

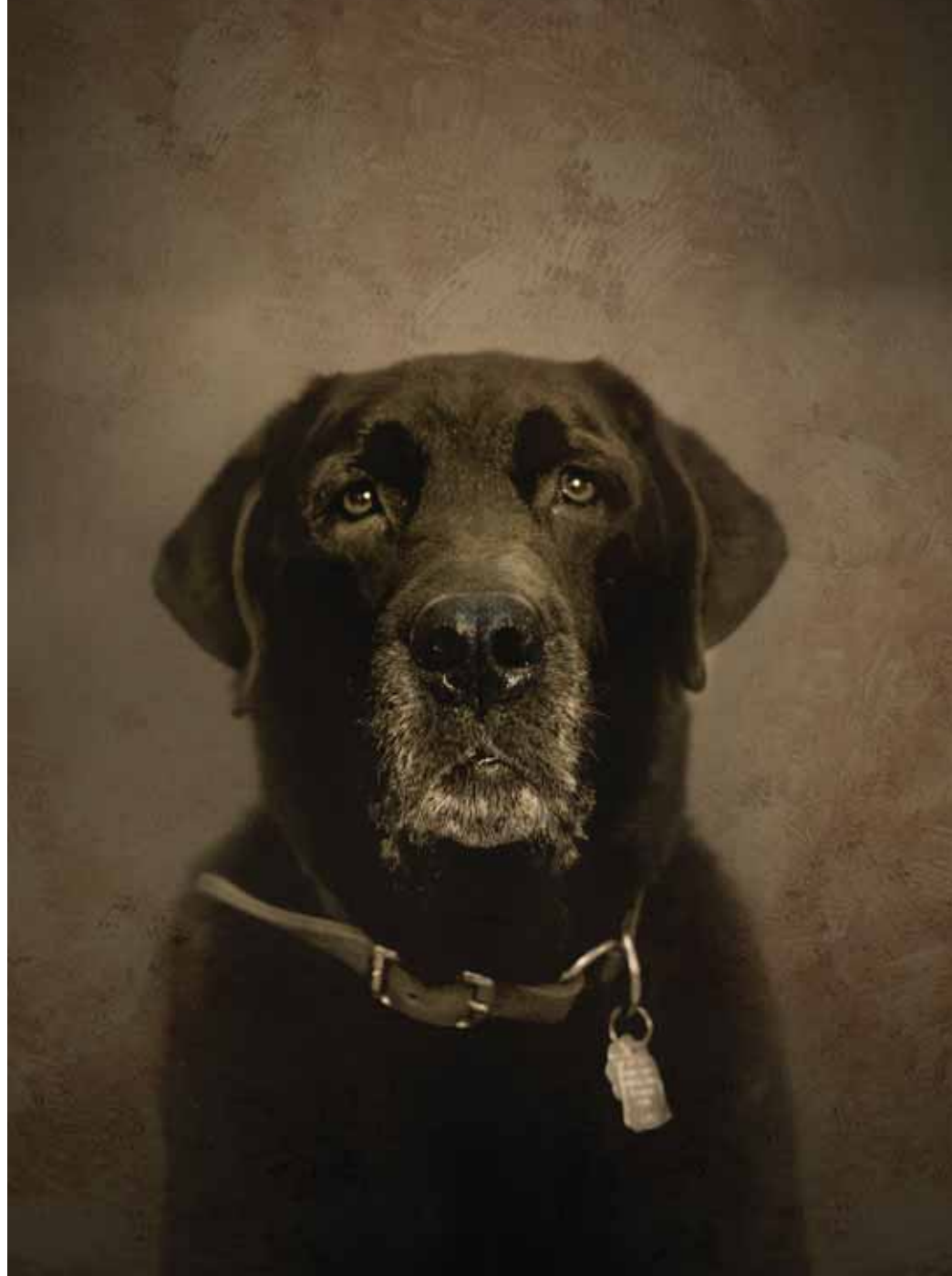
In Dog Years

By Ken Foster

When Brando was a puppy, he woke me in the middle of the night, just to check to see if I was sleeping. In the morning, as soon as I opened my eyes, Brando would pounce on me and begin kissing. As he waited for me to get dressed to take him out in the morning, I could tell by the look on his face that he didn't understand the delay. Why didn't we both just go outside naked? His enthusiasm for everything could be a bit much.

