

THAT DOG THING




ROBIN PACIFIC

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LYING in bed one Tuesday night a few years ago, I came to two apparently contradictory conclusions.

First, my life was too perfect.

Second, I was lonely.

It occurred to me that I could mess up my life, and also share it, by acquiring a dog.

HAD I ever owned a dog?

No, I had never even walked one for a friend.

What did I know about dogs?

I knew that if I stopped to think about it, I would never do it.

BY Sunday, I had found, on the internet, a two year old Samoyed. Her owners were returning to China and couldn't take her back with them.

I changed her name to Mercy.



YEARS ago, when I was a heavy smoker, I thought people who complained about cigarette smoke were either hypochondriacs or just making it up. And I couldn't stand people who treated pets like humans, who slavered over "fur children" and even "fur husbands".

YES, a constant diet of humble pie is my lot in life.

THE smell of cigarette smoke makes me ill, and I've become an insufferable dog lover, continually kissing, hugging, petting, belly rubbing, and even--shame!--talking baby talk.



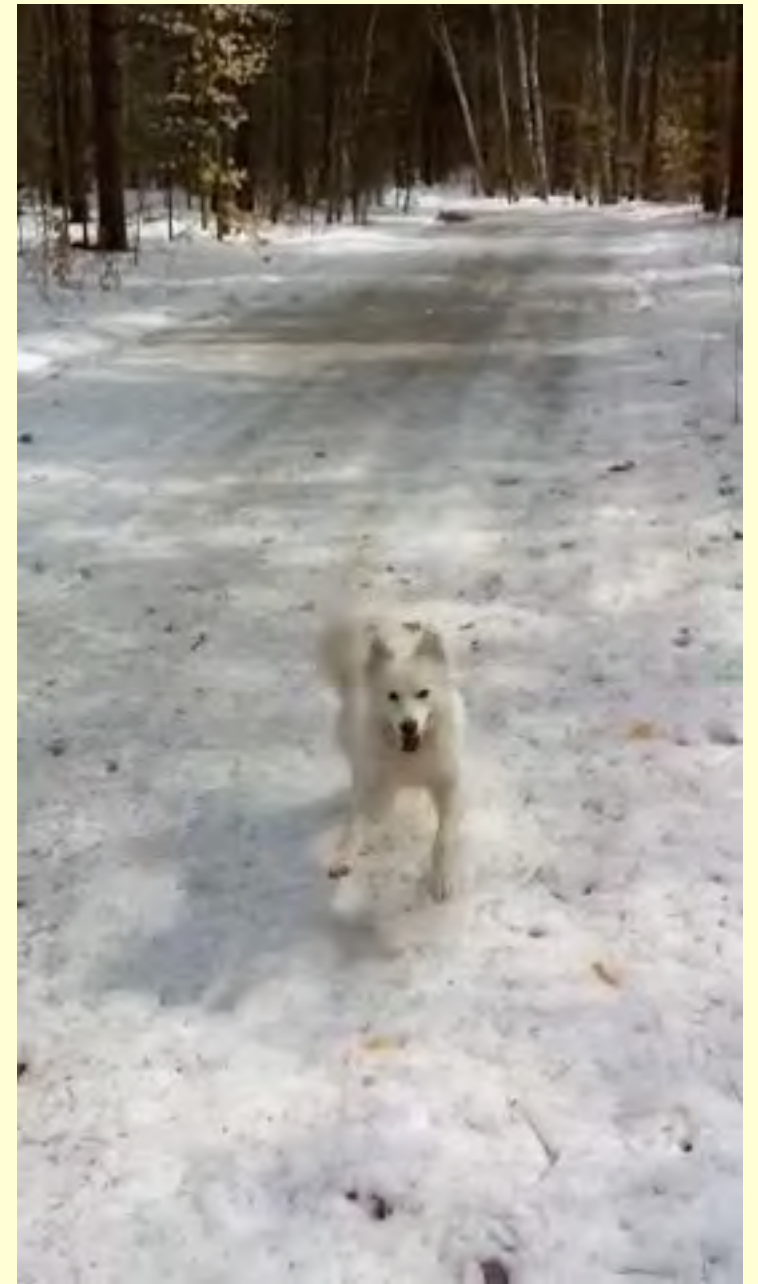




**EACH** was surprised. Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett's face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush's face; his eyes, too, were large and bright: his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them.

