



FICTION



## Feeding Jobs

CATHERINE WONG

TO FEED A DYING DOG, you must fool its nose. Spoon feeding works best. The trick is to play on sight but not smell, conjure the slippery memory of hunger—you let the dog come to something once loved but now repugnant and before the dog can tell the difference the dog is kept alive another day.

The veterinarian who explained this to me was a dour man with tiny, unexcitable eyes. He wore his glasses hung from the collar of his sweater and when he spoke I kept looking past his face towards the glint of the lenses. Jobs was balanced on my lap, rocking with the weight of his own breaths, and the veterinarian demonstrated what to do using a series of disconcerting metaphors. There was a can of dogfood open on the table and he handed me a spoon.

Imagine, he said first, that you are trying to rush past an elevator door while it is closing. After three clumsy attempts he reached out to steady my hand. I was holding the spoon wrong, he told me. More gentle and more firm. Those are two different things, I said, but he told me to adjust my grip. As if, he said, I were forcing a baby's wrist.

It was almost comical, when Jobs first began to go. He would look for his bed in the wrong places and get distracted by the layout of walls, or Mark, my husband, would find him pawing at the opposite kitchen door, the one without a flap. In my lab there is a sensitive graduate student who takes in rescued greyhounds. Sometimes she stumbles into my office in tears to tell me that one



dog or another has injured its back, that she cannot bear to watch them grow broken with age, but Jobs is not a greyhound. Until the end even the collapsing brain of a pug does not have the same effect that it does in humans, the immense helplessness of watching a life laid unrecognizably low.

For a while I was not even sure there was a difference. Mark, who as a child once nursed a robin in a shoebox and offered it water many days after it lay obviously dead, merely pointed out that Jobs, always stupid, seemed to be growing stupider. I made the appointment with the vet only when he began hunting shadows in the evening. The first time Jobs snapped at the outline of a table leg I stepped back, startled by this flash of long dormant wildness. The next day Mark carried him to the laundry room and gated it off with an old baby fence, but that night from our bedroom we could still hear Jobs rushing against the walls, lunging at the silhouette of the dryer.

The Sunday before the appointment, he stopped eating. I filled a bowl in the laundry room every morning and threw it out when I returned from the lab in the evening, still full. For the first time I was conscious of a real urgency. He hasn't eaten for three days, I told Mark. He might actually die. Mark was standing at the drafting table in the small room he used as an office, the plans for a parking garage spread out before him. Without looking up, he said that that sounded like a problem. It was good, he said after a while, that I was taking Jobs to the vet to find out what to do.

Though I failed to feed Jobs even once, at the front desk the secretary handed me a printout of foods that could be prepared for spooning. When I looked it over I saw that it was a list of organs—lambs' hearts, livers, tongues. Mark had driven out to Belmont to meet with a client and I had told my students not to expect me in the morning, but by now it was well past noon and it seemed pointless to return to the lab. Jobs, in a plastic crate by my feet, had grown silent and listless. I hefted him into the trunk of the car and then drove to an out of the way grocery store that I thought might also stock organ meats. They sold organic grains and marked-up produce and I had only been there once before, many years ago, to accompany a high school friend who used and discarded three pregnancy tests in their well-kept bathrooms.



Behind the butcher counter a man was whistling while cleaning a large knife. I handed the list to him and he disappeared into the back and returned within minutes with a clear plastic bag, blood slicking the creases. In my hand, the organ meats were not unfamiliar—I had held every part of an animal during my grad school years, including a cat my partner sliced in two to reveal a string of unborn kittens we unfurled onto the classroom countertop like a garland—but these were fresher, lobed and glistening and undeniably fleshy. At home I poured them all into a pot of water and came back an hour later to find the kitchen unbearable with the smell of liver. The organs had turned a dull gray, soft enough to be spooned like puddings. Alarmed, I cranked open the windows, and then sat down on the kitchen floor, Jobs folded into a towel on my lap.

