

# Andrzej Stasiuk

## Dog

OUR OLD BITCH IS SLOWLY DYING. IT WAS HER HEARING THAT WENT first, as I recall, then her sight, then finally her sense of smell. But she still gets around a bit, and she has a huge appetite. Every now and then she'll try to bark at something. She can barely keep on her feet, she stares with unseeing eyes and barks at her doggy thoughts, imaginings, maybe she's barking at her doggy memory. She's been with us for sixteen years. We've had her since she was a puppy. One summer a woman friend of ours brought her and left her here with us in the country. At the time we neglected the routine shots you're supposed to give puppies, and she got canine parvovirus. But we somehow managed to save her, driving her to the vet every day for an intravenous drip without which she would have died of dehydration. She was left with a slight loss of control over her hind legs. But for fifteen years she ran around and kept up with the other dogs. Once in a while, in the winter they'd disappear for two or three days at a stretch. I'd be furious, but in the end I'd climb in the four-wheel drive and comb the empty valleys, forcing my way through mounds of snow. They'd be found eventually, exhausted, skinny, half-dead, and, it seemed, utterly clueless about what to do with their doggy freedom or how to find their way back home. They would meekly let themselves be loaded into the car and for the next week they wouldn't budge an inch except to go to their feeding bowl.

But the bitch was the oldest of them. All our other dogs were descendants of hers. Children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. In the country, in conditions of almost total liberty, it's hard to keep tabs on them. Dogs are smart, and when it comes to preserving the species they're three times smarter still. We had her spayed only after her third litter. Her procreational activities had become a burden, because at the time we moved a lot and we were living in rented accommodation, sometimes in villages where people would get spooked at the sight of a dog bigger than a cat, a dog running free. (It's true, country people are afraid of strange dogs, because strange dogs bite; nothing can shake this ancient belief. A belief, by the way, that is quite justified in the villages . . .)

But our bitch was gentle. Her grandchildren and great grandchildren will sometimes kill one of the neighbor's sheep. When that happens I curse under my breath, but humbly take my money and pay for the dogs' entertainment. But her, she never hurt a soul. One time, driven by some distant echo of an instinct, she brought her puppies a full-grown chicken. But she didn't do the bird the slightest harm. She held it in her mouth as carefully as if she'd been carrying one of her own young. She even seemed embarrassed by her extravagance. Once

released, the chicken immediately stood on its feet and went back to its own kind.

I can see her right now, lying on the veranda in a patch of winter sunlight. Her coat is yellowish, the muzzle slightly darker, and she has floppy ears. She's a full-blooded mongrel. There's no way of telling what breeds had to have met and mingled in the past in order for her somewhat misshapen, somewhat comical, kindly figure to have made its appearance in our home sixteen years ago. But her mongrel genes must have been strong ones, because her grandchildren and great grandchildren entered the world almost exclusively with the same sandy yellow coat and the same droopy ears. Now she's lying in a pool of winter sun, sleeping almost all the time. When one of us goes up close, she raises her head. It's hard to know if she recognizes us. But she still likes to be stroked and fondled, the way she did throughout her life. Now, though, she's like an old tattered rug. Winter's coming, yet she's losing her fur, a dense, tightly packed, fuzzy covering that allowed her to curl up in a snowdrift and simply fall asleep, her nose tucked under her tail.

She's lost a lot of weight too. When she stands she looks like a skeleton covered in dirty yellow cotton wool. She's unsteady on her feet. She sways and totters. She can manage a dozen or so steps, then she goes right back to her bedding. She stinks. The usual smell of old age. Of a body that's stopped moving. In the smell I can still detect her old doggy scent from when she'd run in from the wind and rain, but it's less and less noticeable. Sometimes she tries to scratch herself, though it's harder and harder. That doggiest of doglike activities is increasingly beyond her. The paw misses its target and hangs in midair.

For the moment it's been a mild and snowless winter, so she can live on the veranda. It'll be worse when the frosts come. She does her business where she lies. On better days she'll manage to move a few feet away, but often she simply goes right by her bedding. It's hard to get angry with her because, aside from human touch, eating is the only pleasure she's capable of experiencing. She eats with gusto, greedily, and when you give her something you have to watch out for her teeth. But whatever it is has to be placed directly under her nose for her to be able to smell it. Even then she sniffs blindly, in every direction, and in the end finds what she's after more or less by chance. So with only vestiges of a sense of smell remaining, it's difficult to tell whether she has anything like taste. Or whether she's merely gorging herself, guzzling things down, filling her stomach, driven by the most primitive of instincts. And then, a few hours later she rids herself of it right nearby. That's why I'm worried about the winter and the onset of the frosts. We'll have to take her indoors, and we'll have to clean up every morning and during the day as well, because she never gives any sign that she needs to go out. She stopped giving signs just as she stopped being able to go out.

These days she actually gets on my nerves at times. As if she were growing old and feeble against us, as if she were doing it deliberately to spite us. I pass by her umpteen times a day, I step across her suffering body, and there are moments

when I feel the prick of irritation. As though, along with her life, my affection for her were ebbing away. In this there's a certain cruelty that's independent of the will. I lean down and pet her. What used to be automatic is becoming a conscious act.

