

Between the Lines

By Niles Reddick

When our seventeen-year-old dog Harper died, it was sad, especially for my wife Michelle because this had been her baby for almost ten years before we had our first child Audrey. She didn't die from natural causes, but she was close and we simply couldn't bear to see her suffer any longer. Day and night, she would bark, turning her head this way and that. Her eyesight had begun to fail and no amount of yelling at her to stop worked because she had lost most of her hearing. Years before, when she could hear me, I could tap on the window and yell, "No," and her tail went between her legs and she parked herself in her house. I believe she lived to be seventeen because she was in shape, would go jogging almost daily with my wife.

In Harper's last year, we bought a Brittany spaniel we named Anna. We wanted to transition the kids when Harper died. The last few months of Harper's life, Michelle would go walk or jog, Harper would go with her, but she couldn't make the one mile journey through our neighborhood, and Michelle would carry her home. There were days when I'd look outside and the poor dog was dragging her back end her arthritis was so bad and causing so much pain. Finally, we agreed to put her to sleep. I told the kids, and they both teared up until I put the positive spin on it: "Just think," I said. "Now, we can give Anna Harper's house. She wants Anna to have it because she won't need it in heaven." They cheered that Anna was getting a dog house. It wasn't that they were happy Harper was "going to heaven," but honestly, I just don't think the bond was ever quite established between the kids and Harper.

Michelle was upset and stayed with Harper while they put her to sleep, and she called me crying. I, too, was sad, and for a few nights, I dreamed of her, mainly the good times, not the bad ones like when she ate the roof off her doghouse and my painting it with jalapeño Tabasco sauce hadn't helped one bit, or when she dug holes in the yard, one so big, I wrecked the riding mower having not seen it for the height of the grass. Now, I either tend to forget or romanticize what a good dog Harper was compared to the two hellions I have now. Yes, two.

Anna wasn't enough of a dog for my daughter and son to share. So we got a rescued Springer spaniel for my son, who we named Jack.

We'd already had Anna "fixed" and after about two weeks of watching Jack hump everything, we had him "fixed," too. We had hoped "fixing" him would have a calming effect, but no. He is still as hyper. We thought after a year or so, he would grow and become less hyper. Not so. He barks at every squirrel, cat, and one day when he was going crazy barking and jumping up on the side of the fence, I went to see, assuming it might be a snake. No, it was a turtle, and it took a long time for the turtle to get out of his range. In fact, I picked up the turtle, moved him to the other side of the yard. A couple of hours later, Jack was barking again, and the turtle had returned. I didn't understand why. Anna, on the other hand, isn't a barker. If she barks, we do have a realistic issue to deal with. Jack barks constantly. No amount of training him has helped. We had an anti-barking device installed, and he continued to bark. I bought a shocker collar, and it does work, and I must admit I take some level of pleasure in shocking him given the countless nights he wakes me. Mostly, it's because of an armadillo that seems to enjoy digging in our yard. If I could get away with shooting him, I would, but we are in the city limits, and guns aren't allowed.

Lately, aside from digging up the yard and chewing everything that can be chewed, including the plastic dryer vent fastened on the side of the house, he ran right through the screen on the porch, knocking it out, after I had just had it repaired from being punched out by a ball. For whatever reason, I can't move beyond it. I'm constantly on guard and do not trust him and have taken to calling him "you stupid son-of-a-bitch," which the stupid son-of-a-bitch responds to with just as much enthusiasm if I had called him by his real name and was handing him a Milk bone dog biscuit.

I threaten to kill him and her or give one or both of them away at least once a week and wish I had a calmer dog, one who would do what I want and when. One who would be therapeutic to me instead of raising my blood pressure and stimulating me to show my dark side to the entire neighborhood. Last night, I got angry about them gnawing the legs on the

Writing Raw

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rocking chairs on the front porch, and I chased them around the yard with a shovel, hoping to knock their damned teeth out, screaming you “sons of bitches.” My neighbors who attend church with us were probably horrified and probably will avoid contact with me now.

Maybe it’s just time for me to get a stuffed animal, an i-Dog (one of these new mechanical dogs), or a Chia pet. Maybe I should just take Yoga, go see a therapist, or just get my doctor to give me some medication to keep me even. Life is complicated and I feel like a drunk driver weaving from one side of the road to other, having a tough time keeping it between the lines.

The End

Niles Reddick bio: Niles Reddick’s collection Road Kill Art and Other Oddities was a finalist for an Eppie award, his novel Lead Me Home was a national finalist for a ForeWord Award, a finalist in the Georgia Author of the Year award in the fiction category, and a nominee for an IPPY award. His work has appeared in anthologies Southern Voices in Every Direction and Unusual Circumstances and has been featured in many journals including “The Arkansas Review: a Journal of Delta Studies”, “Southern Reader”, “Like the Dew”, “The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature”, “The Pomanok Review”, “Corner Club Press”, “Slice of Life”, “Deep South Review”, “The Red Dirt Review”, “Faircloth Review”, “New Southerner”, and many others. He works for the University of Memphis at Lambuth in Jackson, Tennessee, where he lives with his wife Michelle, two children, Audrey and Nicholas. His new novel, Drifting too far from the Shore, is forthcoming in 2015. His website is www.nilesreddick.com