The task of feeding a dog is hypnotically frustrating. I sat there with the small plastic spoon the vet had given me at the end of the appointment, dancing around Jobs' face with the boiled livers and tongues as he turned his muzzle away and away. It was so small and easy a motion and yet I did not seem to have enough hands. I was reminded of a street magician our family had passed many summers ago, when Danny was eight and my younger daughter Lisa was only five, who had stood at a folding table in Harvard Square throwing quarters into thin air. The man had a handful of change and was tossing them straight ahead one by one. I paused to watch because of the simple repetitiveness of the trick, the way he seemed almost bored with his own expertise, but Danny was transfixed. It was late and my husband and Lisa were impatient to go home, but he wanted to stay until the magician packed up the little table. Later I bought Danny a book of tricks with diagrams for fancy shuffles and French drops. He spent the summer in front of a mirror, tossing coins from hand to hand. The key, he told me importantly, was to get the magic so right that it looked completely ordinary. He was so small, then, and yet watching him I already saw an echo of myself, this ability to fall headlong into a task so deeply that time seemed to dilate. Even feeding Jobs, it occurred to me now, was something he would have loved—a sleight of hand to be studied and perfected.

When Mark came home the house had grown quiet and dusky. I had managed to force Jobs to take one or two spoons of meat that could not have filled



a thimble and had been afraid of startling him by standing up to turn on the lights, but when Mark unlocked the door and came into the kitchen the dog hardly stirred.

“I took Jobs to the vet,” I said obviously. “They told me since he was refusing food we’d have to feed him by hand for at least a few days.”

“It smells like liver in here,” said Mark. He was holding a black poster tube and dressed unnaturally well, in a button-down shirt and ironed slacks. When I first moved in with Mark I had teased him for the care he took to iron his clothes in the morning, even though he spent most days sketching drafts or editing models on the computer without ever leaving the apartment. I’m twenty-eight years old, he had said then, I’m trying to look the part, but these days he no longer bothered to change—still standing, when I came back from the lab, at his drafting table in the oversized undershirt and sweatpants he wore as pajamas.

He set the poster tube down on the dining table and walked over to examine the pot on the stove. “What is this, boiled liver?”

“And kidneys,” I said. “And tongues.” He nodded and walked back to pick up the tube.

“And we’re supposed to feed him like this every day?”

“Well, hopefully soon he’ll start eating on his own,” I said. Jobs had burrowed down into the towel, away from the light, and closed his eyes.

“What are the odds of that?” said Mark.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But good, I hope, because I’ve been sitting here for more than three hours, and you’ll probably have to do it tomorrow.”

“Jesus,” he said, and then after a moment, he slung the tube over his shoulder and went into the bedroom. Within minutes, I knew, he would change out of the pressed work clothes into his pajamas and then go into his study and then stay there until 9pm, working on one project or another, before going to bed. Usually we ate separately. Mark cooked, eggs or boiled spaghetti that he took to eat in his room; I kept the freezer stocked with bags of frozen vegetables that I reheated and sometimes ate there in the kitchen or in the living room, while paging through a magazine.

On our first date, twenty six years ago, we had met at a plain but crowded Ethiopian restaurant on Massachusetts Ave. I had never had Ethiopian food



before and had borrowed a friend's white dress, which I regretted as soon as the food arrived, an enormous platter of red and yellow sauces. Mark thanked the waiter and then asked for a spoon. The man looked at him confusedly. I pointed out that at every other table, people seemed to be eating with their hands.

"So you'd never been there before?" I asked him after dinner. The weather, damp and oppressive that morning with summer, had cooled, and we had left the restaurant to walk along the Charles. He had never had Ethiopian food at all, he admitted, but had always heard good things. I asked him if he wouldn't have wanted something tried and true—though we had known each other by then for several weeks, I had been so nervous at the beginning, I confessed, that I could have probably fumbled a sandwich. He said he had been nervous, but he had promised himself when he moved to Cambridge that he would never eat at the same restaurant twice. It's a little silly, he said, but he was afraid that if he started doing the same things too often then he would slip into a pattern. And then, he said, laughing, is when you know you've grown up for good.

