

Ode to a furry companion



BY KELSEA HARRIS-CAPUANO |
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Why are we drawn to stories about animals? This question recently caused me to pause. Great writers of all kinds, Mary Oliver, Jack Kerouac, Virginia Wolf, Cormac McCarthy, T.H. White, Barry Lopez, to name a few, have devoted page space to fauna.

This question followed me around for a couple weeks. I had a variety of pets throughout my childhood and adult life. I am an avid observer and enthusiast of wildlife, and I'm a writer. Surely, I have the tools, the experience and vocabulary to come up with a succinct answer to such a question. But instead of coming up with a "because" response, what comes up is reverie, a replay of memories. That time my dad woke me up when I was four to see a bear for the first time, rummaging in our backyard — I remember the wonder and curiosity I felt. Or when skiing with friends, we came across two lynxes, quietly treading through the snow. We stopped, standing perfectly still, stretching out the seconds until they disappeared into the trees. Or getting our first dog and being hypnotized by that puppy smell, feeling excitement at the end of the school day, eager to get home to our new playmate.

Bella came into my life my senior year of high school. She was an Australian Shepherd-heeler mix that my family adopted from a kill shelter. Bella had gray and black fur with a red face and paws, a long bushy tail and one floppy ear. Her eyes were multi-colored, a mix of brown and blue that gave her a slightly crazy look. She moved like a coyote or a fox, slinking around quietly, and had the apprehension of an animal that didn't take survival for granted. Her trust was hard earned, and she didn't like people or most dogs.

Bella had her name before we adopted her. I always thought it didn't quite suit her scrappy and fierce personality. But slowly she became a part of our family and we became part of her pack. She still disliked everyone, rarely got along with other dogs, hated loud noises and was aggressively protective of the car, house and the only three people in the entire world who she trusted. She became my adventure buddy, a faithful shadow who loved being outside as much as I did.

One day we were on a hike together in the Tetons, a majestic mountain range that's part

of the Rocky Mountains. It was a steep hike during late spring with significant patches of snow. I was kicking steps into the snow while Bella walked ahead, easily staying on top. Always ahead of me, she occasionally turned back to make sure I was still there. As we continued on, I noticed something move out of the corner of my eye. A fox was at the edge of the trees. It was a pale orange color, almost blending in with the snow and surrounding landscape. Bella hadn't noticed, and I continued my slow advance uphill, peeking at the tree line to see what our watcher would do. Instead of running off, it started to follow us from afar. It trotted uphill parallel to our path, stopping to see what we would do.

Bella, turning to look at me, finally noticed our shadow. Ears perking up in interest, she and the fox paused, looking at each other, perfectly still. Bella ran across the snow field, chasing the fox who turned tail and sprinted into the trees. They both disappeared out of eyesight. I called to Bella loudly and anxiously. A few minutes went by. What would happen if she caught up with it? A fox could easily outrun a dog, I reasoned. What if she got lost or hurt in her excitement? After she failed to reappear, I started hiking down to the spot that I had last seen them. Anxiety crept into my chest. I strained to hear any noise of movement, her collar jingling or rustling in the trees.

Bella finally reappeared from the trees and I exhaled, unaware I was holding my breath. She made her way back up to me, trotting happily. When she reached me she dropped something at my feet. It was the jawbone of a marmot. There was still some blood and hair on it, but it didn't look fresh enough to be Bella's kill. Had her fox friend shared this

with her, or was this just a treasure she found along the way? Panting after the exuberant chase, she looked at her trophy and then up at me contentedly. After drinking from a nearby stream, she picked up her trophy and carried it down the mountain all the way home, burying it in the yard.

I had to say goodbye to Bella this year — leaving a huge hole in my heart. I have been pondering the significance of human-animal relationships as I struggle with my own grief at the loss of an animal friend that truly took my breath away.

Dogs have evolved to be human companions. No other animal is as motivated to pay attention to human action or expression. Bella was a wonderful furry friend. She was loving, smart and loyal; but there was always something wild, feral about her that never went away. The right situation or moment would break her out of obedience into mischief. And I loved that part of her. Perhaps it reminded me of my own wildness. It made me feel like having her companionship was not only a choice I made, but a choice she made as well. A lot of the outdoor places I love are places that are imprinted with memories of her. And those places are all the more special because I shared them with her.

Animal companionship has been one of the great privileges of my life, and not just in a pet sense. It's a privilege to see a fox on a day hike or to watch squirrels bicker in a nearby tree, or hear the chirp of finches keep me company on a bike ride. Stories about animal interactions are translations of experiences and relationships that are mostly nonverbal, making them unique and profound. Animals create a sense of wonder; they help us connect to the greater world outside of humanity. And for me, what's most magical is how those experiences help me to connect a place of being rather than to thinking. Animals live in the present, they hold no grudges and do not ponder the future or the past. It's freedom.

The name Bella is related to the Italian, Latin, Spanish, Greek, Portuguese and French words for beautiful. I don't have the perfect words to describe the depth of my relationship with her, but I have her stories. Loving Bella made me a better human, and our coevolution was indeed a beautiful thing to behold. Perhaps her name was a perfect fit after all.

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