

KORI FRAZIER

Cemetery Walking

It's a Sunday morning in late October, and I'm walking my dog, Eliza, in Standing Rock Cemetery, in my hometown of Kent, Ohio, where I am visiting for the weekend. The leaves scatter at our feet and stick in the dewy grass, on the asphalt street between plots of land. My friends always ask me why I take my dog for walks in the cemetery, saying it's such a terrible preview of coming attractions. I tell them it's Eliza's favorite place to walk; she enjoys the quiet, the feel of cold granite against her rapidly sniffing nose, the smells of bunnies and feral cats. She also likes that there is nothing to make me shorten her leash or pull her back—no traffic, no barking dogs. She can roam wherever she pleases, either walking on the street, straight up and down, or blazing her own path, zigzagging in and out of the headstones, her leash catching on the thin limbs of American flags and Veterans markers. A place of mourning, of things coming to an end, is to her the place where she can feel most free.

Eliza is fourteen years old, but no one can tell. She barks voraciously, still plays with a stuffed squirrel and a bee with a squeaker in the middle that she got for Christmas two years ago, rolls belly up on her back, and runs so fast I can hardly catch up. "What a cute puppy!" people say when we're out in public, and Eliza wags her tail and paws at their ankles. But if they were to get down on their knees and look closer, they'd see the patches of aging white below her eyes, the warts puckering behind her ears and beneath the fur on her back, the lipomas on her tummy, slippery below her skin. It's hard for me to even tell sometimes, because her head is still so brown, offset by the white stripe that runs down her head and stops at the bridge of her nose.

But I know. I know because she's been my dog since I was ten, and because I've gotten older, she has, too. There's a picture of us, taken the day my parents and I brought her home from an Amish animal fleamarket in Mount Hope, of me standing on the sidewalk outside our house, wearing grey shorts with neon fish on one leg and a worn out Cleveland Indians t-shirt. We stand against the backdrop of an old tree with supple spring leaves; I am a skinny twig of a girl with oily, straight dark hair. In my arms is little wriggling Eliza, her tiny body all black and shiny, seven pounds, seven weeks old.

When you're ten years old, there's nothing like bringing a new animal home, especially if it's a dog. A litany of small rodents and fish had passed before Eliza—teddy bear hamsters, goldfish from the feeder tank at the pet store that lived for two days at the most, Siamese fighter fish with rippling, red tipped turquoise fins. But a dog has permanence. The years with it stretch endless in front of you, and its homecoming is a celebration of that life. The neighborhood children all held Eliza, passing her from one set of arms to another, their little hands muddy with dirt, holding out Milkbone treats with sweet, meaty insides. Our next door neighbor, Janet, gave her a bath in her sink, which irritated Eliza considerably—although she eventually became an avid swimmer, before the arthritis in her back legs declared her landbound, this initial experience with water caused her nose to wrinkle up, a high pitched puppy growl vibrating through her teeth. That night, she was frightened by the overwhelming darkness of her new home, and when I heard her crying in the recycling bin she slept in, I snuck downstairs and gathered her up in my arms. We sat on the landing in the foyer to the kitchen, and as she lay warm and curled in my lap, I read to her from a little girl's picture book with a creamy pastel cover, until she fell asleep. It was a ritual we'd repeat every night for a year.

Now a sleepy older dog that still has a bit of a bunny hop in her step, Eliza has spent the last fourteen years developing an acute sense of emotion detection that's every bit as strong as her notorious sense of smell. She can tell when I'm angry or sad, and immediately feels a sense of obligation to help aid my suffering. When I sit on the couch, my chin resting in my hand as I stare, hotheaded, at the floor, or start to cry, she climbs up next to me, and sits on me. Her warm weight soothes me, and we sit there together as I run my fingers down that stripe on her head, toward the place behind her ears where she loves to be scratched.

When my parents got married in 1973, they moved into their first apartment down by the river in Kent to find that a beagle had been left behind. My mom tells me he was sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor, wagging his tail as though he'd been waiting for them to arrive. They named him Coolbreaze, and he became the first in a line of beagles that would run over the next thirty-some years, minus one four year patch when our house remained sad and dogless.

