

Dogfish
By Miles Marti

“Dogfish.”

That was the final word I ever said to you. I’d heard the word before in my life – fishing with cousins, the name of a local alehouse – but it was never anything more than a scrambling of letters, among trillions. Even when I said it over your dusty, dying breaths, I couldn’t extract anything close to a meaning from it.

We were at a McDonald’s when we found out about you – my sister and I sitting at a pale, round coin of a table, our father across from us. Through the subtle salted steam of our food, I saw my father’s eyes redirect from his phone, sharp in his dried hand, to my sister, then to me. “Blue is taken,” he said, eyes shifting back down to his screen. “There’s a family with an Autistic child in North Carolina who wants him. The kid is begging. His family believes Blue will help him – a lot.” A few seconds passed without much movement or conversing, my father setting his screen-face up besides the ketchup. My sister thrust herself on the tips of her plastic shoes, snaking herself over the table, grabbing my father’s device with both intent and urgency. Her eyes were both squinted and scanning; she was somewhat mechanical in that moment. The ping-ponging of her pupils stopped. “How about that one?” she asked with a childlike simplicity. “He’s cute.” I remember craning myself to see, looking at you through the screen. Your head wasn’t facing the camera like the rest of them – something out-of-view capturing your scattered attention; like a fish in chummed waters, scanning for meat. “He’s cute,” I echoed. “He’s cute.” The three of us joined our eyes in a triangle of wordless, intense focus. The next words were spoken by my father through his food. “OK,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

About twelve-and-a-half years later we learned you were to die. It was New Year’s Eve. I had just returned from Mexico with my family – I had sprawled in linen-lined Balinese beds, sand scattered underneath, as you contorted yourself, caged, a pen of straw-like hair, and the metal smell of both urine and dozens of empty cans of moist, unsalted meat. I mostly laid by the poolside, eating fruit – kiwi, strawberry, pineapple – by the pound. William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* was always with me; folded backward, avoiding the sun, or its brown-yellow pages laying gently dead on my groin, liminal and unfinished as I rested between chapters. Despite having returned home, now, I still lounged through the days as if the Mexican sun was still orange and hard. My phone pinged, and I saw I had been messaged by my father. He spoke jargoned and complex through little typed letters – “laparoscopic splenectomy,” “hemoperitoneum.” “Euthanasia.”

If I were to write this all before you had turned to a dogfish, this would be different. But you are a dogfish, now, and forever will be – and I sit alone in this browned coffee shop, punching with a sort of heated confusion at the keys of my Macbook. I look to my left; it is thirty-four degrees outside, and the sky’s tears are too thick to be rain but too soft to be hail.

You were sold to us for a few thousand dollars. My father took the day off from work, drove out through the wooded backlands of Pennsylvania to get to you – he cradled you up and dropped you in the front seat. Stepping off the school bus later that day, you looked a little bear when I first saw you – somewhat tubby, paws too big, weighed down as if ankle weights were implanted under your coat. You positioned yourself in something between sitting on the hairy forearms of my father, and standing – your hind legs oddly strong as you statured your little frame. I ran to you, dispersing from the sea of children behind me. My father lowered you to me, and we were the same height for the only time in our story. I looked at you. A horde of children,

grubby and spiteful followed behind me, seemingly entranced. There was a sea of hands being thrown at you – waving and changing in the sign for affection, attention. A herd of little eyes looked at your little eyes. Your view darted up and down, round and round, again and again. You just looked at hands, not at people. You wouldn't look at them, at me. I remember a subtle feeling of affliction – *Who are these kids? What are they doing?* But, I let it be. A minute more of this chaos, and my father hoisted you up over his shoulder, starting down the sidewalk, trekking downward to our brick-red door.

