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ALL THE MEN

Anne Germanacos

Dog

Before I moved in to the house next door, he thought I would be the type of woman who would have a dog.

For weeks, he must have been excited with the assumed knowledge. But then, moving day came and it turned out I had no dog, cat, or child. So he, Jordan, became my dog and like a river, ran between the houses.

A little wild, somewhat rough. He knocks things over as if he had a tail—a small table, a chair. But it turns out that even if I don't have a dog, I'm used to that kind of wildness. Saying never mind, I take him inside my lilac and green kitchen for frothy milk. I don't know yet to shout across the driveway to his mother: Is milk okay?

That thick blue vein

Being dog comes naturally to him. Even cat wouldn't be hard. It's the other seducers that seem to confuse him: rat, lizard, sparrow. Pecking in the crook of my arm, the sensitive place where the vein shows blue and thick.

I'm reminded of others who've pecked at my veins, men I've known along the way:

A Ted

A saint takes on the contours of his time. People rush to listen to the storm that issues from his lips.

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This is where I was: inside the house, doing his dishes.

Who has time for saints?

That Attraction

His saintliness, my barrenness: each a riff on saying no.

Engulfed by sameness, we split ourselves at the core. Two
not very neat parts.

It's opposites that attract.

(That same Ted.)

Mid-Life

Never having thought of myself as shrink, healer, or shaman,
certainly not mother, I know Jordan, the boy next door,
sometimes thinks I'm a bird. He becomes dog whenever he
comes near.

No men for a while now, but I have important relationships with
my stuff. Cigarettes, car. The way I combine the two.

With needle and thread, glue and paint, I make things do what
they seem to have not done before. But—epilepsy?

Could I lure him away from his malady?

Mid-life, half a century here with the rest of you.

Curiosity

I'm curious: Are there people who enjoy the fits? Could it ever
be construed as interesting? Or always painful and terrifying?

(not to mention embarrassing)

Jordan

He gives me a sideways look, actually turning his head away from me then looking back, whenever he feels I'm about to say something dishonest or sentimental.

A Sampson, a Donald

In the desert, he wore everything he owned to protect himself from the day's sun, the night's cold, eventually donning a toga—half-sheet, half-drapery, like a woman. Only his eyes were open on the world.

This is where he learned to see and be seen. In the sand-filled atmosphere, the scorching heat.

The desert: a place he returned to, in his heart if not with the soles of his feet. We used to go down to the dirty sand beach, pretending.

This period was long before he met me. I've never been to any desert but the internal one. The presence of men has prevented me from donning their clothing.

Two slits for my eyes.

These Donalds, these Sampsons.

Sound's Color

It takes too long to figure out: he hears color. That is: each color sounds.

The painting he makes in the living room (blue and orange paint

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on the rug, green on the wooden floorboards, sofa, his face, my arm) has a song to go with it. At first it's just noise but heard repeatedly, I begin to get the hang of it. A jingle, it plays in my mind all night, threads itself through my dreams.

I wonder if he's singing it to himself at home in the house next door, waking himself up out of sleep with the force of his voice.

In the morning, I make coffee cake with blue and green frosting, trying to imagine the song it'll be: up-and-down, dancing around?

Fit

The world zooms in on him. Lights dance. Windows smash into "thousands of trillions of sparkles."

Is there anything in it to like? If he were cured, would he miss it?

Daniel, Donald, Michael, Stephen, Anthony, Jason.

Artist? Seer? Fame-seeker? Saint? Actor?

Leery of shows of all kinds.

Too many times, I thought: artist. But now know: actor.

Question

How does a lie detector work?

Math

How not to be the sum of their discordant parts? The bright

heights they'd be better off not knowing. The darks they'd do anything not to dredge.

Here, again

Deposited back on earth, the resumption of gravity is never without its shock. Here. Again. Oh. With a bark or a meow, a warm lick of the hand. This, I can take.

He licks it repeatedly, tongue warm as the milk he's just swallowed, wet on my smooth palm. He doesn't stop there. Bites my nails as if they're his own. I shoo him away.

