

Lying To The Dog

If you stare long enough at that space between the trees – there, where the row of dry junipers leads the eye down to the field of baby's breath – you begin to see water. It's a lake, perhaps a sea, lying peaceful and cool, and not a field at all. You can hope that no one comes to cut and plough it, leave it fallow for winter. And that's what she sees from the window each morning, when she rises and stands alone in the quiet house.

The sun is just up, hitting the potting shed with its white window boxes, and shining on the hollow bones of the swing set rusting in the yard. There is a mourning dove on the crossarm of the power pole, cooing to himself. This has always been her favorite time of day. So calming to stand by the window, looking down at the wet grass. The dog sniffs bush to bush along the fence. She does not see him but watches the dove. Countless short and tiny lives are waking to the daylight all around.

In the kitchen, she takes the pan and the plate from the sink – where he left them before first light without rinsing the greasy leavings of egg and black pepper – and puts them in the dishwasher, setting it to rinse and hold. And hold is all she really wants to do; just to keep a grip on the life that's casting her away with centrifugal force. And maybe she could use a rinse of sins as well; a drop of detergent for her guilt and grief. If only he could help her find such things, and stop insisting that by God he's tried, that she's had time to get past it, to drag her heart from the shadows; as much time as he's had, anyway.

The dog comes in and stops to drink from his bowl beside the pantry door, then comes up behind her where she stands at the sink. She hears him coming, nails clicking on the hardwood floor. He presses his nose to the back of her knee. Ignored, he goes to his bed in the corner and lies down.

It's true she's had time, and he's had time. Time has passed. But two years or two hours is all the same to her, who is always in that afternoon of their child on her bicycle, just a little big for her, with fat tires and a basket on the front – books going back to the library – riding away. Always

away. So small with the trees behind her, and the gravel drive threading into the trees, to where it turns to meet the county road. That's where she saw her daughter go, around the bend and into the trees. But she never came back out again. She was supposed to come back. That was the understanding. Come back from the library with a new book to read, to talk about. She'd suggested *A Wrinkle In Time*, which she had loved as a girl. Just a little time, then home; not this tearing away, this disappearing to another world.

I don't know what do to, she tells the dog. She won't come home. I told her, straight there, straight home. Be careful, don't dawdle. But you know she's followed her nose into the candy store – she can't resist. Now why are you looking at me that way?

The dog knows. He was here and rushed the door, barking, when the officers came. They came in slowly, eyes down, holding their big hats. She shoved the dog in the hall bathroom and shut the door, and told him stay as if he had a choice. He knew at once. He could smell it on them, the pitiful sadness of it, the rough road ahead waste and shame of it. He could smell the coming grief of it; bitter, musky like a possum running down the fence. So he sat on the lime green rug on the bathroom floor and whined, and fought the urge to howl. The dog knows his lady is lying.

He should just leave us here, you know. We'd be alright, she tells the dog. My sister would come from Santa Fe and live with us. I could get a job. He doesn't care about me and how my heart is broken. It would be good for you, too. She's got two dogs and we'd have so much room, a yard that's big enough for twenty dogs.

The dog digs with his teeth at the hair between his toes, stands and paws at his bed, then turns around and lays back down again. He's watching her.

He doesn't care. He only wants to leave. Just sell the house, drag up and go, he says. And how can I? You tell me that. How can a mother do such a thing? She's much too small to be alone. The days are getting short again, and gray and cold. She'll be hungry, tired from the ride. I have to be here when she comes.