

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

*Rachel Burroughs*

**“Chukchi legend states that two huskies guard the gates to heaven”**

### **One**

I walked over to the dog park out of habit today. Turns out people sometimes judge you when you show up alone. At least I was never one of those assholes.

### **Two**

I'm vacuuming the rug in the living room, because god knows I put it off for long enough, and I see a stray, multicolored tumbleweed of fur blown from under the couch.

“Vacuum it up,” my brain urges.

“No,” I respond.

It blows away into a corner of the room. I hope I see it again soon.

### **Real Meat is the #1 Ingredient**

I try to return these seven unopened cans of Wellness Core that I found in the back of the pantry to Chewy (by some miracle they're unexpired), but a customer service rep emails me back and says to donate them to a shelter instead. How sweet of them. They also give you a refund *and* send you a personalized sympathy card by snail mail. How grand.

### **Four**

“Cats are such unpleasant creatures, don't you think?” I ask Dan over lunch, staring up at the wall where the TV in this restaurant is playing some reality show about badly behaved cats and the hipster-looking man that's supposed to fix them. As soon as I say it I think I probably shouldn't have, because Dan has cats and loves them, so clearly he's not going to agree with me. It was just a random musing that unfortunately came out of my mouth instead of staying in my brain while I watched the hissing tabby cat on the screen claw its way up the hipster man's pants as its owner screeched about how it does this to her all the time, which I was only looking at to avoid the awkward silence with my brother that I haven't seen in a month or two and that I suspect only asked me to lunch out of pity or something. Not that we really see each other regularly anyway.

“That's not true,” Dan scoffs, and I look back from the TV to see him making a face like he's just been reminded of why he doesn't try to meet up with me more often. “You've never even had a cat, but sure, go off and believe this dramatized garbage.”

I shrug and poke at my salad. I shouldn't have said it.

“Besides,” he continues. “At least cats can piss in a box instead of making you drag them outside in the rain, *and* they don't whine, *and* they don't slobber everywhere.”

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I flinch back from his words. I don't know why I feel like I've been slapped. I invited all those comments, asking a cat owner to agree with my cat slander. He purses his lips and stares down at his plate, looking like he wants to say something more, but he doesn't.

'They live longer than dogs, too,' is what I'd say if I were him, and he were cruel.

### Guess it's PTO then

Google says bereavement leave only applies to people. Ain't that some bullshit.

### Six

I can't believe this is how I'm spending my night, but here I am, reading a bunch of inspirational crap on the internet. I find some poster about the 'rainbow bridge,' which I've heard of before – who hasn't? – but I've never read the lengthy missive currently on my screen. I skim it, well aware of the risks to my emotional well-being from reading such content right now, and I realize with only a small measure of surprise that it's based on the idea of heaven. Of course. People want to think their pets have afterlives, just like they think they do, and that once they've lived their pious lives, they'll go to heaven and their pet will be waiting for them.

I wish I could believe in all this, because it would mean believing we'd be together again someday. Funny how people are willing to believe certain things if it might benefit them, when they never would otherwise.

(Of course, there's no question that if heaven *were* real, all animals would go there. People, eh.)

### Flakes or pellets?

Sara from the next cubicle over sends me a message, asks if I can pick up some fish food for her desk fish, Ziggy, a betta or whatever those flashy ones that can live in a bowl are called, and if I can feed him if she misses any days next week. She was out sick on Friday and probably will be on Monday as well, and PetSmart is right next to the café I usually stop at for coffee on the weekends, at least I used to anyway. I remember that the fish care aisle is right at the front of the store, while all the stuff for bigger animals is farther back, so I think yes, I can stop in quickly, I can pick up the fish food, I can feed the fish, no problem.

I also remember that the store has tiny containers on the end caps of the fish aisles that hold these fish, in a rainbow of colors, waiting for kids to ooh and ahh at them, and maybe their parents will buy one and put it in a vase or an overpriced designer cube with a plastic plant. Personally, I think any fish deserves to live in something bigger than a vase or the bougie half-gallon 'zen cube' that Sara's fish lives in, but I'm not a fish owner so what do I know.

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I walk into the PetSmart, ignoring how familiar this place is, and make a beeline for the shelves of fish food I see behind those colorful fish containers before a cacophony of barking stops me in my tracks. A Saturday adoption event. How could I forget?

My eyes immediately land on a dog that's just big enough and fluffy enough to send blood rushing in my ears, and I turn back around without the fish food.

Sorry, Ziggy.

I bet they sell fish food at the grocery store anyway.

### **Told you so**

Google says that betta fish should not live in bowls or tiny cubes, rather filtered tanks that are at least 5 gallons. However, Google didn't think to warn me that huskies are especially prone to epilepsy and certain cancers, so who knows if it's to be trusted.

### **Nine**

Sometimes when I'm settling in for bed and I reach over to turn off the lamp, my eyes will linger on the little decorative box on the nightstand, and each time it's just as outrageous as the first time the vet handed it to me – the thought that an animal that stood taller than my knee could ever fit inside something so small. I almost refuse to believe it.

But here she is.

At least they didn't engrave that nauseating "you left pawprints on my heart" phrase on the box.

### **Oh, big stretch**

I forgot my bed is a queen size. It felt so much smaller before.