**AS** they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I—and then each felt: But how different! Hers was the pale worn face of an invalid, cut off from air, light, freedom. His was the warm ruddy face of a young animal; instinct with health and energy. Broken asunder, yet made in the same mold, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other?

**SHE** might have been—all that; and he—But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other. Then with one bound Flush sprang on to the sofa and laid himself where he was to lie forever after—on the rug at Miss Barrett's feet.



*from Virginia Woolf's memoir of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog, **Flush***



MY family was not a happy one. My mother drank to excess, my father philandered to excess, and they fought unremittingly. “I was born into an ambush”, to quote Milton Acorn. It seems I’ve spent my whole life trying, and failing, to create a family.

BRIAN and I had a child together, a daughter, but neither of us could handle a relationship, let alone parenthood, and we separated when she was four. When she was eight, he died of cancer.


I MET Terry a few years later, and for the first time in my life, I was happy. My daughter’s best friend moved in with us. My niece was studying in Toronto, and she and her boyfriend, and Terry’s son and his girlfriend, came regularly for Sunday dinners. Friends gathered at Thanksgiving and Easter, at birthday parties. Life was rich, full and — sort of normal.

IT LASTED ten years. My daughter moved out, and began the first of many increasingly long periods of estrangement. Terry was diagnosed with a brain tumour, and died a year later.

I WAS alone again, more profoundly than ever.







SO Mercy had a big hole to fill. Which she did, and then some. A couple of months after this dog began messing up my life, I met Frank, whose on line dating profile showed him driving the last nail in a two-storey four-car garage he built after his wife died. He was wearing a tool belt.

FRANK told me repeatedly, “I’m not a dog person”, but I could see he was very good with Mercy, that he had a sweet connection with all animals.

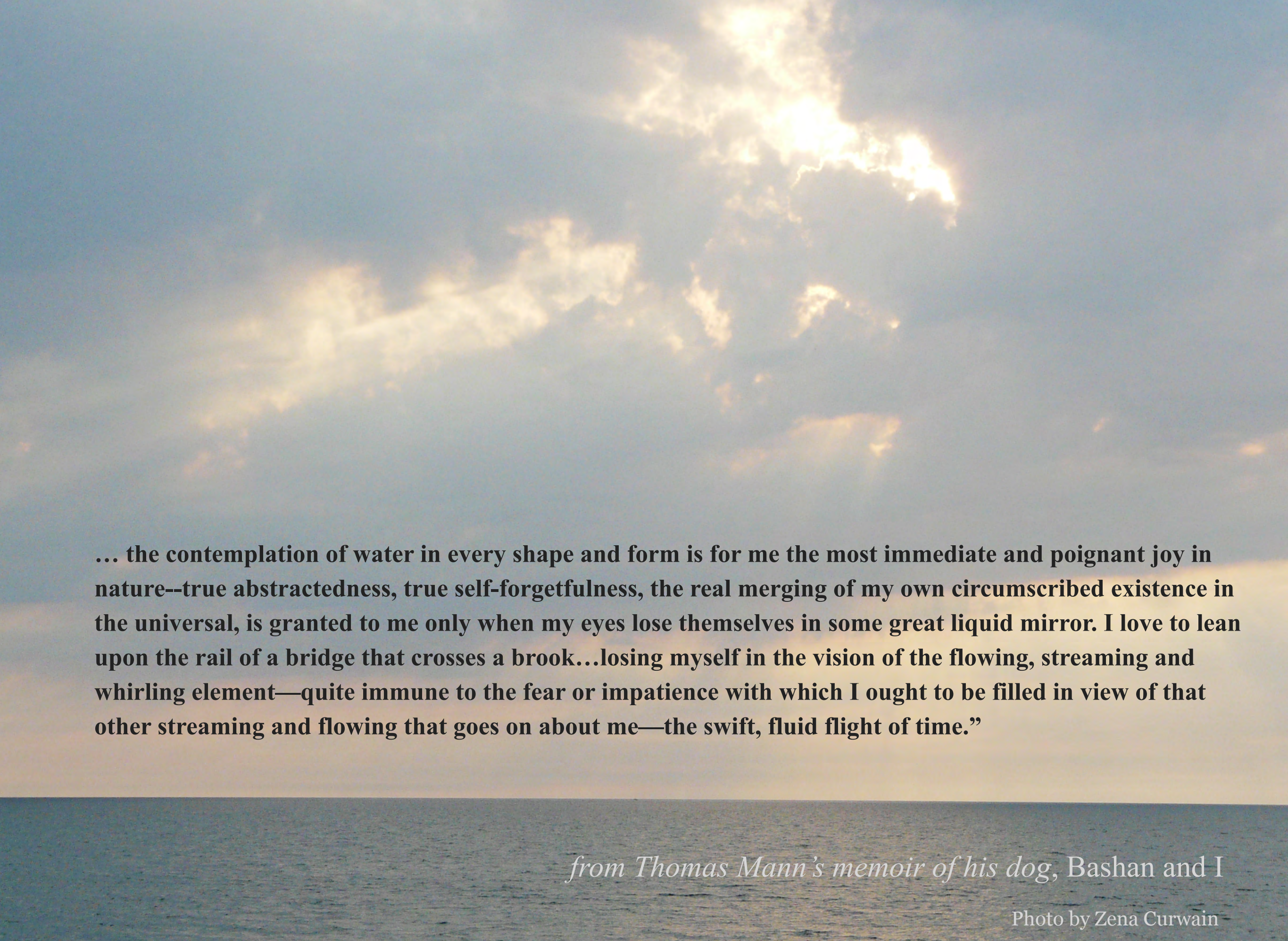
FRANK lives in Thornhill, a 45 minute drive from my house in downtown Toronto--a long distance relationship in the same city. To get to his place you drive past an old cemetery, a small Ukrainian Catholic Church, and the church’s parking lot. There are steps leading down from this parking lot to a path which runs along the East Don River.