The stories they tell of Coolbreaze range from hilarious to terribly sad. He was so obedient, so faithful, that they never put him on a leash; on his walks, he would stay close to my dad, following him around every corner. They'd take him on fishing trips to Canada, where he'd stare down into the water, tracing the outlines of fish with his nose. He got away on one of those trips and took off running through a thicket after a deer. When he didn't come back, my parents assumed they would never see him again. They found him standing outside their campsite the next day, bruised and bloodied, his tail still wagging as if he didn't even notice he was hurt.

Coolbreaze died of cancer when he was only five, but not before they could breed him with Bongo, a female beagle they adopted from the pound. Seeing their dog suffer and knowing they would lose him hurt my parents, and they saw no other way to aid their sorrow than to make sure he would have an heir. By the time I was born, Bongo and her son, Coolbreaze Junior, were the dogs of the house, creating chaos of their own. The day my mother came home from the hospital with me in tow, Bongo took it upon herself to take charge of my crib, sitting herself in front of it like a guard at Buckingham palace. When my great aunt tried to pick me and hold me, Bongo snarled and snapped at her wrist. Although I don't remember this incident, it amazes me to know that the boundaries of species meant nothing to Bongo. Motherhood, it seems, is a universal language.

Bongo died when I was only two or three, and my memories of her are limited. But Coolbreaze Junior was my dog. He was a constant attendee at my tea parties under the dining room table, would sneak up to cuddle next to me on the floor as I watched cartoons on Nickelodeon, or wrestle as I grabbed the smooth red leather of his collar. When I slept in the basement, on an old foldout sofa in my dad's office, he'd wake me up in the morning when his nails pattered across the kitchen floor over my head. "Coolbreaze the Tap Dancing Dog!" my mom would exclaim, and a vision of Coolbreaze standing on his hind legs in a little tuxedo, bowtie, and patent leather tapshoes, a cane in his paws, filled my imagination. My parents have kept a photo on the door of their refrigerator for seventeen years, of me and Coolbreaze sitting on the floor, against one of the kitchen cabinets. I'm six years old, wearing Little Mermaid pajamas made of smooth cotton, and am leaning to one side, my arms around Coolbreaze's neck. He sits upright, his head turned slightly to one side, his pink tongue slipping out the corner of his mouth as though mugging the camera.

One day, I came home from kindergarten, and Coolbreaze was gone. I felt the emptiness of our house the moment I walked in, a cold, internal sensation that made me shiver beneath my skin. I went to our special spot under the dining room table and called his name, but didn't hear the jingle of the tags on his collar or his barks as he clattered down the stairs. Only silence.

My father was pacing in the kitchen, staring out the window, his arms crossed over his chest. “Where’s Coolbreeze?” I asked. That was when I noticed the red collar lying on the counter, left behind, no longer tugged and pulled. I knew what had happened, though I didn’t understand what it meant when a dog got so sick it was a sin to keep him alive any longer. I knew Coolbreeze wasn’t coming home.

He sighed and looked at me. For a moment, I thought he might say something, but instead, he closed his eyes, and walked out of the room.

We proceed to the west end of the cemetery, where the canopy of trees that covers most of the main section ends, revealing a bare field that is just beginning to fill with headstones. Eliza is on a smell, her nose pressed firmly to the ground, exhaling with sharp little cries as she gets closer to her target. She begins to walk faster, and her little white legs move quickly, blurring against the green grass. She doesn’t realize that the smell will eventually fade, or that she’ll never catch whatever produces it. The pursuit alone is enough.

There’s a grave in this part of the cemetery that has always caught my attention, so much so that it was the subject of a poem I wrote during an undergraduate poetry class. A little girl is buried there, her resting place marked by a long, rectangular rose granite stone with a sloping top edge. It is etched with an image of a cross cupped between the palms of two praying hands. Inside the silhouette of a Bible is the identity of the child who lies interred: “Deborah Marie Life. Daughter. February 17, 1979 – July 8, 1987. Jesus Loves Me.”

