

Adele Elise Williams

Tethered

I adopted a dog one year ago, and the hippie who ran the rescue lied. This dog is not a Labrador! He is a small little spazz of a boy—a herder of some kind, and thus we walk and walk and walk. I'd be lying if I said the walks were only for him. There are things coming for me, and my head is a wiffle ball. Walking helps.

A paint can at the corner of High and Lester in Southwest Virginia sits on its bottom at the edge of the forest line, a bit off the road and surrounded by honeyed dandelions. It is April.

Zuma loves the paint can. As a natural organizer, he is preoccupied with placement and purpose. The paint can is approximately one quarter mile from our house, and that quarter mile leading up to the paint can exists for reaching the paint can. PAINT CAN. He can't wait to get there. It captures all his erratic attention. He takes his time. While he investigates, I stop and stretch my legs, folding my body down toward the asphalt and grabbing my elbows, the top half of my body hanging like ripe fruit.

(How about when fruit rots while still on the vine? Ain't that some shit.)

Once, I picked blueberries for a living and I'd stash those berries all over my person, stealing them, I suppose. In my pockets, my fanny pack, neck gaiter, even my palm hat brim. It was ridiculous, the way everyone knew, and I still worked to hide it. Like a little kid. A little shitty kid game.

Once, I got caught stealing from my local green grocer. My burlap sack was packed with produce and peanut butter. Tubers. A rainbow of theft. The manager paid for my groceries. Asked me out. Jubal. His name was Jubal, and I stayed at his apartment for the week, and I was in a phase where all I wore were little boy superhero underwear and hockey jerseys. I was twenty-two.

I can't say what brand or type or color the paint is because I haven't noticed. I know the label is blue, and there is evidence that the can has been opened and used. Once, I bought a car and didn't know it was a hybrid until it went so quiet all of a sudden at the top of a hill, the kind of quiet that comes

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right before *I don't love you anymore*.

I'm not present.

I am not a very present person.

I am *in* the moment but not *retaining* the moment. (Asleep at the wheel.)

Across from the paint can is a large-fenced yard that belongs to a house where no one lives. No one has lived there for months. A red-headed man with a wiener dog lived there before the place went vacant. Every morning on our walk he sat on his stoop with his wiener dog and smoked cigarette after cigarette. The wiener dog caught Zuma's attention. The smoke made me feel boring, sober. The man would execute a polite nod. We'd round the corner past where the paint can now sits and continue on.

Once, I found an unopened pack of Marlboro Reds lying abandoned in the middle of the road right out in front of that house with the yard and the red-headed gentleman and the hotdog dog. I grabbed the smokes and stashed them in my freezer in case I ever had a cool guest or distressed cowboy at my dinner table. I haven't smoked in years—part of an effort to clean up my act, and now my act is so clean I forget who I am. Once, I would have taken up smoking just to fuck the red-headed gentleman. The windows on his truck didn't roll up, and he wrangled stray cats and he wasn't good looking, but I'd still sleep with him.

Before the paint can appeared and after the house became vacant, I'd let Zuma run wild in that large yard. I don't have my own yard, so we used it. Not having a yard makes me feel poor. I don't have a yard or an iPad or lots of self-esteem, and I'd let Zuma run and I'd sit on the porch with a beer and throw it over the fence into the pines to feel reckless. Then we'd keep walking. The yard was good. It helped us both. Because I am a recovering rule-breaker, I was always on my toes while taking advantage of the yard. Surely someone would rent the house or work on the house or just check on it because they owned it and what's it even like to own a house?

On one particular yard-using occasion, a navy minivan rounded the corner slowly and I knew they were looking at us, me and Zuma, craning their necks like WTF. I hooked up Zuma's leash, we took off, and a woman yelled after us, HELLO! HELLOOOOOO! HELLOOOOOOOOOOOO! We ran down Republic Street onto Roanoke and caught our breath in the Wade's

Grocery parking lot. We never used the yard again.

I hadn't been in trouble for so long, the threat of being caught was exhilarating. It wasn't as sexy as nakedness in a public pool, or as punk rock as fighting cuffs, but it was trespassing and it felt dangerous and I felt alive, felt Adele.

Then the paint can. Screw the yard! Exploring the paint can seemed to take as much energy as running wild in the yard. I watch a lot of true crime, and men are always stuffing women in barrels, and I started thinking, *What if something once alive is stuffed in the paint can?* Or drugs. Once, while walking back to my hotel from a bar in Philly, I spied some weed packaged up in plastic wrap and bent down and scooped up those nuggets like a drowning toddler's floppy arm. And that time when my friend Ike was in prison and on road clean-up detail he found drugs all the time, most likely discarded during a pull-over. Drugs or not, I'm always looking for shit on the ground.

(Once, today, I found an eight ball on the asphalt, but it was just laundry detergent and it was a spicy lesson learned).