Later, he finds me in another room, this one magenta, where I'm sewing old things together. Thinking I've not seen him, he retreats, placing the screen door as silently as he can, then jumps the four wooden steps, springs across the thin rectangle of grass that divides the houses.

Bounds home.

Half a century, revisited

Are there foods that can protect him? Words that push him over the edge? Thoughts? Has he ever dreamed a fit and awakened to find it was only a dream?

Cold shower? Hot bath? Blue jeans? Naked?

Are the conditions only internal? What about the weather—clouds, pelting rain, harsh sunlight? Snow?

And me? Half-a-century in the world and besotted with a wily five-year-old.

Close-up

That morning, he was making a mask with bits and pieces found on the kitchen floor: carrot top, button, cancelled stamps, mouse droppings. I screamed. He dropped to the floor, unable to stop his laughter. Then I saw what epilepsy looked like close-up, but still from the outside.

Discretion

We're all continually exchanging molecules, nothing being truly discrete.

Stephen, the one and only.

After each "game," his father left something for his mother—a piece of jewelry, bottle of perfume, a scarf. Or simply a fresh bill off his wad of cash.

Later, she took Stephen, her son, through her treasure chamber, a room at the end of the attic he and his brothers had never discovered in all their years of hide-and-seek. Had the wall absorbed the door to protect them? But it was there. He saw it. A museum of expensive belongings, crystal and scented, colored, heavy or light.

If I were you, he told me he'd told her, I'd have put a match to it all long ago.

But a person's feelings are so much more complicated than another can imagine.

Shame

Desire can be humiliating, especially after the heat of it wears off. Shame confines us to such narrow regions of desire. But

cutting designs on your wife's skin as you take her?

Stephen said: It's impossible, even at forty, to stop being a son, without a son of your own to make you a father.

This was our dilemma; I couldn't help him out of it.

Nothing: more Stephen

He said he wanted nothing but nothing, the purity of nothing, the clean air of emptiness. He coveted nothing the way he once died for certain obscure exhibits of the flesh: pouring over the flashy garter strap of a woman showing herself to a roomful of men.

He couldn't give up watching in the quiet cave of his mind (so he may as well have watched it in the flesh). In the end, he no longer touched any flesh but his own, when he had to, and that included (unfortunately) mine.

I understood that he had problems but I couldn't follow him toward the solution he'd devised.

Our Children (Stephen, again)

The many children lost, months before their tiny lives were tenable. I still love him enough to believe the lost babies weren't his fault or mine.

Does he spend hours pursuing gloomy nothingness because he sees his children there? Do they smile at him from within the frail purity of his achieved state? (A state that toppled if the phone rang, a fly buzzed, or I walked carefully down the stairs, not ordinarily meaning to bother him.)

We left one another not cold but too sad for excitement:

sadness bears little sensual fruit.

Shit (Paolo)

To himself he called it the shit. There were pictures that went along: finely detailed turds, curly and moist. Great pipelines of it, liquid and pungent. Shit surrounded him, infested him like something animal and alive.

I left quickly.

Future

Time, for him, breaks up. Like a telephone conversation interrupted by static, or a lightning bolt.

Will he ever look back on these early days of fits as something rare and coveted? Wanting again to be that boy, driven from the ordinary by swirling lights and animal voices?

My eyes

Writing around the bright scintillating scatoma that light (and obscure) my way. Is it anything like this?

Stephen's Dogs

Speaks with the lost babies, words that aren't exactly words, nothing he'd ever say to another human being.

Perhaps the dogs are recipients of these syllables, in a whispered rush, more caress than sense, but heartfelt.

Jordan, like a swift river,

destroys the plants I left on the bottom step of the porch,

planning to work them into the soil the next morning. I'm certain he's the one who threw them randomly across my hardly fertile yard, blossoms torn from weak vines, clumped dirt bottoms up on on ratty grass.

Surveying it from the kitchen window, coffee cup in hand, I think maybe he was right. Who wants to spend a Sunday digging around in wormy earth?

He arrives later, feigning distraction, his chirpy bright eyes darting around the need to pretend. I offer him foamy milk, add a drop of whisky for early morning solace.

Continues his life with women.