When I was eight, before Eliza and after Coolbreeze, I went on a walk with my parents in the cemetery. At one point, I wandered away, walking through the forest of tombstones, which I viewed back then as not a solemn, hallowed resting place, but an unconventional playground. I’d climb onto the graves and swing around the edges like monkey bars until my father would eye me sternly and tell me to stop without explaining why. And then, as I crossed the road and began to trace my way around the stones, I found little Deborah’s grave.

For a moment, I stared at the picture centered above her name, a color school photograph of a chubby faced girl wearing a little red dress with a wide lace collar, thinly smiling, her blue eyes lost in the lenses of her enormous owl’s eye glasses. She looked like a girl I’d like to play with among the tombstones. Then, I read the dates on the marker, and felt something inside me tingle and numb, as though I were holding a fistful of snow. I wasn’t sure what it meant for this little girl to be dead, but I knew those dates signified a beginning, and an end. I knew when I counted down on my fingers the years that passed between then and now, the number was much too small.

My mother hurried up to me, her face full of relief. She grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the grave. As we walked back toward the car, I looked over my shoulder, and saw Deborah’s eyes, wizened by her thick glasses, following me, bidding me goodbye. For the rest of the day, I was quiet, wondering what had happened to that girl who was so close to my age, why she was gone so soon, what she’d left behind.

I can see the grave from the road, as Eliza and I wind around toward the edge of the field. Eliza has since abandoned the scent she was chasing, and allows me to lead her. We stand over the headstone, and a rush of the cold sadness and confusion I felt looking at it as a little girl comes back to me. Twenty years of rain, sleet, and thick Ohio snow have faded little Deborah’s picture, and it is only when I bend down closer that I can see her; an eight year old girl getting her school photo taken. I remember school picture day when I was her age—being hoarded down to the gym from my second grade classroom, itching inside the black dress with tiny pink embroidered flowers my mother insisted I wear, the dank smell of cafeteria lunch leftovers, the smooth black plastic comb in my hand as a man in a Lifetouch t-shirt passed them

out. And then, being positioned on the stool, my head turned and twisted like a jointed composition doll's—"Hold it! And—" FLASH! For a moment, I try to picture Deborah on school picture day, posed in such solemnity on that stool, and wonder if she went to my old elementary school just down the road, if we'd smelled that same thick scent of mashed potatoes and gym floor wax.

I've always hated dog movies. It's a broad category, with wonderful plots and moral lessons about friendship and love. But I've always hated them because I can't bear to watch movies where dogs die. I can watch the bloody storming of Normandy in the opening of *Saving Private Ryan*, the scene in *The Green Mile* where one of Tom Hanks's prisoners burns alive in the electric chair, Christopher Walken's suicidal game of Russian Roulette in *The Deer Hunter*, all with not much more than a wince or a shudder, a reflexive closing of my eyes. But dog movies are off the table.

I saw *Old Yeller* when I was five, and it scarred me for life. A babysitter put it on for me one afternoon to capture my attention—"She likes the Disney Channel," my dad told her—and for most of the film it did. It was only during that terrible ending—the madness, the disease, the firing of the gun—that I became horrified, and carried the final images in my head for the rest of the day. My parents didn't understand why I was so dazed, why I walked around with pale skin and big, staring eyes. I never told them what I'd seen, even though I'm sure they would have gathered me up in their arms and rocked me back and forth, told me that they, too, remember the first time they saw that movie, how just hearing the title makes sadness ripple through them. I also never told them that it was because of *Old Yeller* that when I came home to find *Coolbreaze* missing, I understood what had happened.

During my freshman year of college, I had a recurring nightmare that Eliza died. It happened nearly every night for the first month I was there, and in every conceivable way a dog can die. In one version—the nicest one—I return home from college to find her missing from our house. I ask my parents where she is, but instead of not answering, my mother says, "She's gone." I burst into tears and fall to the floor under the dining room table. If I dreamed this version, I usually woke up disoriented, my heart pounding, momentarily lost in the bridge between my imagination and the waking world.

