Completed Creations

Louise Nayer

I’m sitting in front of Seven Hills Vet Hospital on a wooden bench in the sun. Sun is sometimes in short supply in foggy San Francisco. This sitting with no agenda is the effect of being retired from full-time teaching—to take time to sit in the sun and look in the windows of the vet hospital at the Diamond Heights shopping center in San Francisco.

Lost Dog, Lost Cat. Posters are plastered on the window. One dog is named Milo(the name of my financial advisor and the name of a tree in Hawaii). A cat is named Ephesus Greany, a mouthful. Another dog, an Australian terrier, looks at the camera smiling that dog toothy smile, standing in a field of green grass. I can hardly look at these posters and all their unsolved grief.

San Francisco is a city of dogs and their guardians and in Glen Park, especially, dogs trot into the local bookstore, Bird and Beckett, where the owner’s mother, before she passed away, could often be seen holding her small pooch on her lap during the weekly poetry readings and jazz concerts-- or dogs, small poodles and Golden Retrievers lie down on the sidewalk by the outside chairs of Higher Grounds Coffee where customers can have specialty crepes and omelets. Life is just starting to re-open post pandemic. But the dogs have been here in full force this last year, many new puppies walking the sidewalks with their guardians—some of them startled by what it really means to have a puppy in their world.

At Glen Park—which is at the end of Chenery Street, the mouth of the park opens to two tennis courts and a huge field on the left—where there are often softball and soccer games. To the right is a grassy field, dog heaven, where dogs and people congregate.

When we had the chip put in we believed a dog with such a new scientific invention would always be found, but perhaps the reality is more like Hansel and Gretel. The breadcrumbs are meant to lead the way back, but the birds—life—gets in the way. Sometimes I can hardly look at these posters and all their unsolved grief. I’m grateful my dog is safe at home, probably sleeping across the wooden floor by the one slant of light down our long hallway.

San Francisco is a city of pets. Hour after hour, women, men, old and young take their pets to Glen Park with its Eucalpytus trees and long walks up a canyon, and if they need to, to the vet where I’m sitting.

Our first dog, Penny, came to us at 12 weeks old when I was already 46 years old and Jim 52 and our daughters 10 and 12. In New York City where I grew up we weren’t allowed to have dogs in our apartments. The breeder, a friendly, talkative woman (I have terrible allergies so needed a pure bred Bijon Frise) came from the Sierra Mountains with Penny and her sister. “I want the one with less energy,” Jim said and so we picked her and cradled her in our arms.

Our daughters, Sarah and Laura, hugged Penny to them through the roller coaster ride of adolescence and she was the repository of all our grief and joy. She even went to the Richmond Senior Center where my husband was the director before he retired many years ago. She was a therapy dog back then, moving between tables of developmentally disabled seniors who looked like they were at a candy store for the first time when they saw her furry body and inky eyes. During her day “at work” with Jim, she would also move from room to room on the same floor—going to meetings at “Family Services” where she would enter the room gingerly, and then always find someone’s lap to sit in.

Ella, our new dog, (Penny died in 2015) has taken over where Penny left off. She is a bona fide therapy dog through the ASPCA and before Covid, she and I regularly visited one senior residence and a psychiatric center where amazingly, she left all her ADD energy behind and let herself be pet and pet and pet by many hands. Energy goes both ways. At the psychiatric center, on a huge white board it would say, “Ella the Bichon” visits today. One evening, an older patient said to me “I haven’t felt unconditional love until I met Ella.” When Ella moved to another person he said with a gleam in his eyes, “She’s cheating on me!”

The sun has gotten too hot on the bench. I get some money out of Bank of America and need to talk to someone in the bank about stopping a “credit line” which seems to have mysteriously appeared on the ATM screen. An older woman has brought her dog into the bank. I find out he’s a Boston Terrier. He has name tag with a red bone on it. “He’s a hearing dog,” she says. “He’s trained to hear the smoke alarm go off because I can’t hear it.” A dog at the bank seems like a normal occurrence here in San Francisco.

I think about all that dogs do for us: the ones that my student brought with him to the tutoring center at City College of San Francisco, trained to bark and lick his face when his owner had an epileptic seizure—the ones you read about who rescue young children from drowning in deep wells, or from snow drifts or from swimming pools. Our new dog, Ella has been pandemic buddy to my husband and me. “The three of us,” we often say as she snuggles up to us on the couch and sleeps with us, part of her body always touching part of one of ours. Bodies need bodies, human or creatures.

“Animals are completed creations," Alice Walker said in her essay “Am I Blue.” I’m proud to live in a city with so many dogs. I go home to find Ella curled up, as usual, on the couch, her tail going back and forth like a pendulum.