I'm writing about this because it's the first time I've watched the long slow death of a being that for many years I shared almost every moment with. I've talked with other people about it, and they tell me the most sensible thing would be to have her put to sleep. (That's an interesting euphemism, by the way. No one says "kill." Everyone talks about "putting to sleep," which is to say, something gentle and, as it were, temporary.) I know that would be sensible, it's what people do, and those who do it have the feeling that they've brought relief, they've cut short distress, and that in fact they've acted humanely. I thought about it too for a moment. But we decided not to take that path.

I'm writing this doggy obituary-cum-memoir about a living animal because for the first time in my life I've had the chance to watch closely and systematically as a live creature turns into a failing body, and finally will become a corpse. I look at our bitch and I think about myself, but also about all the people who are slowly slipping away, shrugging off their integument. And so as I watch the dog, I can't shake a certain vision of humankind in its mortality. Our yellow-haired, useless dog (she doesn't bark, doesn't nuzzle up to you, doesn't wag her tail, isn't pleased to see you, won't cheer you up) is turning into a thing that will have to be disposed of. Yes indeed, some people recommend doing it sooner, to spare ourselves some trouble and the animal some suffering. After all, at this stage nothing is going to change, stop, turn back. A quick injection, and that's that. I could even administer it myself. When I've had to, I've slaughtered sheep and goats. Yet for some reason I can't get beyond the thought of all those people lying in the carefully concealed places that serve for dying. People like that are useless too. They consume energy, money, labor. They provoke vexation or indifference. I know how it goes because I've seen it many times: three or four people in nurse's uniforms and latex gloves enter the room. Two of them lift the almost weightless body, the others rapidly remove the diaper, clean, put on a new one. Three minutes later there's no indication that anything has taken place. Except that a strange human-yet-not-human smell lingers in the air. In fact, it may just be the smell of a human being, frightening us, disgusting and oppressing us, and that's why we lock it away in those remote, invisible places. We pay the people in the latex gloves to breathe in that smell in our stead. We pay them to accompany dying. When it comes down to it, in a sense we pay them to die for us. Because when we take part in the deaths of other people, of those close to us, we ourselves die a little, we ourselves become a little more mortal. We're simply buying yet another service to save us from using up our own time. To save us from breathing in that smell.

It's strange, this civilization of ours. It saves lives, protects them, prolongs them. Yet at the same time it renders us defenseless in the face of death. We don't know how to behave in its presence. My grandmother was washed and dressed

for her coffin by her daughters and her neighbors. A man who lives near me died at home. His daughter checked him out of the hospital because she couldn't imagine him dying among strangers. My neighbor took a long time to die, so his daughter had to learn to do all the things they do in hospitals, including giving morphine shots. And my neighbor died in his own room, with the view of a green hillside that he'd looked at every morning. But my grandmother, my neighbor—those are almost utopian deaths.

At times I'm troubled by a vision of a big city where the dying all remain in their apartments on the upper floors of modern high-rises or in the gated communities that empty out at daybreak and are only repopulated in the evening; they're separated by thin walls from the hubbub of the street, from the swirling, predatory world of the present-day metropolis, amid the never-ceasing howl of the city, with the glimmer of neon lights in their failing pupils. That is the vision I have. That people aren't dying in hospitals, in hospices or retirement homes, but in houses, apartments, that for most of the time are unoccupied. It's hard enough to deal with owning and walking a dog, let alone a dying person. And how do you carry a coffin down from the ninth floor? Stand it upright in the elevator? Then what? How do you lead a procession through city traffic? Sit in gridlock on your way to the church, the chapel, then afterwards to the cemetery? Honking, flashing your lights so the other mourners won't get lost?

Even in the villages funeral customs have changed. When my grandmother was buried, the procession walked two and a half miles in scorching heat from the church to the cemetery, the coffin carried on the shoulders of family members. At my uncle's recent burial in the same village, the procession went on foot only as far as the last houses, then everyone walked back to the church, got in their cars, and rode the rest of the way behind the hearse.

There are more and more of us, and more and more of us will die. And we'll be ever more alone when we do. At least till someone discovers the secret of eternal life. But even this to-be-discovered immortality will likely turn out to be only infinite solitude. Because after all, what can such an immortal talk about with mortals who cannot afford immortality?

It's thanks to our bitch that I think about these things. It turned colder today, and I built a kind of kennel on the veranda. I put blankets around it and inside it. She curled up into a ball and now she's sleeping. She's always sleeping. Nothing would actually happen if she were given that injection. She'd just keep sleeping. She'd stop doing her business where she lies, she'd stop turning over, she'd stop trailing her hind legs behind her, she'd stop eating her own excrement. She'd stop suffering, and we'd breathe a sigh of relief too, because it isn't easy to watch someone (is a dog someone?) eating their own excrement.

Nothing would happen. People should anticipate events and when necessary prevent them from happening. That's how we've gotten where we are today, so it would seem. And nothing can hold us back. We'll do away with lives that serve no purpose. Since we've learned to prolong life, we'll give ourselves the right to shorten it too, because for some time now we've felt that everything is in our

hands. In olden times, before the days of humanism, death was pitiless, it came as always too soon, but life persisted till the end. It was fate that decided. Now fate is gradually receding into the past. One day it'll vanish. For the moment we're removing it from our everyday space and putting it in hospitals and dying places. Then we'll turn our attentions to its timing. We'll be the ones to decide when it comes.

As I write, I look out onto the veranda. She's had something to eat and now she's curled back up in her den of sleeping bags and blankets. Our young dark gray cat follows her in and rolls up next to her in the warmth of her cooling body.

*—translated from the Polish by Bill Johnston*