At the time I had just begun my postdoctoral work at a lab that focused on viral gene therapies; I spent my days measuring reagents into vials that were exactly the same size to ensure that even these fallible rhythms of life could be replicated precisely. This dogmatic avoidance of patterns, so unlike my own, felt thrilling. When I thought of this dinner now it seemed impossibly arrogant—to have believed, when we discussed the many friends whose lives we swore to learn from without following, that having seen one potential future we could build our own to avoid it. Our lives, bent so deliberately then from the strait-jacketed mantle of routines, now seemed to rest solely around them. Without these rituals, I feared, we might look up one day to find that our existence together was like a tree I had seen once that had been struck by lightning—still standing, but hollowed out at the center into nothing but ash.

Jobs had stopped turning his head when I brought the spoon near, and after a while he stopped opening his eyes. For a moment I wondered, until I remembered the faint rise of his chest against my leg, whether he was dead. There were footsteps in the hall, and at the sound Jobs lifted his head slightly. I looked up, surprised. Mark had changed into a gray T-shirt and jeans. He came down the hall and went over to the stove.



“Can I move this?” he asked, gesturing at the pot of organ meats. I had not bothered to turn off the heat, hoping that time might boil off the smell.

“Sure,” I said. He shifted the pot to the back and then turned to the refrigerator, bringing out a head of garlic and an onion, and then opened the cabinet where we kept the pans.

“You’re cooking,” I said. “Not eggs.”

“I thought you might be too tired from taking care of Jobs to make something,” he said slowly. “Can I use up a bag of frozen cauliflower to make spaghetti?”

“OK,” I said. “That sounds nice.”

I watched him at the countertop besides the stove, slicing the onion with his back turned. It had been so long since we had prepared anything that required more than boiling that I had forgotten his ease with a knife—the first time we made guacamole, I winced involuntarily when I saw him cutting an avocado he held in his palm, drawing the slices with an assurance that seemed cavalier. Once Lisa moved away to California we had given up on family meals entirely, but by then they had already become rare and stilted, as if we were playacting without reason. Our evenings in those days were full and exhausted, and it seemed wasteful to force everyone together at the same time.

Jobs shifted his weight in my lap. Grateful to feel him move, I adjusted the towel around him, wiping away the flecks of liver that had caught on his face and fur. Mark was pouring oil into the pan. Before he turned on the heat, he lifted off the floral apron we kept on a hook by the dishwasher, and by the time I thought to offer to help him, he had already tied it on. Years ago, I had bought him this apron on his birthday as a gag gift—it was patterned with faux-embroidered roses, and I had found it amusingly quaint—but to my surprise he had used it sincerely and often. My own mother had never taught me to cook, relying on packaged salads and frozen dinners even when we had guests, but Mark had grown up in a household of elaborate Sunday pot roasts. When I first began staying regularly at his apartment he had seemed thrilled at an excuse to cook for two. It was easier to use up vegetables in bulk when there were two people, he explained. In those days we stood side by side in the kitchen while I handled basic tasks, like washing mushrooms, simply to be close to him. Often



we did not finish preparing meals in one go, too eager for each other when we were so near—garlic burns quickly even at low heat, he would say if we had made it that far, always reaching around me to turn off the stove.

The kitchen was now warm with the smell of frying onions; cooking had masked the slightly metallic odor of the organ meats. When I looked up I saw that Mark was nearly done. As he took the pasta from the stove, pouring it carefully onto a pair of plates, I shifted to lift Jobs off of my lap and realized that I was afraid. At the lab, I did not eat with the students, spent my lunches reviewing grants or students' papers over sandwiches that I bought from a nearby truck and unwrapped within the quiet of my office. I had not spoken during a meal for so long that I worried I no longer knew how it worked.

Mark placed the plates on the table, along with a couple of forks. On the floor, Jobs lay in the towel where I had left him, tucking his head occasionally into his chest but largely unmoving. I pulled up a chair and sat down. Mark lifted his fork.