**THIS** is Mercy and my most very favourite walk. Off leash, she's free to ramble and sniff at everything to her heart's content. Off leash, I amble and cogitate and meditate. It's the most prayerful time in my day, meandering with the meandering water, watching Mercy play in the colours of the changing seasons.







**... the contemplation of water in every shape and form is for me the most immediate and poignant joy in nature--true abstractedness, true self-forgetfulness, the real merging of my own circumscribed existence in the universal, is granted to me only when my eyes lose themselves in some great liquid mirror. I love to lean upon the rail of a bridge that crosses a brook...losing myself in the vision of the flowing, streaming and whirling element—quite immune to the fear or impatience with which I ought to be filled in view of that other streaming and flowing that goes on about me—the swift, fluid flight of time.”**

*from Thomas Mann's memoir of his dog, Bashan and I*

Photo by Zena Curwain



Time, like an ever rolling stream,  
Bears all its sons away;  
They fly, forgotten, as a dream  
Dies at the opening day.



*from the hymn **O God Our Help in Ages Past**, verse 5.*



ONE day, out walking near my cottage on Georgian Bay, Mercy and I discovered the Pink Chair Beach. For some reason, every time Mercy sees those chairs, she runs around them in frenzied circles. Crazy with joy, she digs in the sand, crashes into the water, runs around the chairs again -- so drunk with ecstasy she bursts through some invisible barrier, and she is outside time.



WHEN she calms down, comes and sits at my feet, and I look into her dark eyes, so am I.



MY daughter's estrangement appears permanent this time, and I am now in my ninth year of widowhood. Yet Frank and Mercy walk me to church on Sunday mornings, and then walk back to meet me when the service is over. Coming down the steps, there they are, sitting and waiting for me. Something to count on. Like a family.





The little Ukrainian Catholic church beside Frank's is rented out on Sunday afternoons to another congregation. The young girls who go to church there are besotted with Mercy. Coming up the stairs from the ravine into the parking lot, the dog racing ahead of me, I hear them calling, "Look, it's Mercy! Mercy's here!"

"Mercy", the children cry,

MERCY

MERCY





WHAT is a charitable heart? It is a heart which is burning with charity for the whole creation, for people, for the birds, for the beasts, for the demons—for all creatures. He who has such a heart cannot see or call to mind a creation without his eyes becoming filled with tears by reason of the immense compassion which seizes his heart. This is why such a person never ceases to pray also for the animals. St. Isaac the Syrian

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