In another, Eliza is sitting in the same spot under the table, and I'm holding her tight and sobbing into her fur. My father is trying to take her away. He says it's time for her to be put to sleep. I won't let go of her collar, and in my dream, it's made of red leather and is slipping in my palms. Finally, he scoops her up off the floor and carries her away, and I fall prostrate on the carpet, its rough surface burning my face. I usually woke from this dream to the sound of myself crying, a high pitched, childlike "NO!" tearing me from my sleep. My roommate, a tall blonde sleeping in the bed across the room, would roll over and switch on the bedside lamp, her long, sour face sleepy eyed and frustrated.

I looked at her sheepishly, my cheeks burning. "Bad dream."

"What are you, in kindergarten? Shut up and go back to sleep. I've got a midterm at seven o'clock in the damn morning."

I'd roll over and hug my teddy bear, eyes wide open.

The next morning I'd call my mom as soon as I woke up. "Is Eliza okay?" I'd ask when I got her on the phone.

"Yeah, of course she is. She's sitting right here. What's wrong?"

I'd tell her about my dream, and she'd only sigh. "Oh honey. It's all right," she'd tell me eventually. "Everyone's okay."

My dad was always less understanding. "I dreamed Eliza died," I told him once. "Something terrible happened to her."

"But Kori," he'd say, "someday something will."

Someday.

I've always tried not to think about the fact that my dog is old. I don't know whether to call it living for today or just a very sophisticated form of denial. Perhaps it's somewhere in the middle. I've gotten through those bad dreams and thoughts by taking a deep breath and looking at the facts—that as she's aged, Eliza has seemed that much more determined to hold onto her youth. There are times when I'll be lying on the floor under a blanket, and there she'll be, rolling on her back next to me, her big brown eyes, outlined with a thick black that Janet likes to call her "eyeliner," egging me on, begging for me to get up. When I do, she'll wait for me to begin to wiggle my hand beneath the quilt for her favorite game—"Hand Under the Blanket"—then jump and bark as I move my hand, then slacken as it falls limp, staring intently, waiting. Then she'll begin to run in circles around the dining room table, sometimes hopping like a bunny, legs outstretched, and bark until I throw one of her toys so she can chase after it.

It's in those moments, watching her play, that I realize Eliza isn't thinking about someday.

It's getting close to dinnertime. Eliza is getting antsy—my mother would say her stomach clock is going off—and even I'm starting to get hungry. We begin to head toward the edge of the cemetery, where I've parked my car. I watch her as we walk—how she pokes her nose in the dirt, stops to take a pee, then begins to prance, her head held high, her tail, black with the tip dipped in white, standing straight up, as if to say, "Damn, I'm good." She's a princess, and she knows it, takes advantage of it any way she can. "You guys kiss that dog's ass all the time," my dad says of my mom and me. "When you aren't around, she expects me to give her extra treats and get down in her face and talk baby talk. No wonder she's such a drama queen."

But the truth is, I don't do it to spoil her. I do it because I love how she sits up when I give her a treat, her paws dangling at the joints, her tongue hanging out in a smile. I love how she'll run all over the house looking for a piece of food I've hidden like an Easter egg. Most of all, I love how she'll sing to me when I come home and bury my face in her warm, fur that smells of beagle, howling as I babble nonsense at her face. I love all these things about her, and I want to have as many images of them as I can, lined up in my head for days when the classes I teach go badly, or when I can't sleep at night because I'm homesick, even at twenty four years old. I can't bear to leave things undone, unsaid, something that comes not from actions and words, but going through life with the ones I love, at the pace time has set, for however long that is meant to be.

A bunny sprints across the field. Eliza gives a sudden, forceful tug on her leash, and I nearly trip over it as she runs after the bobbing lump of grey fur, howling in a screeching battle call. She runs as fast as she can, the bunny getting smaller and smaller before it finally disappears into a pile of woodchips. But she still keeps running. I'm out of breath and she's several feet ahead of me, not slowing down, eyes straight ahead, on the long dirt path ahead, the brush in the distance. So I keep running too, watching her stubby legs race forward, listening to her howls and holding them safely in my ears.