

In Redbud Winter, Haven Clary Remembers the Dogs of His Life

by Charles Semones

It seems that it's always getting close to twilight on an afternoon in redbud winter when a slur in the wind says their names as plain as any human voice could. And they come back, not as transparent ghost-dogs or dog-ghosts, but as their furry selves, just as they were back then, and resume their lives in this place they knew every inch of when they were alive here once with him. They come back, looking no different than when they went away but, as he soon discovers, they are neither visible nor invisible. He's aware of them only as tactile presences. It's as if they're leaping on him or licking his hand, for instance. He senses them close on his heels as he tries to finish his chores before good dark sets in, and he must light the lantern, low on oil, that he found rusting where he'd left it. He doesn't live here anymore; he has not for longer than he can easily remember. The place is abandoned to whatever wildness will have it. He knows that because of where he lies now, day in, day out. Being dead, he sees it more clearly than when he was alive here. It's only moments from the Shiloh churchyard, lorded over by disputatious crows. He notices the clapboard house, long uninhabited, has fallen into ruin. So has the tobacco barn, a haven now for owls and groundhogs. The smokehouse, woodshed, and corncrib are leaning; the cowbarn where hay-scent and cows' breath mingled with the fresh milk-smell is without its roof, and rotting boards, still holding on, sag outward. Brownie, Pepper and Gayheart check out everything in sight. They were strays that showed up at his back door. He gave them food and refuge and, as he hoped they would, they stayed. But years of redbud winters added up and made them old and lame. When the time came, each one limped away to a dying place, chosen long beforehand. He knew what they were up to; he knew some instinct not meant for him to comprehend had told them what to do. He watched them struggle down the hollow below the house, behind what was once his mother's garden, and never made a move to call them back, though a hot stone weighted down his heart and, being no stranger to loss, he got bleary-eyed as they labored out of sight. It wasn't for a lack of love that he let them go, for they were doing nature's bidding and he'd always known that what comes natural to man or beast is better left alone—not tampered with in the God-stun of its happening. Now another redbud winter coaxes them away from their sun-bleached bones, the wreckage of their skulls, and they show up again on April days when redbud-tapers flare in the long hush of cedar-dusk. It was yesterday or the day before, it seems, that he was a boy here doing what boys do when an urgency more startling than their first glimpse of God tongue-ties them. Life made him solitary. His manhood, though needling, did not incline him

toward a wife. By then, he had only his dogs, Gringo and Peso, for company, and they never let him down, never wandered off at winter nightfall, forcing him to go outdoors in the frigid dark to search for them. They loved him, and it was their nature to be faithful, unlike some people who'd deserted him without a second thought, it seemed. When he least expected it, his bones foretold December and the long siege of cold. But his dogs were never fretful. Their acceptance of final things amazed and humbled him. He thought their stoic poise was something he could learn from, something that would serve him well through his hoary eldering. But long before he expected it, a voice as faint as a mourning dove's, told him it was time to go—they to fields and fencerows where chipmunks scampered unafraid and he, borne by six stout men, to Shiloh's grievous hilltop with its gravestones, weather-crazed. Now that his dogs can no longer heed his every footfall, he finds his grave's as good a place as any in which to spend an April day, watching it sadden by the moment to its close. Watching his dogs from where his death has confined him, he's mindful all over again of the brevity of any creature's time on earth. He has a hunch that heaven's nothing more than the backcountry he spent his life in. He suspects that, instead of ghosts, his dogs are shaggy angels looking out for him—the only ones he's known, the only ones he's apt to know.