

*The Realm of the Dog*

The old man next door had a dog, a mutt with a hoarse yap instead of a bark. He didn't take care of the dog. Instead, he chained it to a stake in the backyard and left it there, all night sometimes. The man was often gone for days. The dog wasn't as big as some of the other dogs in the neighborhood, but it was wild and lean and long lines of silvery drool hung from its jaws.

Once, when the next-door-neighbor boy, Malachi, was playing in the dirt in his own backyard, the dog lunged after a scrawny alley cat and yanked the stake out of the ground. For an instant, the dog seemed stunned and its ears went up and the black corners of its mouth turned up in what looked like a smile. But the cat streaked into the next-door yard, past Malachi, who grabbed for it because he'd always wanted a pet. The dog's hackles bristled and it charged and the cat disappeared under the fence and the dog sunk its fangs into Malachi's leg, as if to accuse the boy: "It's your fault the cat got away."

The boy screamed and the dog snapped its head side to side and dragged the boy through the dry dirt and raised a pale, brown cloud of dust. Blood spooled out into the dirt in bright globs. Finally, the backdoor flew open and Malachi's mother leaped off the stoop and jumped at the dog. She tried to catch its neck in her hands, but the dog was quick and let go of the boy and clamped its jaws onto her forearm. She fell, then staggered to her feet, lifting the dog off the ground the way a fisherman lifts a catfish from the water, and the dog kicked and twisted like a caught fish and wouldn't let go. The mother tripped backward and fell again and her hand found a loose brick in the dirt and she slammed the dog on the snout and it released her arm. The dog took two sideways steps and tipped over. Its rib cage inflated and collapsed like somebody

blowing up a balloon and just as quickly, sucking the air from it. The dog stared straight ahead. It didn't bark or whimper.

The mother carried Malachi inside and laid him in the bathtub and turned the water on, as hot as she could stand it.

“Why were you playing with that dog?” she shouted, “Why? Why?”

But Malachi had begun to fade. The tub filled with bright blood, and soon, there was more blood than water in the tub and the mother lifted her son from the tub, heavy now as a bundle of blankets straight from the wash, and laid him on the floor and wrapped his leg in a towel and picked him up again and carried him out the front door. Outside, she screamed. A man in the bodega across the street saw the mother and the boy, and shouted for the shop owner to call the ambulance. Then he ran to the mother.

“Malachi,” she screeched, “Malachi.”

The man peeled the soaked towel from the boy's leg and wrapped it again immediately. He squeezed the boy's leg in a tight grip with both hands and imagined that his hands were clamps and that he was trying to squeeze a tree branch hard enough to halve it. The blood was hot and had already soaked through the towel, but now it rose between his fingers like floodwater up through the floorboards of a cabin that was bound to be washed away. By the time the ambulance arrived, Malachi was dead and the mother sat on the sidewalk, legs V'd out in front of her.

The man said, “Lady, your arm.”

Later that night, much later, after everything had been arranged and everybody had been notified, a cab dropped the mother off in front of her house. She went inside and got a flashlight and went around back and saw the dog had not moved—that it was, now, dead. She glanced at the old man’s house. There were no lights on inside and the backyard, normally the realm of the dog, had been dipped in shadows that had hardened to blackness.

The mother thought she would go inside again and return with a cleaver and lop off the dog’s tail and cram it into the old man’s mail slot. Then she would heave the rest of the carcass over the fence into the alley for the rats to pull apart, sinew by sinew. She stood for a long time, staring at the dead dog in the flickering flashlight beam. Then, she went back inside and came out again, carrying an empty, battered cardboard box. She held the flashlight in her mouth and scooped up the dog, stiff now and cloudy-eyed, and laid it gently in the box. Then she sat there and sat there, until all the neon ‘OPEN’ signs up and down the street buzzed to life.