

DOGS OF DECEMBER

My sister Terry once said to me, concerning the stray dog she had raised: “I couldn’t love this dog more if I had given birth to it.” At the time I thought the sentence was melodramatic, but the passing of years has convinced me of her sincerity. Her dog (Angel) was as vital to her as her blood – and her life was a testament to that love.

I’ve been thinking about animals recently. There’s a particular squirrel who lords it over my side yard. He’s easy to recognize because he’s got a pouch under his chin that looks like a large white sack of marbles. The squirrel – let’s call him Donald – is boorish, overweight, greedy, hostile, and incapable of sharing with any creature within a five-foot radius. I’ve got a “squirrel-proof” feeder hanging on a pole, and for months he’s taken conspicuous pleasure in defeating it. I see him there, hanging upside down, holding on with one foot, bending an arm up to extract sunflower seeds one at a time. He looks at me with contempt. I tried adding cayenne to the seeds. I think he enjoyed the mixture even more. Just two days ago, in a gesture of rage-against-the-mechanism, he bit through a metal grommet and destroyed the entire device. All the seed fell to the ground. The squirrel spent the day laughing, gorging his pouch—attacking any bird that dared to land nearby. My poor feeder is now twisted scrap-metal in the recycling bin.

A far friendlier face is the chipmunk – let’s call him Stripey – whose brethren have lived in my garden for as long as I’ve been here (29 years) and will probably be here long after my Depression-era house has been torn down and replaced with some soulless mansion. When he’s not stuffing his cheeks with dogwood blossoms, Stripey enjoys sitting on the head of the cement rabbit in the garden. I’ve located six holes he’s engineered to gain quick, leaping access to his underground lair – two of which are on the opposite side of the house.

Once, this fall, he slipped under the front porch door and walked into the living room where I was reading. We regarded each other. I stood up in an attempt to frighten him back out the way he’d entered. Instead, he turned right and proceeded across the living

room and up the stairs to the second floor. I never found him. I searched the closets, the drawers, under the radiators. I set a Havahart trap in the guest room. (It's still there – still waiting.) But Stripey silently disappeared into the skeleton of the house: the pipes, the fissures. And, truthfully, it's probably as much his house as mine.

Speaking of animals, I'm embarrassed to say I know more dogs' names in my neighborhood than I know owners' names. That's one of the pleasures of owning a dog; it immerses you into a whole sub-community. The therapist down the block owns an energetic black dog named Karma. I'm waiting for the day I hear her scold the dog, "Bad Karma!" There's a thoughtful man with glasses who walks a small thoughtful dog named Douglas. Years ago, the thoughtful man ran a mystery book shop on Main Street that I remember chiefly because of the Maltese falcon statuette that brooded above the cash register.

I walk my white bichon Nellie in the early evening, and there's my neighbor Howie, across the street, walking his small black dog Lucy. The two leashed dogs stop to consider each other across the gulf—and their thoughts are as clear as if they were spoken: "We're both stuck with these leashes, these masters. We want to run across the street to play together, but here we are...suburban dogs...tethered to these middle-aged men...dependent on them for everything."

Both dogs look at each other, and they both sigh.

I admire these dogs' abilities to figure out the world non-verbally. They quickly comprehend that car keys mean desertion – and their faces fall into masks of despair at the first rattle of the key chain. Suitcases cause even deeper mourning. All this without a word – just those searing brown eyes. And I'm always amused by owners who speak long, complex sentences to their dogs. "Reggie, stop scratching or I'm going to have to give you half a Benadryl, and you won't like that." I think to myself: "Wow. A dog with a degree in pharmacology."

I love how dogs smile when everyone is finally inside for the night; dinner is done; the television glows; a rawhide bully-stick lies a paw's length away. It's as if all their blessings have been gathered under one roof – and they have nothing to do but smile.

My neighbor Jean suggested that I end this essay with an exhortation to readers to adopt a pet from a shelter for the holiday. I admire Jean's public-spiritedness. Meantime, I've bought a new squirrel-proof feeder. It hangs on the pole in the garden. I look out the kitchen window this afternoon and there's Donald the squirrel hanging upside down from the rim – like some kind of overweight aerialist. I think, actually, he's giving me the finger.