When I received the message from my father about you, I sat still, just looking at the words. Words, devoid. I read them aloud – reciting, merely, not processing. In the other room, my stepfather peered his head around the wall, eyes a softer shade than normal. His strained shoulders were hugged by his military outfit, a battle of sandpaper and olive. His condolences he gave. He'd met you just once, calling you too stubborn and repetitive in your whines for his affection. He told me of his own childhood pet – a browned mutt found on the soaked streets of the Bronx. He recalled his sister and him sitting with the doctor as it happened. "Feeling the heart slow in your arms is one of the oddest things I've ever experienced," he said. "He died in my arms." I looked up from my reading intently. We locked eyes. "It's a little traumatic," he said. His tongue was softly different, though I didn't see how.

Your impulsivity and chaos would scare us from time-to-time. We once took refuge in a West Virginia mountain house over Spring Break, bringing you along. We spent our time as by-the-textbook as possible – during the day we would hike the bouldered slopes and collect sticks, only to return just before nightfall, watching Shyamalan films and roasting s'mores. The first day or two was pleasant, yet our unconditioned selves grew irritable in a dash. My father and stepmother fought egregiously, and my brother had been throwing tantrums – the same boxed foods, canned foods, could only keep a little one sane for so long. My sister found herself plagued with homesickness – the greens and the browns of the terrain, near-never-ending, had grown nauseating; it was not at all like the suburbs. Thinking she couldn't grow any more inhospitable, the discovery of lice by the dozens, secretly bedding in her hair, was inconvenient enough to send her into a spiraling fit of rage.

Back home, it took a minute for my father's text to resonate. Within ten minutes, I was stepping out of the car – lolled awkwardly between two spots of the animal hospital parking lot. The building stood still and tall, a type of unbothered attitude in the brown bricks, the cyan sign. It was only as I pivoted myself to walk to the front door did I see, in the reflection of the pillowed glass, the mirrored painting of my favorite childhood pizza parlor. I did not remember it was across the street – just a mere stone's throw. The fact that a place of laughter paralleled a building so otherworldly held no place on my Earth. The hospital loomed over the eatery's small, dingy walls. Twenty years of frequent visits, there, and not a thing had changed. The place was stereotypically Italian – red, checkered tablecloths spread at every seat, the smell of the square-shaped, mozzarella-riddled slices always cutting through the air, even during the brutal, Mid-Atlantic winters. I paused to look across – just for a split-second – as I always did when passing through the town. It held countless memories: take-out and movies on a lukewarm Friday night, my cousin's birthday party, when he ate twenty-two pieces, claiming victory through a squeamish pair of orange-red lips. In retrospect, I could write pages of these experiences both with vividity and ease. Yet, as I continued walking to the building of death, I couldn't recall a damned thing.

On the day we were to leave West Virginia, you had slipped out through the flimsy, half-rotten front door – which held an undeniable difference from the images posted on the rental

website. Leaves popped and pricked as you pranced through the yard with a clumsy grace, teeth flared, mouth agape. You circled around like a mad, mad thing. With a sudden and seemingly random jolt, you bolted for the old, dying shed, crouched in the corner of the yard. The thing was crooked, in all senses of the word – the wood panels were slanted and held on by a series of half-dead nails, and unknown stains were splattered with an undertone of violence. The entire structure itself was somehow balanced on three pegs rather than four, a divot or slit in the corner of where the fourth leg should be. Beneath this impossibility was a hole, so brown it was black, thin and claustrophobic, yet comically large. Young, it terrified me. As you flew to the abyss with eagerness, your eyes opened wide with a strange, animal wonder. You ran into it, burying yourself tightly in the gap, like an aquatic thing tangled in net, and I remember the thought being dropped on my scalp with a painful weight – *You are not a dog. I don't know what you are, but I know you're not a dog.*

Entering the hospital before your death, I met my family in the lobby. There we sat for a moment, and I couldn't help but feel a writhing sense of stupidity come about me. Everything was smaller, softer, more comforting than I had imagined – the lights were bright and stagnant, and the floor was clean and acceptable. The joy and unity of Christmas decorations were inescapable – a wooden nativity scene sitting content on the reception desk, plastic candy canes, twilight in tango with the soft, silver ceiling ventilation. Peppermints swirled with an unmistakable sense of serenity in a glass jar tucked in the corner, and the scent of synthetic gingerbread sat stale in the spacey air.

