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An essay

The Dog's Body

A car hit and killed Rusty, our cocker spaniel, on the road in front of our house, early September, when I was twelve. Rusty saw me pedaling toward home after delivering newspapers. He was supposed to be on a chain hooked to the clothesline in the back yard, but he wasn't. He saw me, and he took off across the road. A new Buick sedan, a deep blue Buick, hit him.

I saw Rusty thump under the car, about midway between the front wheels. He bounced from the asphalt road and hit the undercarriage of the car again as the car rolled over him. Then he spun off the pavement into the ditch, with fur flying everywhere.

A voice in my mind said there might still be hope, but I saw how hard the car hit Rusty, how hard Rusty hit the pavement, and how he spun off the pavement, set to high-speed by impact from the car. I knew there wasn't any hope and Rusty was dead. That was the way it was when I got there. Rusty lay dead in the ditch.

I couldn't do anything for a minute. The blue Buick slowed way down, then picked up speed again. I was glad it didn't stop. There wasn't anything they could do. I cried, from my feet all the way up. I didn't want anyone intruding on what I felt.

I picked up Rusty's body and carried it farther from the road and sat there with the bloody dog across my lap, in my arms. Then I carried Rusty up to the house and put him on an old rug in the garage.

When Dad came home, he brought the car, and I carried Rusty over and put him on the old rug in the trunk of the car. I rode up front, and we took Rusty down to the willows above the creek and buried him.

We dug the ground, and I laid in Rusty's broken carcass. Part of me wasn't close to the funeral we held there in hot sunshine. Part of me stood way off to my right and watched me place the stiff carcass in the hole we'd dug. I stood up. It made me dizzy to stand up so quickly. Dad leaned on the shovel, watched me, and sweat in the late-day heat.

I took the shovel from my dad and covered the copper-gold dog's body. We covered the grave with rocks from the creek bank. I wasn't sure I wanted to do it that way. I didn't have the words to define the change trying to work its way into my thoughts. I stood in sunshine, thinking. I could only think it through so far, and my thoughts diffused and left me standing in the hot sun, watching Dad carry rocks.

"Dad, I'm going to carry the rest of the rocks myself, but I need to think a little bit first." I did carry the rocks, because I couldn't take a ceremony apart when we were already halfway through it. I thought while I carried rocks, one at a time, up from the creek bank and lay them on Rusty's newly filled grave. I said, "I'm okay. I'm going to miss Rusty. I didn't want this to happen, but it did. I want to get this done and get on with other things." I cried again. Then we walked away from the creek and got in the car and drove home. I got on with other things.

Years later, my wife and two daughters and I took care of a ranch in a high mountain valley in northeastern Oregon. Earl, the old man who had taken care of the place before we took it over, drove his pickup into the driveway that first spring. We talked a while in the sunshine about how the water ran and where the grass greened up and started to grow.

Earl's dog sat in the front of the pickup, a blue heeler, Australian shepherd cross, with one moon-colored eye, leaner and faster looking than most dogs of that cross. Earl said, "I got to give this dog away. They won't let me keep a dog down there where I'm working now."

I said, "I don't want him."

"That young couple up on the Camp Creek ranch said they'd take him, but now they have to go up to the city. They don't know if they'll come back, so they can't take him. You know anybody could use a dog? He's a good stock dog. He's a good dog. He's just grown, just about two years old. I just brought him out cause I thought they were going to take him."

"No. I can't think of anybody. If I hear of anybody, I'll let you know."

"Well, that won't do any good. I can't take him back with me."

"I don't know what else you could do."

"Well, I thought it might go like this, so I brought my rifle. I'll have to shoot him on the way home. Can't turn a dog loose. Could cause problems with game and with cattle. Some rancher or hunter would shoot him anyway."

I thought Earl was trying to set me up with the dog.

Probably he wouldn't really shoot him. When Earl climbed into his pickup and looked at me through the open window, I asked him, "Are you really going to shoot him?"

"Don't like to. Surely don't like to."

"I'll keep him. I can feed him."

