

Diamond Dogs

I

All the doors were wide open. Summer was giving way to autumn and a group of friends were enjoying rare, true leisure together. A light breeze repeatedly lifted and dropped some napkins on the coffee table as the new Sparklehorse record drifted sweetly from the stereo. There were three on one couch: Bran, his girlfriend Sadie, and Joshua. A second couch positioned perpendicular to this, seated Jacob, Parker and Melanie. Beth sat alone in the recliner, her legs pulled up into her oversized shirt.

It was Beth's family home, rented from her grandmother. She kept a somewhat rotating cast of roommates, but for the time being, Bran and Sadie shared a room there. The other four were present in some capacity or another at varying intervals, sleeping on a couch or sipping beer on the deck or something. They never contributed to the rent, but freely shared their collective array of skills, which ranged from cooking, to car repair, to musical interpretation.

They were all in a rare spot, a few years out of college, but not yet exposed to the desperate ruin of adulthood. Food service was still okay to them as they chased artistic dreams. Still unblemished by the world, their awe within it was tenable. They were still young enough to experience this moment: enjoying the company of friends and listening to Sparklehorse with the doors open, void of politics and duty; void of worry or loss.

"Ghost in the Sky" was about halfway played when a new being entered through the front door. She was a dog, some kind of mutt, with boxer and pit bull evident somewhere in her lineage. She entered the living room and, without so much as a glance toward anyone else, shuffled directly to Bran. Up on her hind legs, she balanced against his knee and stared into his eyes, her tongue dangling.

"Hey dog!" Bran chimed in a silly, higher register.

She hopped, pushing herself into his leg.

"Hey dog!" he repeated.

She hopped again – then again. Undeterred she dropped to all fours and sprung up once more at his other side, this time successfully, on to the couch between he and Sadie. Much closer now, she licked his face and rested her head against his shoulder.

No one knew where she had come from and she had no tags that could have indicated such information. This was all the better for Bran, who felt a magic in their connection and did not wish to see her given up to another master. He felt in her, and in the room, a strong sense of family – something essential to a Capricorn like himself.

Bound by the duty of the golden rule, Bran embarked upon a quest to find the dog's owner, however half-heartedly. He hung up some "found dog" signs around the neighborhood and hoped no one would answer them. He and Sadie had taken to calling her by the name Zeta, which she began responding to very quickly. At one minute after midnight, on the thirtieth day of no inquiry, Bran went outside and removed his postings.

"She's ours now," he assured. "It's where she should be anyway."

Sadie agreed.

"And I think we should change her name."

"Change her name?" Sadie disagreed – strongly.

“Hear me out,” continued Bran, “It should still sound the same, but we should spell it Xeta, with an *X* rather than a *Y*. It can be like a rite of passage into our family.”

Sadie had no issues with this amendment. Bran was taking on the bulk of responsibility for the dog himself, anyway. “Okay then. Xeta – with an *X*.”

Within the year, Bran and Sadie moved out of Beth’s house and into a rental in the residential outskirts of downtown. Twice a day, Bran and Xeta would circle a few blocks, sometimes passing by the nearby Lutheran Church and entering the unaffiliated garden cemetery across the street.

Xeta would grow excited to be among the graves there, breathing in each monument and relishing the smell of death. With their limited olfactory perception, humans tend to perceive this smell as primarily sour, if they smell anything at all. To a canine, however, there also emanates a sweet side. And though humans ultimately determine death to be something of a *concept*, to a dog it is recognized as a physical entity in and of itself. For by smell a dog knows its master, as it knows any other creature on earth, too by smell it knows its god.

Once Xeta was comfortable with the new location, after a few months of walks, she was able to accompany Bran without her leash. There were exceptions, such as during block parties or holidays that involved fireworks, but the restraint was precautionary then. Even at those times, she kept steadily at Bran’s side. Only in the cemetery did she ever break her step, and within its walls this was a constant; charging immediately to the back recesses of the place, where the smells were less trampled by human steps. It was her custom there to go ahead of Bran and wait for him to catch up.

II

The aughts carried an odor very similar to that of death, but with the sweet attributes on the surface, and the sour hidden below. It was a soft, round decade, as it's written numeral forms implied. Solid, bold colors washed through the fashion of the time, with clothing that was both stylish and comfortable. The soft fabrics were accompanied by equally textural sounds as music, too, had become clean and bright - positive even, if one's ear was in the right place. Technology was allowing people to remove blemishes from their art, and to share it with the world through a growing Internet. America stayed high on the Clinton prosperity of the nineties, enjoying an oblivious slide into the gutter of the 2008 financial crisis.

