

Old Dogs, Old Winters
March 2020

She wasn't always an old dog. That's the thing. This morning, though, she is old, and this is the picture I carry. I haul with me as well the memory of the panicked call to our vet and the subsequent days of fear. Days of glucose level monitoring. Insulin shots. The neuropathy in her hind legs, which eventually subsided but left her with wobbly, weak limbs. She painfully circled on the thick living room rug, searching for the perfect place that had once been easy to find. Her legs didn't want to make that harrowing journey—stand, sit, down. She plopped, our arms in awkward guidance. She struggled hours later to attend to our beckon, just before bedtime, “Time to go outside!” We used a towel sling to gently coax her body to move forward since her muscles lacked the strength. We shivered in the cold, but she, in her thick brown coat resembling that of a grizzly bear, gave little notice to the winter wind's bite. Instead she sniffed as if it bore a delightful fragrance. We took this as a sign of hope and told her, “Good girl!”

This old winter vexes us. We cannot remember the elation of the first snowfall, raising our faces to the flakes, thinking of the holidays ahead. The snow holds no beauty now. That is the picture we carry, outside and in. The wind is relentless, and its chill grows sharper as the weeks move toward St. Patrick's Day, when we rue that those living south of us, and lower in altitude, might find spring-fresh shamrocks in the meadows. The snow is months old, having thawed just enough to become treacherous ice lakes on the sidewalks, in the gutters. Mounds of it, scooped and transported by the snowplows to the edges of parking lots, grow black, as if snow could rot. Along the daily route my husband takes to walk the old dog and the younger one, ugly yellow snow pockets form from pee. Poop and occasional litter are frozen tight in the snow crust.

She wasn't always an old dog. Riding along on my lap on the day we bought her, she sniffed out the window, her posture arrow straight. She was only eight weeks old, but she was confident that this was her family, assigned to feed her, love her, spoil her. She took charge as soon as she bounced in the front door. Our grown yellow lab knew that he would spend his elder days in good-natured deference to her. She annoyed him, and he acted as if it were play. She ran with him, hard, fast, and long. She was the one who finagled puppy biscuits from us, for them, even when they had done nothing, really, to earn them. Except to be loyal and lovable.

Months ago, winter wasn't old. It came gently, energetic, young, resolute. It circled, retreated, circled again, soon settled down, not awkwardly, but with deliberate, confident weight. Indian summer crowded in as well, but the days of radiant sun carried the cozy smell of wood burning stoves, and Christmas lights appeared quite early on. The autumn snowfall brought neighbors out to shovel and to tease about winter's wrath, “just around the corner!” We smiled as we shoveled, and the snow disappeared by the next day.

Months ago, our old dog nearly died. Our vet's moments of silence, as she examined our pup, indicated that she was incredulous that death had not come to our faithful, furry friend. We asked if our pup should be euthanized. Our vet said, “No, let's give her a chance,” and we left the office with syringes, insulin, pills, hope. Our old dog left with us and with the tenacity to live more days. She always was a stubborn girl. Nevertheless, in those early nights when she could barely move, I kissed the top of her head, told her it was okay to die, whispered goodbye,

and wept. I reminded her that when she was a young dog, she raced me, on cross-country skis, to the bottom of a long, steep trail. She won.

A friend in Missouri lost her keys in the deep snow by her house. In searching for them not long ago, my friend wrote that she spied the green tips of daffodils and crocus in her flower beds.

Tiny green leaves. A sign of hope. Spring will come. We must be patient, here in our small city, 7200 feet above sea level and buffeted most days by high winds whipping the extreme chill off the western mountain peaks. We are serious when we pray that spring will come before June does. The stalwart robins will come, in tandem with the final snows, which will be wet and heavy. These early robins are impervious, laughing and hopping high, as if in dance, over the clods of snow blanketing the lawn.

Nearly every morning brings hope. Our old dog, sluggish at first as she slowly stretches from her comfy bed, plods toward me. She raises one front leg and then the other in a happy puppy hop, snuffles a greeting, and reminds me that she is still queen of the house by catching my foot with her soft mouth. We will patiently care for her, raising our voices to her near deafness, turning her around as her failing eyes take her into the pantry. We will not leave her.

Winter will eventually leave, and our old dog will spend her days stretched out in her back yard, the giving sun warming her joints. But for now, this morning, she stands tall on the ice-crusty, gray snow, stretches her nose to the sky, and sniffs—as if the world is hers—the fragrance of a woodburning stove's smoke. A good winter scent, I smell it too and am reminded of my grandmother, whose house was heated by woodstoves, who cared for me, held onto me with her letters of hope and her constant reminder to be patient and to love what each day gives.