"You won't regret it. This is a good dog. You might have to move some stock sometimes up here, and this dog, he is good at moving stock. His name is Pooch. You're gonna like to see him work."

Tex was right. Pooch was a smooth-working professional. He gathered fifty steers scattered over twenty acres in the field next to the house into one tight bunch, packed them tight in the fence corner farthest from the house, and kept them there until I walked down with a leash, hooked him up, and brought him home. I told him, "We're new at working together. We'll work it out to where you come when I call, and you'll stop herding cattle when I say stop herding cattle, won't we?"

It took me all spring, all summer, and most of autumn to teach the dog he was only to move cattle on my orders. He wasn't to herd cattle for his own recreation. Especially, he wasn't to rile the Mama cows in the herd on the west side of the river and make them lose weight charging after him and trying to horn him down and stomp his bones to dust.

I didn't know if Pooch was so good at his work that his instincts overcame all distractions from the dance, the chase, the race, the systematic moving of the cows, or if he'd been trained up by a man who whacked him around so much he wasn't going to respond to anything but brute force.

The dog's history didn't matter. First time the owners came up and saw an unsupervised dog riling the cattle, I'd probably have to shoot him. The next time that black, grey, and white, moon-eyed stub-tailed dog wouldn't respond to my instructions and come back from chasing steers, I ran him down, knocked him down, and kicked him in the flank. "You're either going to leave the cattle alone unless I tell you to move them, or you're going to spend the rest of your life chained up in the yard. You decide. I don't like getting angry and yelling and chasing down a dog and kicking him to make him mind. My days are peaceful without you, and I will have my days be peaceful."

Eventually, we agreed. Mostly. Pooch left the cattle alone. Mostly.

Sometimes, when we had to travel through the herd, a

melee couldn't be helped by the dog's discipline. Some Mama cow would decide she was going to stomp Pooch, even if he was trying to be peaceful, just because he was a dog. Some mama cows think all dogs need stomping. I couldn't ask him not to dodge and run. Three or four more cows would charge a dodging, running dog. I couldn't blame him for getting into the spirit of it. Soon, ten or fifteen cows bawled and charged, saliva flying, as each one put a thousand pounds of beef into a full stop and reversed into a gallop after that cow -damned, calf-threatening dog, who nipped flanks, heels, and noses until the cows retreated from him and went where he wanted them to go.

I watched him take a flying leap at a six-hundred pound steer and nip his rump, and the steer kicked both legs back full force and hit the dog square in the head. The dog spun around twice in the air, and drops of blood flew away from him in sunshine. He hit the ground rolling, scrambled up, and nipped heels again before I could move five feet toward him.

I watched four Mama cows in a row run over him. Knees, hooves, and udders slammed him to the ground, rolled and bounced him around. He scrambled up between cows only to get stomped, rolled, and bounced by the next cow. They weren't even attacking the dog. They were just going somewhere, full speed, and he got in the way. The last one galloped over him, and he rolled to his feet, galloped after, and nipped hocks and flying hooves.

After that, I knew it wouldn't do any good to hit him harder, trying to make him mind. The side of the boot along the ribs or flank, just hard enough to get the dog's attention and let him know I meant what I said, would do all that could be done. Kicking him to death wouldn't do anything more. If the lightly used boot wouldn't keep him under control, I had to put him on the chain until the situation changed.

One midwinter day, I looked out the kitchen window and saw the dog galloping down the county road, with six inches of packed snow on the road, nipping at the front of the drive-wheels of a loaded log truck.

I ran out into the cold day and caught the dog and brought him back into the yard. I said, "You're probably not going to have a chance to die of old age. You're going to get killed on the road by a stupid vehicle. That or live on the end of a chain."

I would have been glad to give the dog to a cowboy. The dog liked to work. He was good at it. I didn't work cows much,

and I thought the dog should be where he could work. I offered around to give away a good cow dog, but I gave up after a while, because everybody I knew had a full crew of stock dogs.

