, how overwhelming the silence can seem." Or, "I know it's hard, but try to think about the joy she gave you and all the joy you gave her." Their importance was not in what they said. The world was again subject to a great division. There were so many who understood her loss that Anne almost forgot about those who did not, or pretended they had not heard, or did not know what to say. Late in the second week of Baxter's death Anne received a card from Pierra of all people. Inside the card, with a small logo from some animal-rights organization on the back, was typed the simple quotation, "There is providence even in the fall of a sparrow." Pierra had written, "Anne, so sorry to hear about Baxter." Anne gladly recalled Pierra as one of the us who takes the side of animals, and she regretted that she could not for the life of her remember the name of Pierra's bird.

"I like the way when she was sitting upright on the couch you would sometimes lean into her and tilt her backward a little, so that her back rested against a cushion and her paws were in the air, and she would lift her right paw and prop it directly on your chest as if to say, 'Keep your distance!'" Anne loved the ambiguity of that gesture: it was both affectionate (because Baxter liked touching you and her eyes would squint with contentment) and controlling (she wanted to give up personal space only gradually and on her terms). Anne wanted me to list my favorite things about Baxter. Then she decided she would do it herself: "I'll start with five." Here is the list she came up with on her first attempt:

1. I like "Keep your distance!"
2. I like her sidewalking. Remember how she would run ahead of you slanting off joyously at an angle, so eager she could not keep a straight

line, and we used to sing the Jesus and Mary Chain song to her—"Sidewalking, sidewalking."

3. I like how she was always at my feet when I was home, and even when I'd get up to fetch something at the other end of the loft and tell her, "Stay, I'll be right back," she'd have to follow me there and back, not wanting to miss a thing.
4. I like the way she used to sleep by my head on a pillow, curled in close, and then sometimes for no reason at all she'd decide to burrow under the covers and we called her a burrow hound and she'd be down there all soft on my naked feet.
5. I like how protective she was of me.

This last point had to be elaborated. "Do you remember in my old building how I'd take her out for a walk and she'd start barking crazily at the maintenance man, Adam, because I'd asked him to go into my place during the day while I was at work and fix the shower or the track lighting? Baxter had been there the whole time, of course, and when she saw him later in the hallway she'd start barking to tell me, 'There's that man. He was in our apartment again.'"

Immediately upon completing her list Anne began to revise it entirely, needing to make the point that the things to love about Baxter were too many to list.

"What else can you remember?" Anne asked. "I don't want to lose any more of her. Please try to remember anything you can, any story I might have forgotten."

At first I was silent. My remembrance had followed hers for so long I was not sure I could add anything to what had already been said. Then I remembered a time when Anne had been living in an apartment in Bucktown which had next to it a large fenced yard where several dogs sported freely with Frisbees and tennis balls tossed from the hands of sundry owners. Two of the dogs were beagles who would leap high in the air to catch the tennis balls, and one of them was a collie mutt of some sort, and the fourth an old yet athletic black labrador. Every afternoon or evening the dogs roamed the yard under Anne's bed-

room window, while Baxter sat on the bed, which was about a foot from the window sill, and barked incessantly at them. Sometimes she would bridge the space between the bed and window by extending her front paws onto the window sill and lowering her snout beneath the cracked window and pushing close to the screen. Eventually her back paws would cause the comforter to slip and recede beneath her and she would lose her balance and fall to the floor, whereupon she would spring up and stand on her hind legs before the window, barking ever more ferociously though now with a lesser view.

"She wants to play with them," Anne suggested. I had my doubts. It sounded more to me like she was warning the other dogs to keep away from her house.

One day Anne went and stood by Baxter while she was barking, and she said, "Look how excited she is. The hair on her back is standing up." She lifted the window and propped Baxter up by the belly and hind legs, as Baxter swung her paws onto the window sill and, able now to see the dogs, aimed her barking at them more selectively, barking in spurts focused on particular actions, her voice inflected by haste whenever the dogs neared the window. The neighbor who had been throwing Frisbees to her beagles spotted Anne and Baxter in the window and invited Baxter to come play with the other dogs.

"Okay," Anne said. "We will." Then she turned to me and suggested that since she hadn't showered and had a bunch of paperwork to do and didn't especially care whether she met these neighbors, I should be the one to take Baxter next door to make some friends. Why precisely I agreed I'm not sure, since I'd been the one insisting that Baxter didn't want to play, that she just wanted those other dogs to keep the hell away from her window. But I walked Baxter around back by way of the alley and introduced myself to two women who asked in unison for Baxter's name. One of them held a ball in front of Baxter's face and threw it. While the two beagles and ancient lab gave chase, Baxter remained utterly motionless. Her typically incessant stub of a tail was clenched against her backside and she looked up at me with melancholy indifference.