Barack Obama took over the American presidency just in time to clean up after the party and deal with the collective sticker shock. A Leo by birth, there was no better leader for the new age. Yet, his benevolence and pragmatism were shrewdly limited by a congress of men who still desperately clung to the old. Through the rise of social media, this division came to be prominent between private citizens as well. Everyone felt duped or hurt in some way and so defenses became high and frequent. On frail legs, the world entered the twenty-tens with its head down, as though it were an abused animal.

Art and music had always been dicey ways to make money. Tech industry executives found ways, though - on the backs of the creators. This left the artists themselves shortchanged on royalties, as the cost of living kept rising. As usual, creativity stood little chance against process. It was in some ways fortunate then that Bran's thirty-sixth birthday would fall on a Saturday, for his wonderfully imaginative friends all had the weekend off from the dismal office jobs they had resigned themselves to.

An anemic but involved sampling of those friends met he and Sadie at a small, unmarked speakeasy on the ground floor of a stylish downtown hotel. The drinks were pricey but well crafted, and the atmosphere was quaint. Beth, Parker and Melanie were all in attendance, as well as Parker's girlfriend and Melanie's husband. Beth had remained single and took over the mortgage on her grandmother's house. Joshua sent his regards, though was busy with a wife and three children in Atlanta. Jacob moved to Arizona and lost touch with everyone. Bran and Sadie were married. Mark Linkous from Sparklehorse died a few streets over from the one they lived on.

Another death had occurred in the neighborhood the evening before Bran's birthday. Beth brought it up: "Did you all make it out for the lights last night?"

"The lights?" asked Bran.

"Yeah - on Eleanor at Third. Right down the street from you."

"I saw it," spoke Sadie. "What was it?"

"A suicide. Alan Placido."

Parker spoke up. "Wait. That's what that was? Alan Placido? Really?"

"I don't know who that is," said Bran.

"I used to work with him at Chez Lib back in the day," Parker explained. "That's shocking to me. He was a really super nice guy."

“He really was,” agreed Beth. “I hadn’t seen him in a couple years, but it was always a pleasure when I did. You know it would have been his birthday in just about another week. I think his was the sixteenth.”

Beth’s wording seemed alien to Sadie. “It’s so weird how we switch to past tense the moment someone dies. I mean, his birthday still *is* the sixteenth, right? Or do our birthdays end when we die?”

With that, the group fell into a moment of silent contemplation. Parker was the first to break it. “Wow,” he said before raising his glass. “One for Alan.” The group drank.

Melanie brought it upon herself to clear the air, raising her own glass, with a smile across her face. “Hey how about one for the birthday boy? Am I right?”

“Happy birthday!” “One for Bran!” “Happy birthday, Bran!” Everyone raised a glass and took another sip.

Beth carried Melanie’s lightness to a new topic. “So has anyone heard the new Bowie record?” she asked.

“*Blackstar*?” asked Bran.

Beth continued, “Yeah it came out yesterday, on *his* birthday – on David Bowie’s birthday.”

Melanie grinned on toward Bran. “Oh. Your birthday is the day after David Bowie?” she asked. “It all makes sense now.”

“The videos from that album are intense,” spoke her husband. “Major Tom ascending and all that.”

“Yeah. I love it. The whole album is excellent,” confirmed Beth. “It has a depth to it that I can’t quite grasp yet. Some kind of strange magnetic power or something.”

Sadie salted Beth’s enthusiasm. “Well the album *is* called *Blackstar*, after all,” she reminded. “Don’t you think a ‘strange magnetic depth’ is the feeling you’d expect?”

“Why you gotta do that, baby?” asked Bran.

“It’s just effective packaging that makes you feel that way,” stabbed Sadie a bit deeper.

“Why are you giving away the Capricorn secrets?”

“Whatever. You don’t even believe in astrology.” Alcohol made Sadie contentious.

“Just save a little magic. That’s all,” requested Bran of his wife.

With the exception of Parker’s girlfriend, the group departed the speakeasy and routed the celebration to Bran and Sadie’s home for beer and cards. Beth arrived first. Through the small stained glass window on the front door, she could see Xeta stretched out on the floor. Evident that no one else was there before her, she elected not to knock, for she saw no consequence but that of disturbing the dog. She instead leaned against one of the porch’s columns and proceeded to smoke a cigarette.

Not having seen each other in some time, Bran rode back to his house with Parker and they were next to arrive. Melanie and her husband were seconds behind them. Beth stepped aside and continued her cigarette as Bran opened the door and entered before the others. He immediately gave pause to Xeta’s lack of a response to him.