About the middle of that summer, Rick was a cowboy needing a dog. He was trying to train up Jefferey, a McNab-cross pup, but he said "He isn't training up too good. I trained him not to jump out of the pickup. I tied him on a leash short enough, when he jumped out, all he could do was dance on his back feet, keep jumping up to keep from choking to death. He learned that. He don't want to jump out anymore, but he don't train up anything beyond knowing not to jump out of there. I named him Jefferey after my wife's little brother. They're both about the same amount of smart, not much."

Rick said, "I can turn the pup by shooting ahead of him with a 30-30, but he's half-scared of cows. Let's send him out with your dog and see if he can show him how to work," so we sent them both out in the field with the steers. I told Pooch to put them all in the corner, and Rick told Jefferey to go along and help.

The pup hung back. Then he got in the way when the older dog ran around the steers, and Pooch bit the pup on the butt and sent him rolling to get him out of the way. The pup squalled and started back. Rick said, "Go on out there. Go on, you worthless, dirt-dragging son-of-a-bitch." The pup got about halfway out and squatted in fear.

"That's one son-of-a-bitch going to get his self shot. A dog that don't work out gets shot. That's all you can do. Either a dog's going to do you some good, or he's just a drag on your budget. You can't buy him dog food if he don't work."

I said, "He's young to be working."

"I've worked younger dogs."

"He'll train up. Give him some time."

"I need a dog working cows right now. This spring, you said you'd give your dog to a cowboy who could work him a lot."

I said, "I was talking through my hat. I hadn't talked about it with my wife and kids then. You know who really runs this place. They won't let me give him away."

When the cows broke the fence and leaked out of the corral after all the horses and dogs rode trucks back down to the owner's home ranch, I went over and let Pooch off the chain and talked to him. We crawled under the fence and walked down past the cows and brought them up, around the barn, and into the corral.

John Rouse stood up by the corral and watched the whole show. I wanted Pooch to look good, and he looked really good. He ran low to the ground. He circled, dodged, nipped, in close and out around and back in closer, quiet and fast. Cows jumped away from nipping teeth and pushed other cows, and he headed where he wanted them to go.

I walked and talked. "Bring em on up the hill. No big rush. There's lots of time. You're doing really fine. Take em to the gate." My instructions didn't mean much. The dog knew where the cows were supposed to go, and he had everything under control. He pushed the cows up the hill, behind the barn, and into the corral. When the last cow went through the gate, the dog leaped, nipped her on the flank, then returned to me and sat by my feet as if to say, "How was that? What's next, boss?"

I had to remember to chain Pooch to the pickup or a stump when I was cutting wood, or I'd shut down my saw and discover the dog gone. I'd walk to the edge of the timber and find bovines bunched up tight in a fence corner, with the black and white, moon-eyed, tailless dog circling back and forth, nipping a flank, a heel, or a nose to keep every one in place.

At every opportunity, he galloped down the road after a car. Anything that moved, his job was to herd it.

That's how he died. Midwinter. Three feet of snow on the ground. Laura went for a walk, out the county road and across the highway. The dog had been minding her so well, she didn't think to grab his collar and hold him. As soon as he saw the black van rolling down the highway, he ran, and it was too late to grab him. He misjudged his distance or slipped on ice. The van hit him and killed him instantly, threw him onto the snow by the road.

The people stopped. They put his body in a cardboard box they had in the back, with a blanket in it, and drove Laura and the dog's body home.

I saw them pull into the driveway. I saw them lift out the box, with the blanket hanging over the side. I stepped out onto the front porch and called to Laura, "Don't take any puppies."

I meant it to be a joke. I didn't know what they were doing, but I knew Laura wouldn't take any puppies without checking with me first. I walked out toward the van, and I saw their faces. I knew jokes weren't appropriate.

Then Laura told me, and I saw Pooch's body in the box, partly wrapped in a pink blanket. I said, "It isn't your fault. I always figured he'd die like that. It was either live on the end of a chain or take a chance on that happening. I couldn't make him

spend his life on the end of a chain.”