The creature had buried itself instantly in the hole beneath the shed. It fluttered around with both anarchy and awkwardness, thick mud and cakey, fragrant dirt being tossed around effortlessly. With a sharp stop, movement seized. The creature tried to raise its legs, but was stopped – stuck and static in the hole, panic and fear seizing the mountain air. There was a mix of a yelp and a cry and a call for help, staccato grief radiating across the yard with power. I remember it growing louder, louder, louder, and feeling myself take the form of one of the innumerable trees around us – still, waiting, watching. I questioned if I should call for you, or if this is just what things did – circle the planet, dig, and become one with the dirt before anyone could intervene. Minutes passed, each moment more intense than the last, until my father had gotten on his hands and knees with urgency, wrangling the thing out from its captivity. You coughed once and ran for the door, your hot breeze passing along my leg, your eyes forever frozen only forward. Only then did I move, hoping you too hadn't caught lice, hoping you too wouldn't spread the dirty little bugs to me in your swift passing. I hate dirty little bugs.

As I observed the sensory comforts lying around us, a nurse entered through the door. Leading us down a stubby hallway – short, fat – she walked us to room twelve. We sat in four chairs as she stood above us. As she opened her mouth to speak, her eyes were pulled to the tissue box placed on the side table – as if by an invisible magnet, cruel, involuntary, ugly. “He'll be in within a few minutes,” she said. I can recall her orange hair being faded and gentle, her smile withered and mangled by both age and air. “Would you like some treats?” I nodded – up, and then down – and she exited without a word.

You entered minutes later – you looked the exact same, save for the IV buried through your shaved, front left leg. You held yourself normally – jaw protruding, nose mushroomed and moist. Your ears stood erect and wispy in the room – the room which could best be described as “simply thin.” In an instant, you began to walk in circles – sniffing at nothing and swooping your neck to see all that you could, like a giraffe wrangled in infancy. You surely couldn't tell, but, for just a moment, a vast and blanketing sense of something swallowed the room, just as the whale

did Jonah, and, I could swear, we were transported to another place for a fraction of reality. The nurse returned quickly, two canned chickens in each of her hands. “We’re out of treats,” she said – a tone in Limbo between remorse and genuine care. “We only have chicken.” She bent over ever-so-slightly, her dry fingers running across the metal cans, folding backwards and over themselves like self-destructive waves. “Is that OK?”

You tore through the meat, so floppy it looked raw, almost still alive. As you scarfed and spat like a child, the only words I could muster were “some things never change.” The two large cans were empty within thirty seconds – a gentle shock rang through our human bodies, surprised you kept your appetite, monstrously carnivorous and eager – in the face of death. With the cans now hollow and dry on the floor, the nurse headed for the door, turning her saggy head right before she vanished. “I’ll leave you all to some alone time with him,” she said. “When you’re ready, there’s a phone over there.” Her veins looked oddly blue as she raised her hand to give directions. “Either dial one-zero-zero or one-zero-one,” and we’ll send in the Doctor.” I thanked her, and she left.

The time we all sat there was anticlimactic. You didn’t embrace us – you didn’t let us embrace you. You just trotted around the room in jumpy circles, like a playful pony. We would reach and twist ourselves over to you, joining our cheeks with yours, if only for a second. My father’s hands pressed down on the nape of your neck where your mother once held you. You seemed more interested in the blinded windows, though. This cycle repeated, the tears growing dryer, evaporating through the white, white ceiling. I looked to my father. “We should – do it.” His eyes met mine without words. Synchronized, the four of us helped ourselves to our feet. And everyone left the room but you and I.