He said her name. “Xeta?”

For a moment, she raised her head and looked at him. Her tail wagged slightly, one way then the other, and she calmly laid her head back down again. Bran repeated her name and lifted her limp body from the floor. Her bowels immediately discharged and it was apparent that she had died.

Sadie arrived just after Bran laid Xeta down on the front porch and attempted to resuscitate her with chest pulses and cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Accepting the ineffectiveness of this, he gave in to lying over her body and weeping. The others towered above him with tears in their eyes as well. Once Sadie realized what was happening, all of her previous fire was immediately extinguished and she, too, cried heavily - suddenly sober like the others.

III

On the morning of January tenth, in the wretched year of 2016 the world woke up to learn that the legendary musician and artist, David Bowie, had also passed away. To some, this was every bit as startling and sudden as the deaths of Xeta and Alan Placido. To Bran, Xeta's departure was naturally the most difficult of the three to handle. There was no question to anyone, however, that death had commenced the year with a heavy pound of its gavel.

As aforementioned, Bowie's final album, *Blackstar*, was released on his birthday that year, January eighth. Its poetry was misinterpreted for a brief time until his sudden passing, not forty-eight hours later, made it all so direly clear. The theme of the record crystallized around Bowie's own awaiting death; its close proximity obscured from the entire world but for a small inner circle. Suddenly, there it was, glaring shrewdly at generations of shocked people.

And yet, there was also the sweet side of his death – the side more familiar to canines. Undeniably, his sudden disappearance held mystical qualities, but mythical as well. The way his departure was made, be it intentionally by the artist or by some force of synchronic events within the universe, was masterful in its ability to tie his entire life together into an apposite, organic, package. That *strange magnetic depth* was not there to satisfy demographic testing garnered through focus groups. It was there because nothing else would have made sense.

Intentionally, Bowie came to the world at large as an alien from another plane of existence, introducing himself with a song about an astronaut drifting through space eternally. He called himself Ziggy, and a parade of other aliases would follow. Perhaps it had been fiction, though perhaps not, once his full story arc could be determined and analyzed. Simply put, his final album was called *Blackstar* and was released on his birthday, which occurred one day before the moon itself was entirely blacked out by the shadow of the earth while in the constellation of Capricorn. Then, one day after that, just as the moon saw the slightest of illumination, David Bowie exited with that shadow. And so it seems that, be it premonition or coincidence, he was taken by the darkened satellite that he had conceived, and at precisely the most appropriate time.

The world may never know if David Bowie had constructed his own tunnel away from it, or if this passage opened up for him from the other side. It was apparent, though, that on the ninth of January, between Bowie's birthday and death day, the portal was at its widest. To unsuspecting human beings, paying most of their attention to handheld glowing screens, the new Bowie record was merely released the day before a new moon – if even those things were apparent to them. The open tunnel that would carry home the alien artist simply passed overhead, mostly undetected. Those who did perceive an inkling of this sacred formation were quick to turn away, for this passage was death, itself, and the avoidance of sour smells had grown inherent in most people.

The presence of the passage was not lost on dogs, of course. Like most all other dogs in the neighborhood, and most all other dogs on the earth, Xeta smelled the sweet underbelly of death. It hung crisply in the air to her, more strongly than she had ever experienced on her jaunts through the cemetery. It was so present to her, there on her

master's birthday, that she became aware that she could step right through it, herself. She was, at first, reluctant because Bran was not with her. She felt it at once unnatural for him to not be accompanying her through that particular scent. Yet there she was, in their home as she was so many times before. Xeta did not believe that her master would allow such a smell into their home if not to interact with it. She was uncertain though and so changed her respiratory pattern and took the tunnel in through her nose a different way, with short, shallow, repetitive sniffs. She found finer olfactory nuances in doing this, but one in particular stood out above the others.

Through the sweet and the sour of death, beyond the home she slept in every night, she smelled the Capricorn essence. This was Bowie's essence, as well as the essence of that time of season. It was the essence of the moon that night, and it's particles flooded through the passage. This being also the essence of her master, her confidence to pass through only increased. She felt more comfortable to go that way; determined even, but still she had not seen Bran, and wanted to make certain he was near. She lay down on the floor and stared into the blackstar, anxious but obedient.

Somewhere outside the tunnel, a familiar white door opened. It was the same white door she went through daily to go on her walks. Within its frame, Bran appeared. He spoke her name, and she turned to look at him with great relief. With him there, she knew their walk could commence as usual. And so she went ahead and waited for him to catch up.