

Poem: With No Regrets

by Peter J. Collom

Once I knew an old, yellow dog.
When he walked
His feet padded softly.
His ears flopped like a clown.

He is old now,
And weak;
And suffers all the indignities
That come with living longer
Than your body ever intended.

He sees me sitting, and watching.
His sad, tired eyes widen a bit and sparkle with recognition.
I call to him.
Nobska,
I say, How are you, pup?
Not profound,
But sufficient.

I know how he is.
I have eyes. I can see.
But I smile and stroke his tawny hide,
Telling him he is beautiful.

He accepts my token of affection gratefully,
Without condition,
Asking nothing more.
But he reaches up a paw gently to coax me on
When I hesitate as if to stop.

He blends into the pattern of the carpet upon which he lies.
Did the family who created this work of art,
Knot by knot,
Nearly a century ago,
Know that they would bring rest and comfort
To such a deserving soul?

Perhaps they did.
More likely,
They did not, But woven into the warp and woof of their rug was this dog's shadow,
And he knows,
Exactly,
His place.

He stands at the door and looks back hopefully.

Outside,
He limps, and I wonder if we should go back.
He chooses the smooth path along the side of the road,
Just as a small boat rides the eddies at the edge of a narrow passage,
Spurning the stronger current at midstream.
His center channel isn't the flooding tide,
It is the punishing rocks and sharp pebbles turned up by repeated passings,
And his easy eddies are the soft way
Where fall has strewn colorful leaves
And soft pine needles
Over the ground.

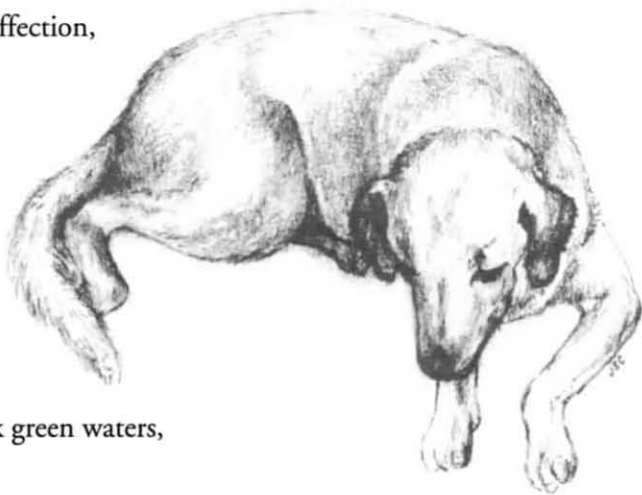
Sometimes on our walks
He would fall behind,
But when I turn and wait,
He bounds along to catch up,
Forgetting for a moment his aches and pains.
Ears flopping, a smile on his face,
As if young again,
He takes the lead.

When we returned home
 Out of the cold and mist,
 He ate,
 And drank,
 And rested.

You smelly, old dog,
 You are a teacher.
 What we all could learn from you.
 Courage and determination,
 Taking what life deals out,
 Making no excuses,
 No complaints,
 Asking no more than a little affection,
 Giving far more in return.

He sleeps now,
 And dreams,
 Of what, I do not know.
 He cannot talk.
 He cannot tell me.
 But I think I know.
 I expect he dreams of the dark green waters,
 Teeming with life,
 Off the coast of Labrador,

Playing among the rocks,
 Sure-footed and fleet,
 Taking the wind square in his face,
 Bold, sturdy, and free.
 Swimming the coasting waves.
 The high surf and the curling water do not frighten him.
 He is lithe as an otter,
 Strong, and at home as a seal.



Drawing by Julia S. Child

If he could,
He would dive down deep
Among the porpoises and whales
And swim, and swim,
And swim,
Never taking a breath.

Nimbly
Picking his way down a rocky cliff and
Threading his way among the boulders,
He reaches the ocean's edge.
The smell of the sea is stronger here among the small tidal pools
Mussels,
Small crabs,
And a variety of lichens and sea grasses
Welcome him with their pungent bouquet
And make him pant with anticipation.

Carefully,
He steps onto a flat, slippery rock
And launches himself headlong into the icy shallows
As a steep wave crashes over the outer barrier,
And with a whispering hiss
Foams its way towards the beach.

Then
He is in the water,
And with the sure, strong strokes of an experienced swimmer,
He sets out towards the surf

But, inevitably,
He awakes,
And shuffles about on his belly,
The water no longer
Supporting his weight.

It is hard for him even
To raise his head.

Lying on what should be
His comfortable and familiar bed,
He hovers between two worlds,
Feeling his old restrictions return with a certainty,
Seeing in his mind's eye the sun reflecting off the water,
Knowing which place he prefers,
But unsure which of them
Is real.

Bone cancer,
The doctor says,
Possibly metastasized into the lungs.

So that is it.

Reality flushes over me like a cold sea shower.
His breath lately had become labored, and
There was the intermittent cough.
He had grown thinner.
And he had run
With a list to starboard,
Favoring the swollen leg.

He might last six months if the leg is amputated,
The doctor said, in guarded tones,
As if the old dog could understand.

*Good Lord,
Of course I understand
I can hear.
I can see their faces.
I cannot speak to them,
But can't they read my eyes?*

The moon shone like a floodlight
Completely illuminating the Sound,
Enjoying the largess of the sun
Half a world away.
It was one of those electrifying nights
That come to the Cape in late autumn,
A cold snap,
The first frost.
The hour was late.
Lights peering out of windows long since had been extinguished,
Curtains pulled down against the cold.
The gibbous moon,
Just slightly larger than one-half
Might just as well have been full.

Light waves pattered the beach.
There was no wind.
Not a cloud marred the perfect sky.
East Chop blinked a dim and distant green.
West Chop occulted clear and bright.
Gay Head, Aquinnah,
Marking the western end of the Vineyard,
Tarpaulin Cove on Naushon Island,
And the myriad of flashing red and green buoys that
Dotted the entrance to Little Harbor and Woods Hole Pass
Decorated the Sound as if for the Holidays.

The intermittent tinkling of close-in buoys came to him
Like bells calling monks to prayer
In a high mountain reach
Cultures and worlds away.

The old, yellow dog loped easily along Church Street
As if he were a pup.
Nobska Light almost blinded him,
It was so clear,
As he glided down the hill towards the beach.
His feet barely seemed to touch the ground.
He felt as if he were flying.

The lights began to dim,
The sounds became more distant.
For he was high above,
A mere spectator to all that lay below.
He took one last, loving look
At what had been his home for thirteen years.
He knew that if he ever did see this place again
He probably would not be able to remember it.

Then,
With surety and grace,
He struck out for a beautiful, bright opening in the roof of the World,
Where a voice seemed to be calling him
Home.

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