

poems for Z



Eric Schaller

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by

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*in memory of our dog Z, a cairn terrier, who passed
away on Monday, August 9, 2021*

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THE PROBLEM

The difficulty in calling the vet
And putting your dog down
Is the gradual nature of decline
The question of when to call the shots
That will mercifully hasten the inevitable
Even when your dog's hindquarters betray him
Even when he hobbles hunched with his tail
Once so voluble in its demonstrations
Stiffened into a hard comma between his legs
Refusing hamburger, chicken, and scrambled egg
The treats with which you used to bribe him
But still roused toothily for a pizza crust

And still drinking water from his bowl
Even though you must steady him
Fingers pressed against his warm ribs
And carry him to his nest

Lined with towels to absorb incontinent episodes
Knowing he will sleep
But also knowing that while he is asleep
He dreams and runs wild as when he was a pup.

Z

The letter Z
Wasn't the first letter chosen
To be the puppy's name
By the son
Of Z's former owner
Maybe J or K or X
I don't remember for sure
And it doesn't really matter
Of the 26 possibilities
Z was the coolest letter
And replaced the initial choice.

Once,
When Z was playing around
In our small yard
A family came up to the fence
By our autumn blooming clematis

Mom, Dad, and son

They asked the name of our dog

“Z,” I said

Their son’s eyes lit up

“That’s the best name ever

When I have a kid, I’m going to name him Z.”

DOCTOR Z PRESCRIBES

For sprains, scrapes, and cuts:

Saliva, administered by tongue, apply liberally.

For indigestion and other internal maladies:

Grass, bitten at the root and ingested as a single blade, the choicest specimens to be found at the yard's perimeter away from the lawn-mower's sterile harvesting.

If all else fails:

Sleep (also cures inclement weather).

THE OTHER PROBLEM

How do you explain to a dog
What is going on?

How do you explain when the time-tested remedies
Of spit, ingested grass, and sleep
All fail?

I'm not convinced
Dogs understand time in the same manner as we
process it.

They respond to the past
That's for sure
The memories that dictate day-to-day expectations
Whether it be the positive
Awake at Seven AM to pee and eat breakfast

Supper at Four PM, and don't try to trick me with

Daylight Savings

My stomach knows what it knows

As well as the negative

A single malfeasance

Whether it be a bath, tooth scaling, or a visit to the
veterinarian

Met at repetition with bodily shivers.

A complication

Is the different rates at which we age

Humans barely skipping a heartbeat

While dogs pass from frolicking waist-deep in the
water

Z at McIndow Falls for example

Searching out minnows and snapping at crested
bubbles

Barking and barking as if to not only wake
picnickers on the far shore

But every picknicker everywhere in the world

In the universe

To a few years later

Barely showing interest in anything except his next
meal

And that it be on time and fuck Daylight Savings.

Dogs have a language of their own

But it is limited by their understanding of time.

I don't believe it includes a word

For tomorrow

Other than that tomorrow be the same as yesterday
and today

And if it isn't, just wait for it

Time is on your side

More specifically

I don't believe dog language includes a word

For aging

That the expectations for the future

Can be any different than those encountered in the
past.

How do you explain to a dog

He should not feel disappointed in himself

For no longer being the dog

He used to be?

EMPTY NEST

On our bed, he always chose to nest on any
additional layer of fabric
As if to achieve maximum buoyancy or height
Turning, sometimes for minutes on end
On a polyester fleece blanket at the foot of the bed
covers
A plush-obsessed locksmith
In search of the one combination
Of twisted fabric and bodily deposition
To unlock Heavenly comfort
Little Lord Fauntleroy
Later, after he was diagnosed with lymphoma,
almost by accident
We discovered a round bolster dog bed at *Ocean
State Job Lot*
How could we have ignored this possibility
And for all these years?

But there were no recriminations

Bolster dog beds proliferated

On his last day, the strata, working upward from the
wooden floor:

the living room carpet

a fleece mat from his crate

a rectangular bolster dog bed

a round bolster dog bed

a *Grreat Choice* dog pad, absorbs two cups

liquid

a bathroom towel folded in two

a paper towel between his legs

Zoned out

His muzzle wedged against the fabric of the
adjoining couch.

FORM

The loss seems greater when you consider the
process of decay
That the form you laid to rest under shovelfuls and
handfuls of dirt
Protected from predatorial excavations by a large
flat stone
Has not completed his transition
The form preserved in memory and photographs is
not retained
Not even the sleepy aged dog with the goobery eyes
Who rejected his favorite snacks
Who, on that last day, found no savor in water
Even your last memory of the limp body cooling
You had to check just to be sure he was dead
You driving north with him wrapped in a towel
And that towel in a plastic bag
You don't want to call it a trash bag

Curled as you arranged him into a cinnamon bun
The way he used to curl in sleep
Should rigor mortis lock him into a final form
In preparation for burial
Although you know there is no final form
Just a final memory preserved
As nothing organic is preserved in fact.

BURIAL ARTIFACTS

One polyester fleece blanket, citric green, folded into an approximate 18" x 24" rectangle

One black 100% cotton t-shirt, *Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts* design in white on the front, size large, worn but not washed

One soft white ball, synthetic fill, five inches in diameter, with design of eyes and mouth, possibly of a Jack-o-lantern, printed in black

One tiger hand-puppet, polyester, chewed, contains interior residue of food (meat-based; Goldfish-brand crackers)

One small animal skin, synthetic, unidentified species but possibly a sheep based on the wool-like surface, chewed, lacks the stuffing common to such artifacts when intact.

About the author

Eric Schaller's debut collection of fiction, *Meet Me in the Middle of the Air*, was released in 2016 from Undertow Publications. His stories have appeared in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *Fantasy: Best of the Year*, *Year's Best Weird Fiction*, and elsewhere. He is a contributor to *The New York Review of Science Fiction* and *WeirdFictionReview.com*. His illustrations have appeared in *City of Saints and Madmen* by Jeff VanderMeer, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, and *An A to Z of the Fantastic City* by Hal Duncan. He is an editor, with Matthew Cheney, of *The Revelator* (<http://revelatormagazine.com/>).