"Baxter wouldn't play at all?" Anne asked. "I remember that. It's

just like her."

One of the beagles came racing back with the ball and delivered it to the woman, who handed it to me and suggested that perhaps if I threw it Baxter would give chase. So I stepped into the yard with the other dogs circling excitedly about me and I threw the ball high in the air. One of the beagles raced under it and leapt and the ball bounced off his teeth. Once again Baxter had been unmoved. The labrador caught the ball on the rebound and brought it back, releasing it when I pulled it from his mouth. So again I threw the ball and all the dogs gave chase, but once more without Baxter among them. When I looked back to see whether she had given any ground, she had finally moved: she had turned from where she'd been sitting and started walking slowly back down the neighbors' driveway, a proud little dog obviously prepared to walk by herself all the way around the garage, through the alley, and back to Anne's back door.

Anne was delighted by the story. She reprimanded herself for not having remembered it. She tried to memorize each of its details. "What did she do next?" Anne asked.

"Nothing," I said. Baxter had kept walking. I caught up with her in the alley and walked beside the headstrong cocker spaniel, watching the spring return to her step once she was back on her own turf and near again to Anne.

"The hardest part," Anne said, "is knowing how much easier it is without her. I feel so guilty about that. Jazz is so healthy, so quiet, she never asks for anything. Sometimes I'll be working at my desk and she's under my chair and I don't even know she's there. The other day I got up for a cup of coffee and I heard a tremendous yelp. She'd positioned herself right behind the chair and I hadn't even noticed and I leaned back in the chair and it trapped her hair so that when she jerked away there was this massive wad of fur left on the floor.

"It's so quiet having a healthy dog. She never scratches my leg, asking for water or to go out outside or for more food or for nothing at all—all those times when I'd say to Baxter, 'No,' 'Not now,' 'In a minute,' 'Later.' It was always a dialogue. 'Don't be so ornery,' I'd tell

her, but she kept talking to me, she was always in your face. I want a bossy dog. I miss all those occasions when Baxter needed things, and all those times she scratched me and grabbed my attention, and we went down the list verbally and when that didn't work I'd put out water, then food, then pull out her leash or one of her toys, or I'd remember it was time to give her her medicine. And none of it was what she wanted."

Later that night Anne had laid aside *The House of Mirth*, unable to surrender her own sadness for the manifold sorrow of Wharton's world, and started channel surfing—CNN, C-Span, CNBC, seeking her distraction among the superficially significant forms of news entertainment. Some sustained footage on CNN caught her attention. It was of a dog struggling in a largely frozen river located, according to the caption, somewhere in New Jersey. Anne turned up the volume, and she listened to the newscaster tell how a woman had been walking by the river and had spotted the dog, unable to get up over an embankment of ice, but apparently still full of fight. The woman ran to a phone and called for the local animal rescue, and they were there on the scene inside of three minutes. They'd obtained a rubber-bottomed boat that slid along the ice and then into the water alongside the dog, and the live footage showed about six men struggling to find a way to get at the dog and lift it out of the water. The dog kept fighting desperately, and no one knew for sure how long he'd been lodged in the icy river. The CNN reporter was suggesting that they might not have much time before hypothermia set in, and Anne began to root out loud for the dog. She was rather angry with the men for their inefficiency. At last two of them were able to dip a harness of some sort into the water beneath the dog and hoist him high into the air where it looked as though at any minute he might fall back into the water and the stronger current over which he was now dangling. Anne gasped and squeezed a pillow to her chest and released a small exclamation of joy when the dog was pulled over the main body of the boat and scrambled in alongside the men. The camera went close in on the dog, showing clearly his matted, icy coat. Only then did Anne notice in the upper left-hand corner the white lettering that

said, "Recorded Earlier in the Day."

With the animal doubly safe and the narrator at CNN filling in details about how the dog, whose name was Freddy, had been rushed to a veterinary intensive-care unit where his vitals had been monitored and his body temperature stabilized, Anne recalled the many episodes of *Animal Rescue* she'd watched with such focused, nervous intensity and with Baxter at her side. Whenever Anne would gasp, at each turn in fortune crying for the many animals in pain and in hospitals, she would scold the much-beloved cocker spaniel pressed against her legs for being so fortunate. Baxter would patiently endure Anne's words and sudden empathic embraces, as if she understood perfectly well where she must fit on any continuum of care, as if she took for granted the place she would always hold in Anne's dog-loving scheme for how the world was supposed to be.