The man said, “That doesn’t make me feel any better about hitting him. We love dogs. That’s why we had the box and the blanket. We just took two puppies to some friends in the valley, and we were going home.”

The family talked about Pooch in the sunshine in the front yard, after the people in the van left. The girls cried. I said, “I didn’t want that to happen. But the way I’m going to look at it, he had six good years, with a lot of free living here. He wouldn’t have had that if we hadn’t taken him. Earl would have shot him six years ago if we hadn’t taken him.”

Laura cried now and then the rest of the day. She said, “I should have had him on the leash.”

I couldn’t think of any way to ease the pain she felt.

Laura and Juniper and Amanda said I should do it the way I wanted to. I said, “This dog loved to be outdoors. I don’t want to bury him. Let him be a carcass for scavengers. That’s what I’d want to be.”

We all talked about things we remembered about the dog. The soft silkiness of his fur was one. Amanda said, “Remember how he used to try to herd us? It was a long time before he understood we were people and not animals to be pushed around where he wanted us to go.”

We talked about when Pooch was sick and Laura took care of him until he could begin to move again. Amanda and Juniper didn’t want to see the dog’s body. It had nothing to do with the body. When they seemed to be finished, I said, “He was a good dog.”

Then I left by myself, with Pooch’s body in a cardboard box in the back of the pickup. I drove as far down the county road as I could go in four-wheel drive. I shoveled snow until I had room to turn the pickup around facing home, so I wouldn’t have to deal with that after dark.

I carried the the dog’s body in the box across the snow. I didn’t want to carry the dog’s body against my clothes.

It was hard going. The crust on the snow had softened and wouldn’t hold me some of the time. A lot of steps, I broke through thigh-deep. I castigated myself for not bringing skis, but I didn’t want to go back to get them. I tied a length of twine on the box and drug the box along the snow. I didn’t want to leave the dog close to the road.

I found a big pine tree, near the top of the ridge, with some ground clear of snow right under the tree.

I let the body roll out of the box onto the ground. I

looked at it for a while. Black and grey and blue and white, short hair. Blue heeler and Australian shepherd cross, with some whippet, back a ways. A good cross for a stock dog. Fast. Loves to work.

I thought about Rusty, the cocker spaniel I buried when I was twelve. Then, I didn't want the ceremony and the ritual, because I thought that made it harder to understand what I was trying so hard to understand. If the simple fact of it was there in front of me, it might be easier to understand than when it was adorned with practiced rites.

I went ahead with the ritual when I was twelve, because, though it was meaningless to the dog's carcass in the dirt, it completed something, closed an otherwise open gap in the relationship between my father and me. It put the family's stamp, finished, tidied up as best as possible, on the matter.

When I was twelve, I understood we were dealing only with the husk, the carcass. What I tried to understand was, what unseeable something was gone? What happened to what had animated the body? Why did that force still burn in me but not in Rusty? What careless, unforeseen moment could rend that force from me or from someone close to me, as it had from Rusty? I knew the adults around me couldn't answer my questions in any way that would make sense. There was no point in asking them.

Twenty-four years later, I still can't answer those questions. They don't burn in my mind so fiercely now. There is much I never will understand. Being an adult doesn't mean understanding everything. I learned that through the last 24 years, and it quieted some of the frenzied activity in my mind.

Day's light is gone. I put the blanket into the box and started back toward the pickup, dragging the box along behind. I stepped into my earlier footprints when I could. No use breaking through twice if I could help it. It jolted me every time I stepped down and the crust broke and plunged me down in the middle of a stride.

It got colder fast. Stars shone bright all above me.

The next spring, after all the snow melted, I repaired fence along the foot of the ridge where I left the dog's body. I left my tools on the ground and walked up to the big pine tree. There wasn't anything there, not a bone, not a tuft of fur. I walked a widening circle around the place, thinking I might find Pooch's skull or some other bone, but I didn't find a trace.

My opening spiral of search led me back to the fence. I looked up the hill at the big pine tree in mountain sunlight. I

picked up my tools and spliced winter-broken barbed wire.