Minutes later, a woman entered. Despite her youth to the previous nurse, she moved slow and heavy, like a stout slug. I looked at her, she at me. “Hello, Doctor,” I said plainly. With not even a smile – just a redesign of her upper lip – colored a sandstone hue – she corrected me. “I’m not the Doctor,” she replied. “I’m just a nurse. I just came to talk to you for a moment.” Your eyes met hers with a stillness, a static state that somehow held both a complex, fiery consciousness and a taxidermized stare.

She began to speak to me, and there was a sort of childish simplicity in the way her words landed. I felt like a child. “Have you ever... been *present* before?” she asked me. I declined. “I’m not sure if the Doctor will explain, but I’ll... tell you just in case. I replied “OK,” my hand on you. You just stared at her like you’ve never stared at anyone or anything before, I swear it. You were shockingly unmoving, eyes like daggers at rest – sharp, shiny, still. She looked at you, interrupting herself. “I love your face, I love your face” she told you. You shimmied a little bit in excitement, in love, and, within a moment, the scenario was as if it had never changed. You were still once more – me the same. Feeling as if there were only two souls in the room, I looked at you. *You are not a dog. I don’t know what you are, but I know you’re not a dog.*

She explained that there would be two shots. “The first one,” she began, “is a sedative. This will calm and numb him. He’ll be still once the effect kicks in – around a minute after, the Doctor injects him.” She opened her mouth as if to speak, but quickly closed it once again. “He will feel no pain or discomfort – it’s just relaxation and tranquility.” The silence in the room was interrupted by her shoe, moving a half-inch, birthing an ugly screech in the tight room. Your ears didn’t hear it, and I thought of your mind for a moment – questioning what it was, if it was even there. You just stared – just like you had been doing. “And then, there’s the second shot. Once the first shot is in full effect, the Doctor will move to the second shot,” she said softly. “This will

enter through his IV, and stop his heart.” At that exact moment, all I could think about were words. The Nurse was careful and strategic – no “dead,” “kill,” not even a “pass away.” Her sentence simply stopped at “heart.” It was dull. I confirmed my understanding, and thanked her for her routine spiel, which felt so absurd. She left the room with her head low and closed the door.

You began to move, now. You walked in circles, circles, circles. There was no speed or pattern to it – the only certainty was that it was constant. Like a shark who couldn’t stop to sleep, it felt like you would go eternally. The room was a perfect square, you snaking around it, then through it, bouncing circularly, then diagonally, from armchair to window, tissue box to door handle. I couldn’t touch you for more than a second on end – you just curled, bounced, ricocheted. Like a shark who couldn’t stop to sleep.

And then the door opened. In stepped the Doctor. His hair was light and curly and childish, but the rest of his face held low, like a sort of primate. His glasses were perched on his nose, and his white gown made everything feel a bit more real than it had been moments before. His right hand opened the door, his left hand cradling two syringes – capped with plastic, labeled with letters so little, and words so complex, I simply looked away instead of trying to decipher their symbols and meanings.

He greeted me with a “hello,” – simple, plain, soft. He closed the door gently, and said something which I can’t recall precisely. He then ran through the explanation the nurse had just given, but, still close by the door, as if not fully immersing himself until after his words were spoken. The contents of his speech were the same, but he was more advanced in the words he chose: “ultra-concentrated dose of pentobarbital,” “moral and humane euthanasia,” were the only two I remember with perfection. Like the previous nurse, he avoided the “bad words,” despite their truth being now inescapable. As he described the process of the second shot, his gaped mouth just trailed off mid-sentence. “I’m sorry,” he said, though I don’t know to whom. You were still circling, sniffing about. The Doctor bent his creaky knees with a sort of discomfort, and waddled towards you awkwardly. I don’t know what I expected to happen, but it felt surreal as he transitioned so smoothly – and almost gracefully – from his words to his movements. I wanted him to wait.