### **Honk**

There's a toy I always hated, a stupid rubber goose with a stupid face and a stupid squeaker box inside that I can't believe I ever thought would be a good idea to buy. I would fantasize about accidentally leaving it behind at the dog park or burning it in a dumpster, but I never did have the heart to get rid of it, because it was her favorite. Of course, it was. She'd chew and squeak the damn toy endlessly, and wouldn't you know the only thing that could trump my desire to launch it into orbit was my love for her. If the stupid goose made her happy, the stupid goose could stay, and my ears would just have to get over it.

Sometimes when it's too quiet in the house, I pick up the goose from the toy box. I look at its stupid face all covered in teeth marks, and then I squeak it, just to hear the sound again.

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### Twelve

Something I was particularly unprepared for is how many people unironically, and seemingly without a shred of situational awareness, have asked me things like “didn’t you used to walk a big dog around here,” and “oh yeah, you’re the one with the wolf in the neighborhood, ha ha, where is it now.”

I don’t know what’s worse, the reminder that I *used* to walk a dog, or that people are honestly dense and insensitive enough to ask me questions like that to my face.

I guess the stupidity of people is something I should always be prepared for.

### Thirteen

Sara returns to the office on Wednesday, and wouldn’t you know the first words out of her mouth are to ask where I bought the fish food.

“You said you were going to PetSmart,” she says, inspecting the container with a sour look on her face. “They don’t sell this there.”

“I did go to PetSmart, but I forgot they have adoption events there on the weekends. I left and bought the fish food at Kroger later.”

“This stuff is cheap. It’s not as good as what they sell at PetSmart.”

Well, I’ll be damned. I guess the bougie cube fish can only eat bougie food.

“You’re welcome that Ziggy didn’t starve while you were gone.” I turn my back on her ungrateful ass and return to my own cubicle.

“It’s been three months.” Sara pokes her head over the divider, not content to leave me alone. “You’re telling me you couldn’t stay in the store for a few minutes and get the fish food while there were some dogs there? Maybe it’s time to... you know, get over it.”

I keep my eyes on my screen, because my first thought is to stand up and whack Sara across the face with my keyboard, and I don’t really want to lose my job or get arrested for assault today.

My second thought as she clucks her tongue and disappears behind the divider is to wonder how it’s already been three months.

### ‘Ink is running low’

Later, I print out a fact sheet on acceptable habitat options for betta fish (which also includes info on why it’s cruel to keep them in tiny, inappropriate vessels) and leave it on Sara’s desk while she’s in the bathroom. I’m sure she’ll know it was me, and I’ll probably end up reprimanded for using the office printer for petty payback purposes, but maybe Ziggy will get a bigger and better home and it will all be worth it.

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### Fifteen

Another night of scrolling inspirational crap.

“Dogs are better than people,” this Instagram photo proclaims.

At least that one I can agree with.

### Sixteen

This morning I ran a hand across her leash, where it still hangs on its hook by the back door, and my fingers came away covered in dust.

If I then spent the next hour maniacally dusting every surface in the entire kitchen while sobbing off and on, well, at least I live alone so no one saw.

### It's called 'agouti,' thank you very much

I used to think it would be a relief if people would ever stop asking me if she was a wolf.

Like, for god's sake. Wolves are huge. Wolves are wild animals. She was neither. You'd think people would know at least that much. But I guess the only huskies people ever think of are those black and white dog show specimens. We could hardly go anywhere without someone asking a dumb ass question like “is that a wolf” or “where did you get your wolf.”

But it's not a relief at all.

### Puppy breath

I'm out walking, trying to break the muscle memory habit of having to stop at every fire hydrant and tree trunk lining the sidewalk, when an older gentleman rounds the block, led by an energetic puppy bounding along in front of him. I pause (though there's no hydrant or tree next to me) as the puppy spots me and begins an excited wiggling dance in my direction, and I briefly consider escaping to the other side of the street.

It's a little thing, short-haired with a squashy face and looking nothing like a wolf or a husky, so I find that it's not so painful to stoop down and let the puppy lick all over my hands.

“Sorry about that,” the owner says above me with a laugh, which I think is a silly thing to say, given that I've willingly lowered myself for the puppy's attentions, but the smile I feel on my face distracts me from this small criticism. “He's a lover, for sure.”

“That's alright.” The puppy has now managed to stretch up and lick my face. I'd almost forgotten what this feels like. “I could do with more dog affection in my day.”

Another laugh. “Do you have a dog?”

I look up at the man while his puppy continues to assault me with licks and jumps and eager little whines, and I consider his question. It's

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innocent, conversational. He doesn't know me, doesn't know that I *used* to walk my own dog on these same streets. He's not asking an insensitive, dumb ass question to which the answer should be obvious. I think I can answer him.

"Uh, yeah... I did."

Maybe it's my tone of voice, or whatever expression is on my face, but the man responds with a small smile and so much understanding that I drop my gaze back down to the puppy before I impose any tears on a random stranger's morning.

"Gotta get me one of these," I joke, gesturing to the tiny creature scrambling once more up my lap to lick my chin.

"You should," the man says, and I glance back up at him again. "Some-day."

### Nineteen

I finally make time to take the cans of food to the animal shelter. Against my better judgment, I ask to go back to see the cages.

### Most popular breed, how about that

I should have gotten him before, when he wouldn't feel like a replacement, but a friend for the dog I already had. Well, at least people won't ask me if he's a wolf.

He finds the stupid goose and makes it do that stupid squeak. Then again, and again. I wonder if she'd have shared it with him.

I watch as he trips over the goose, the rug, his own feet. I wonder if he'll shed quite as much as she did. I bet he won't howl as loud, at least. I wonder how much I'll come to love him.

Her collar is too big on him, but he'll grow into it.