The thing about the paint can is it isn't stationed at a normal yard waste pile or trashcan site. And it didn't fall off a crew truck because it is sitting upright nestled in glowing dandelions many feet off the road. *What if there is a baby in the can?* I thought that. Or a few kittens. I thought that too. Mostly because I live in a place where people are broke and desperate and dumb enough (because they are broke and desperate) to think that the best way to get rid of unwanted animals is to package them up like presents and throw them away.

Once, when traveling through Mississippi, I discovered that people dumped animals all along Natchez Trace, and I'd camp out there to get those babies when they first arrived. It was like they were reborn, shocked and mewling into the light and then into my warm arms. I got my first dog that way. Jackson. Jax. Jackie-boy. Paint can. I found an entire litter, and all those puppies tried to nurse on my forgettable breasts the whole ride home. One pup tried the hardest. Jax. Jackie-boy.

Jackson died chasing wild horses before he was even four—a thing much more romantic to write than to know. It was the deadest of winter, and Jax

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didn't come home one night. By the next day the worry was coyotes. The day after, frozen. But on the third day a farmer found him close to death from a car and held him in her arms and sang *You Are My Sunshine* while he died.

Paint Can?

Then the paint can was gone. Zuma pulled me that quarter mile like Willy Wonka was letting folks in, and when we got there, the paint can was gone. He sniffed its absence, eyed the blank space, the empty yard, and then me. He peed on its grave—the space it left like a ship sunk under water at night.

(Once, I watched something drown. Like Sula and Nel.)

I wasn't there when Jackson died. I was drinking somewhere, in love with myself. I went back to the road spot and recovered his red collar, knocked from his neck like shoes off a man.

The next week Zuma and I walked down High Street, right on Lester, then left on Craig. On Craig we passed several tiny community churches. We passed a man in a wheelchair with a giant rottweiler. We passed red tulips and junk piles and a soggy diaper and a family walking together where every member wore a Redskins jersey, and we passed prayer flags and a car outfitted in Iron Man decals and two blue birds fighting over an Arby's dipper. Then right on Harless. Then the tree I call a "longbean tree." Then the house with the abandoned school bus out back screeching with feral cats. Then the corner at Stone Street covered in dog shits so big I wonder if they are human. And near the mammoth shits, where the yellow jackets buried themselves in the ground last summer, sat the paint can.

Zuma screamed when he noticed it. I do not mean barked or shrieked. I mean that he screamed like Clarice and that baby lamb she tried to save. It was disturbing enough that I checked his whole body for pain sites—fingering in between his paws, assessing his ankles for swelling, applying gentle pressure to his abdomen, examining his teeth and tongue, pressing my knuckles into his ears for temperature. I cannot stop thinking about when Zuma will die. It is selfish. It has everything to do with how my life will fall apart once he does.

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When Jax died I took a train from Virginia to Montana the next day, pretending like it never happened, pretending that nothing mattered, and I was no one with nothing to lose. The Dakotas that winter were nearly as dead as my dead dog. The lifeless resemblance was striking.

After Jackson I had a dog named Bub who screamed like a lamb when I left him alone. He looked like a little lamb, too. I rescued him and his brother from Wilson, North Carolina. There were eight in the litter all scrappy in a kennel out behind a farmhouse, and my boyfriend picked the haus and I picked the puniest one. I had never rescued puppy brothers before. When we brought them home, they hid for two weeks under the woodstove—that's how small they were! Eventually the boyfriend left and took his pick of the litter with him. Zuma screamed when he saw the paint can like Bub screamed when his puppy brother left and Clarice's lamb screamed at slaughter and I screamed when the boyfriend left and I had nothing but cinder block walls and an armchair from the duplex dumpster down the block.

There have been countless screaming dogs to witness it all. I think about that. Like children from fucked-up parents. *How have I forever impacted this young mutt? How will he father his own children now? Who will he ever trust?* The answer is simple enough. I don't know. And he will only trust me.

I opened the paint can by the giant shits because the lid was burped.

Potbelly pig?
Teacup chihuahua?
Chicken foot?
An ounce of weed?
Picadillo peppers?
Wiffle balls?

Once, I stole a dog.

Once, I adopted a dog and returned him because I was scared of his jaw maw and then got another less scary dog.

As a woman nearing forty with no children, no husband, and no shiny

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assets, the death of an animal that tethers me to purpose becomes a sort of macabre white whale. When will it all go to shit? How will I break down when Zuma dies? I am too fearful these days to go obviously AWOL. So I will go quiet woman crazy. I will not shave my head but I will bang it on something. I will not run away but I will ruin. I will not eat pills but I will not eat. I will not seek sex but I will grieve its usefulness. I will write poems that turn my dead dog into sticky candy. I will take long dog walks alone, dragging a neon leash. I will tattoo Zuma's name on my thigh under Jax's and Bub's.

Zuma trembled as I fiddled with the tacky lid.