“Well,” he said, “to Jobs, I guess.”

We sat in silence, eating. It was a relief to be sitting upright—with Jobs in my lap I had sat uncomfortably hunched, my legs beginning to grow sore against the tile—and the spaghetti was as I remembered, sharp with garlic. For the first time since the morning, I thought ahead to the next day.

“Actually,” I said, “after dinner, can I show you what the vet said? I don't think I'll have time to feed him tomorrow before I head out.”

“OK,” said Mark. “And it looked like there was a lot of liver left.”

“I probably made too much,” I said. “At the vet I couldn't get him to eat anything, but somehow I thought that it would be easier when we got home.”

After dinner, while Mark took the plates to the sink, I retrieved the little spoon the vet had given me and the leftover meat that I had scooped into a plastic bowl. Mark knelt down, rearranging the towel to wrap Jobs more tightly, and I handed him the spoon before crouching beside him. Mark was a tall man—when we had gone to see movies, I had rested my head on his bicep instead of his shoulder. Kneeling, he looked reduced and gangly, like a badly



collapsed chair. I showed him how I had held Jobs' head in one hand and the spoon in the other, and repeated what the vet had told me, how the trick was fooling the dog's nose.

"I'm not really sure that it's working," I said. "But that's what you're supposed to do."

Mark lifted the spoon. I leaned in beside him, watching as he struggled to get the liver past the dog's lips. During dinner Jobs seemed to have recovered a newfound energy. He was resisting actively now, craning his neck away every time Mark brought the spoon near. I could see that Mark had not expected this, the excruciating futility of the feeding. After thirty minutes he had gotten nowhere.

"I think you might be going too slowly," I said. "He might be able to smell it."

"I'm trying," he said, but Jobs turned suddenly and kicked the little bowl of liver over onto the floor.

I went to get a paper towel, but when I came back, Mark had scooped the meat meticulously back into the cup. After ten or fifteen more minutes, holding the spoon so tightly that his hand shook, he managed to slip it into Jobs' mouth. Jobs chewed once or twice and spit half of the mouthful onto himself. There was liver on the dog's muzzle and cheeks and Mark began to wipe it off with the towel, but before he could finish Jobs spit up the rest of the liver onto the floor and Mark, with a guttural grunt, hurled the spoon across the kitchen.

The spoon clattered against the opposite wall and there was an enormous silence. It was as dense and electric as the air after a rain. Mark looked startled by himself, already ashamed. It was an action—unrestrained, wild—that carried an impetuosity I recognized in my husband, though I had almost forgotten this, our lives as dulled over the years as a knife pulled too many times against a whetstone. Lisa had inherited this from her father, both of them coursing in their youth with an energy that bordered on uncontainable. They were like those transparent globes pulsing with electricity that leapt to the surface when you brought your hand to the glass. I had laughed, involuntarily, when Mark had told me during that first dinner that he was studying to be an architect. I had assumed that architecture demanded a necessary stillness—all that attention to the correctness of lettering and lines—though later I learned that in the act of drawing alone he looked unnaturally ordinary, his body doubled over the paper and for once motionless.



The first time that Mark had invited me back to his apartment, while he stepped into the bathroom I had unrolled one of these plans on his kitchen table. They were scattered in a corner of the apartment and reminded me, translucent and curled, of snakes' skins. The plan I unrolled was for an unremarkable house with two floors and square windows. I remember studying the assuredness of the lines as if I were studying him, this man who had labeled every window in letters of the same size.

Later that evening, my thoughts woolen and careless from two glasses of wine, I had admitted to Mark that I had held the plan to the light against several others to figure out if every letter was identical. He had flushed and shown me this and other tricks: how to sketch a circle by outlining it three times and then darkening the strongest lines, how not to pierce the vellum with a compass. His natural handwriting, he said, was atrocious. A professor had once ordered him to spend an entire class copying the alphabet, filling sheets of paper with the same letters.