There was a sort of sting to the moment – like the constriction of cold skin in colder water – but I, too, bent my knees, childish and capturing, trying to corner you. The Doctor and I both knew we had to join our bodies, to create a sort of barrier wall to entrap you, yet neither of us said a word, let alone even glanced at the other, save for our peripheral. We failed in our first attempt to pin you to the creases between the two walls. As we closed in, The Doctor kneeling down, reaching for the IV, you phased through our pale, arachnid legs. One of the few real thoughts I had in that building – I couldn’t help but compare you to a ghost or ghoul, melting through doorways, appearing anew on the other side. You stopped in the middle of the room. Turning our efforts to the opposite corner, we approached you once more – this time my shin against the stiff and boney legs of The Doctor. You wobbled gently, and a purpled liquid spiraled through the tubes with impressive speed, disappearing at your paw. You kept wobbling. Eyes fixated on the IV, childhood, Seussian images and stories poured into my head. I thought back to my youth – reading *Green Eggs and Ham*, *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* with a glass of chilled milk. I could hear the swooshing of the leathery pages as they turned, could smell the dust dancing in the air, could see the –

– and then you fell; you, the creature. It wasn’t cruel to call you that, I swear it. It was simply safer, more true, more you. It’s left, front leg twitched for a moment of a moment, and, as

it tried to stand, it simply didn't. Its weighted coat fell on its left side, plopped and echoed to the ground. Watching it fall wasn't tragic, nor even shocking. It was absurd and bliss. Body flopped like a sandbag dropped from high. Sitting in a chair next to it as this happened, I remember pulling my hand back, scared. My feet kicked up, made room for the hard landing. My throat constricted. Posed awkwardly on one knee, a cruel marriage, The Doctor extended his crooked back and inched closer to a paralyzed thing. "Oh, Dakota," I said. As it laid there, the triumphant thought in my mind was of a fish – static on its side, eyes balled wide-open, pointed, stiff, repulsive in suffering, yet paradoxically innocent.

I began to breathe a little heavier, it a mile softer. "OK," the doctor said, his eyes bouncing between the gently-laid blanket, dead-center in the middle of the room, and the still body, with an odd stiffening to it. "We can move him to the blanket. Do you want to move him to the blanket? Or we can leave him, here, in the corner. Or to the blanket."

"We can leave him in the corner," I said after a second, seeing his hands grab the second and final syringe. He took the cap off gently, putting it on the counter noiselessly. I readjusted my footing, the faded woolen sheet snatching my stare. I didn't look at the creature – I blinked slowly and softly. "Actually, can we go to the blanket?"

The Doctor swooped his forearms under it, like a sort of gull, and, grunting with its bloat and fat and fur, carried it to the blanket. He laid it down with a smooth motion, and it exhaled gently. I pulled myself in next to the Doctor as he searched for the end of the IV, tangled and messy. "Do you want to go over there?" he asked, his empty hand pointing to the other side of the body. "There's more room over there, and you'll be closer to the head. You might want to go over there." The word choice irked me violently – "head." But I did as he suggested – I stepped over it, and sat back down, crunched and little as it laid large and hard in the room so small.

I glanced as he leaned in with the second syringe. It looked unmistakably the same – had not moved an inch, could not if it wished. It laid still like a fish, a fish, a fish. I looked at it, at the liquid, an eggshell-white now seeping in, and closed my eyes, hand on gentle hair.

There were about thirty seconds of the loudest silence I've ever heard, a tingling in my wrists I've never felt before – the most grudgingly absurd time of our beings. The Doctor left me with the creature, impossibly static, alien. We sat in frigidity for a few minutes, and I looked at it, toyed with the rubbered, tar gums of the thing and watched the teeth sit madly. A part of me expected a grumbled snarl, any spark of life. As I upped and left, the last thing I said – the only thing that could have been said – slipped out through puckered face and half-dead cheeks. As if a single word could capture it all. As if meaning mattered in the moment

"Dogfish."

The word sat stale, a failed offering to a thing that's nameless. I said it because there was nothing left to say – because it was funny, cruel, or perfect – or maybe because it was nothing. I said it because of the absurdity of trying to make meaning of what was left.