It was only much later, after Danny fell, that I understood that it was not that Mark could not be still, but that stillness scared him. I recalled, then, how in the weeks after I moved in I had sometimes awoken to find him watching the rise and fall of my breath. In those days we slept curled together so that I felt him warm against my sternum—because these things, we thought foolishly, were all we needed as assurances of an unscathed life.

I was holding a red mug of coffee at the time, five years ago, that the woman from MIT called. I had poured in the milk but the coffee was still too hot to sip. It was 8:32 in the morning. Later I learned other related numerical facts, such as: the night before Danny had completed nine and a half problems of his convex optimization homework, and, from the roof of Random Hall, which was not the dorm where he lived but a dorm that he visited often, it was 8 stories and approximately 85 feet to the ground. The voice of the woman on the phone was calm but insistent. I asked her, confusedly, how she had known of all places to call me directly at the lab. Before she could answer reason kicked in awfully and I put down the phone and ran out to the car.

It was so easy to go to him. The entire process was easy in this way, a multitude of tiny and terrible conveniences. Mark had refilled the gas the night



before and this was lucky, much as it was lucky that Danny had kept meticulous emergency contacts, or that a campus patrol had found him within minutes where he lay, or that the impact had fractured the sockets of his eyes and lashed his brain against his skull and yet—luckily—he had not died. We were told all of this by many people within the span of a few hours. It seemed that our lives were suffused suddenly with this kind of good fortune, a perverse bargaining of gratitude. I enumerated these things to myself and Mark even months later until he told me to shut up. At least, At least. At least we could take him home. The roads on the way to the hospital—at least they had been startlingly clear.

In the hospital I took refuge in understanding the mechanisms of damage. All the axons in Danny's brain had been sheared, I was told, by the force of the impact. More than once a nurse took me aside to explain that the axons were like telephone wires and to try and say gently that all the phone lines had been ripped. It was satisfying to dispense with these and other metaphors. I switched gladly into the linguistics of academia, offered additional facts to the doctors to clarify the depth of what I understood. Often they looked at me with relief. So you know how it is, then, a doctor said to me, and as he discussed the many things my son might never do again his voice took on a faint but recognizable tenor of clinical interest. It was an exchange of information between professionals. Mark stood by silently; for a moment I thought of telling him to take notes. Afterwards when everyone had left I sat at the bedside with my heart beating like I had passed an oral exam. Finally, when it slowed, I leaned into Mark and cried with a ferocity that astonished me.

In my first year at graduate school, I spent three months in a lab where I was assigned to select newborn zebrafish and then poison them. It was a tedious task; we kept vials of toxic solutions in a refrigerator and I was told to move the eggs one by one into a solution where they could be observed cleanly and killed. Under the microscope the first time I chose the eggs I wanted to look away. They were too lovely, translucent and gold with yolk. The astonishing thing was how quickly they grew ruined with life; you could see the cells split and double before your eyes and within hours the miracle of a tail. I was taken aback by how you could look right through their bodies: down to the crooked precision of their vertebrae, down to a pinprick of blood in their hemorrhaging hearts. In



the mornings and afternoons I recorded these details carefully in a notebook. I was good at this, and the professor complimented me once at lab meeting, how well I had learned to keep a document in the succinct terminology of death. After Christmas I transferred without telling her to a lab that dealt solely with cells.

It is not difficult, actually, to harm a cell; plated they are blind and blameless. Even the cardiac cultures, pulsing uselessly in the absence of a body, have always felt to me like hardly more than a feat of mechanics. There is little to mourn in their deaths—raised and gone in days like so much dust. At times I have caught myself extrapolating outwards against my will until even the largest life feels like a simple summing of parts. In all of my classes we were taught to regard the breakdown of things with academic interest, the way you would look into the hollow body of a broken clock.

In the months that followed I often thought of purchasing one of the notebooks from my zebrafish days, the amount that could be written down within their neat and gridded lines. I had always been good at remembering the mundane specifics of structures and routine—the precise cycles of cells, the timetables of trains—but now things seemed to slip in and out of my mind like water. I wanted to have something I could look at and point to, a ledger of recorded facts. For example, an observation: it is not all at once that doctors switch away from the language of rehabilitation. In the early days I counted the days until Danny would be fixed and it took nearly a year before I noticed that we were no longer counting. We installed an expensive bed in the basement. The man we hired from midnight to noon was named Ronald and the man from noon to midnight was named James.

Another observation: the spoons James used to bring in a clear vinyl bag and the spoon I was given now, to feed the dog, are of a nearly identical size.

The Friday after Danny came home, Lisa announced to me that she was taking up photography. I knew that she kept the money she earned repairing bikes at a motorcycle shop squirreled away in her bedroom—once, months earlier, while changing her sheets I had discovered an issue of *Time* magazine sand-



wicked under the mattress with \$400 tucked into the center, as if the magazine would have been enough to throw off the scent to intruders already in deep enough to search under the bed. She told me that she had bought a DSLR off of a boy from her geometry class who had flirted briefly with filmmaking before joining a band.

As a result, we have many photos from these years, though I have not looked at them often. When I mentioned this offhand to a visiting friend in the first few months she nodded and put a hand on my arm. I realized that she had assumed the obvious thing—that I could not bear to see these photos, or that we kept them locked away in a cordoned off room, as a kind of preemptive shrine—but it was not like that. The truth was that the photos would have felt redundant. I had already looked at my son for so many hours that I knew what I would find.

There was also this, which I could not bring myself to say aloud: when I looked at Danny there was a persistent and unshakeable incongruity. When Lisa brought home the first developed batch I remember finding them stacked on the kitchen counter, next to crumpled paper towels and a wicker basket full of fruit. She had not yet fully learned the mechanisms of the camera or the rules of composition—later she would expound at length over dinner on the rule of thirds—and most of the photos were of Danny in the basement, shot from different angles, looking openmouthed and underexposed.

When I flipped through them I felt violently as if I were looking at photos of an acquaintance. It was like a newspaper clipping of a distant relative who had gone through a terrible thing, horrific but mostly tangential to my own life.

When Danny was first born I took him dutifully to newborn care classes at Mass General for two months, ferrying him back and forth in the mornings before heading to the lab. In those days, the simple ritual of strapping him backwards into the car was alien, thrilling. I felt a soft disbelief in touching him—for the rest of the day it was only him and Mark for hours, and these mornings placing my son into a car seat felt like a simple validation that he was also mine. The classes were taught in a bright but windowless room and covered topics like sponge bathing and swaddle techniques. The nurse in charge,



a peppy woman in lavender scrubs, warned us about things like keeping vigil at all hours to ensure that our swaddled child did not roll over improperly in the night. If they rolled over improperly they would suffocate and die. This was the consequence of many of the classes, spoken or unspoken. If you kept your window cords unattended or sliced up hot dogs more than a half-dollar large it would all be over and you would be left with nothing but acres of pain.

Throughout my life, when entrusted suddenly with breakable things—a sack of glass pipettes, the palm-sized dishes of embryonic fish—I had felt, even in the face of their ordinary fragility, excitement laced with a thin undercurrent of fear. The lessons of the newborn care class haunted me. Children held a kind of animal's feral innocence in their hands, I concluded. I was afraid of crushing it the way that you could accidentally crush a lightbulb.

When I first saw Lisa's photos in the kitchen I stood there trying to draw a line between the boy whom I had practiced holding with both hands and the boy in the photographs and I couldn't. If I thought hard enough I could comprehend the way we had seemed to double over in time between that boy and this one—back again, after so many years, to the innocuous holding upright of heads, the cleansing, the unfolding of limbs—and yet I could not fit them together in my mind into the same child. After ten or fifteen minutes I put the stack of photos down and when Lisa came home from school that day she put them away.

A month into the second year, Lisa took Danny out to the shop. She claimed that Mikey, the thick-armed man who oversaw the repairs, had heard that Danny had once been an engineer and invited her to bring him in. When I thanked Mikey later he said that Danny was great but that he was astonished that Lisa had even brought him over. I think she simply wanted Danny to see that there were huge and beautiful things that she was capable of fixing.

We paid James overtime to come out to the shop, and he and Mikey managed to lift Danny into one of the resurrected cruisers and hold him there for a few minutes in the saddle. When I saw the photographs of Danny afterwards I was struck by the way that James was holding up his head. It was like looking at a man cradling a bruised fruit, as if his thumb might go through on accident.





James had large and gentle hands—this was obvious from the pictures—and yet to see them was unsettling. In those years my mind was crowded and un-inspired and I hardly thought of anything that was not directly before me, but it occurred to me that if James had closed his fingers around Danny's skull he could have contained the brokenness of my son completely.

In my final year of graduate school I audited a class from a noted biologist who believed that our world could be understood as a series of cycles. The world is complex, he told us, but look more closely and everything can be broken down. Things follow naturally from one another. He told us that the most wonderful and terrible halves of humanity could be demystified in this way. There is no good or bad, he would say. It is not even that they are two sides of the same coin. There simply is no coin, and no sides to choose from, just the omnipresent churn of chemical processes.

After one of these lectures, on the biological basis of human morality, I remember walking home feeling shaken but free. Everyone I passed in the hallways and campus yard seemed obvious, reducible. They're so stupid, I thought stupidly. If only they knew.

That evening I told Mark about these theories over dinner. Think about it, I said, isn't it incredible how easy it is to induce something as human as happiness? Even as I said this aloud, I could feel my excitement evaporate—it felt suddenly sadder, holding our newly cyclical, explainable world.

During another of these lectures, the professor told our class that most of humanity spent its days running from what they could not or would not understand. Under the umbrella of cyclical processes, he said, most human fears became small and frankly—he wrinkled his nose slightly—mundane. Even aging, he told us, even death. You see how clearly they follow.

I sometimes thought about this lecturer after we brought Danny home; he had never had any children. I also recalled, despite his insistence on rationality, that he dyed his hair every time the roots grew long to stave off the appearance of gray.



It is true, however, the sometimes extraordinary simplicity of death. Towards the end there was no need for a second assistant. James came by in the mornings and evenings with cans that he piped, after turning and cleaning my son, directly into his stomach. So many times I heard the willful selection of my son's death described as an act—of mercy, of dignity, of letting go—but this felt deceptive; what we had chosen instead was an inaction. All the complexity seemed to rest in the knotty handwringing of the law, in our language. The first week James came with one fewer can and the next week he reduced it by two. There was less and there was less and then there was none. A doctor visited several times to check on the progress, but this, too, seemed meaningless. What progress? We were marching towards an undramatic end.

Looking back, I can see that all the action was weighted after the fact. My daughter moved to California. My husband, though it took time for me to notice, moved into another realm, abstract and distant—somewhere that I have never located again, not even now.

In the morning, when I first carried Jobs into the examination room, the vet had lifted him in his arms as casually as a clock radio, a light but inanimate thing. Jobs hung limply with his limbs to one side. The vet looked over him in silence. When he finished, he said that it would be best to put him down.

But there must be something we can do, I pleaded. It wasn't recommended, he said, but I pressed him until eventually he left the room and returned with the dogfood, handing me the little plastic spoon.

What my professor in graduate school had never seemed to grasp was that you can understand every step of a cycle and run from it anyway, that even obvious things are not always so easily explained. For example, at the very end of the appointment, the vet put a hand on my shoulder and told me to think about what I was doing. I know your intentions are good, he said, but you need to think about whom you are doing this for. How did he know, I thought, that my intentions were good? I was not sure of that, even then.



Or Mark, my husband, lifting our dog gently to the ground, crossing the kitchen to clean off the liver streaked onto the wall with a paper towel. He was sorry, he said, he had momentarily lost himself. He would be home all day tomorrow. He would take over the feeding in the morning. OK, I said, though I knew that after tomorrow there would be another day and then another, that a tomorrow would keep on coming even if we never understood whom it was for.