"When will he calm down?" I asked friends with older dogs.

"About five years," one said. "Then you have until he's seven. Those are the good years."



"Two years?" I asked. It already didn't seem enough.

"But they are really good years."

I have an assignment I frequently give my students, regarding point-of-view. We start with a New York Times report about an eighty-year-old woman arrested and strip-searched for playing rap music too loudly. After reading the story—which is both true and completely crazy—they retell the story from the point of view of one of the many other characters included in the report. Many pick Harry, the woman's 23-year-old cat. This is a little tricky to pull off. How much does a cat know and understand about the inner workings of the NYPD? But one student took me by surprise with her account, which focused on the reversal of the dynamic between the cat and his owner. As a kitten, Harry viewed her as an old, wise, caring woman, but now that he is several decades her senior, in cat years, she seems wild, impulsive and immature, even at eighty.

Brando's decline came very slowly and then all at once. He grew crabby. He didn't want to walk very far. He didn't want to play with other dogs. If I tossed a ball for him, he walked a few yards in that direction before deciding he was done. Some nights he insisted on having me lift him into my bed, and on cold mornings, he didn't want to get up at all. I took the leash to the door to wait for him. "I'll leave without you," I called, and that would get him running. I chalked it up to stubbornness, until one day even that didn't do it.

I went down the street with my empty leash to get a cup of coffee and expected to find him waiting, whining, on the other side of the door when I returned. But he was still in bed. I put the pieces together, and wondered why it had taken all of these little incidents, over a period of months, for me to catch on.

When I was three, I broke my leg while playing The Three Bears with my brother and sister, running through our newly carpeted house. The doctor insisted my leg wasn't broken, but my parents knew better when I didn't crawl out of my crib on my own. And so I knew that something was seriously wrong with Brando when his arthritic hips trumped his separation anxiety. Following the advice of my vet, Brando began taking glucosamine, chondroitin and MSM, purchased at the drugstore and hidden in canned food. A month later I woke up on a particularly damp morning and found Brando had chewed the fur off his left hip while lying next to me as I slept. Finally I accepted the truth:

Brando was six and a half—he had just surpassed me in dog years. If I was occasionally having trouble getting out of bed, why shouldn't he?

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These were supposed to be our good years, and instead he was falling apart before my eyes. Brando is a big dog, with a deep chest and tall giraffe legs. He may be part great Dane, but I'll never know for sure. Large dogs don't last long. The deep chest stresses the respiratory system; the large frame stresses the hips. I try not to think about how short many Danes' lives are. Many don't make it to age ten.

"Could it be something else?" I asked our vet, who can be very patient with all of my questions.

"This is the age it happens for a dog his size," the vet said. "We can make him better, but it's expensive."

"How expensive?" I asked, adding, "I guess it doesn't really matter how expensive it is, since whatever it is I'll do it."

"It's a series of eight injections," he explained. "But it really does work. You'll need to be prepared; he's going to be a brand new dog."

A brand new dog? This sounded like science fiction. The vet was talking about Adequan, an injectable form of glucosamine that not only generates a more viscous joint fluid, it also—somewhat mysteriously—regenerates previously damaged cartilage. There are few side effects. I'm suspicious of things that work without anyone knowing how they work. But it was for Brando, so I immediately said yes. After the first injection, I multiplied the fee by eight and realized what I'd really signed up for. It is a bit expensive, but not as much as getting a new hip.

The following morning, Brando did a few laps around the park, galloping with his long legged, thoroughbred body, and finally running toward me with a delirious exhausted grin. "Be careful," I reminded him. I didn't want him to overdo it before the healing had begun.

On a quick trip back to our old neighborhood in the East Village, I kept my eye on the other dogs, Brando's former peers. It was bitter cold and the streets were clear and I was wondering how we had ever put up with such brutal weather. Still, I managed to run into a few familiar faces. Angus, the black Lab, had some gray hairs on his muzzle, but after talking to him for a few minutes, he remembered to check my pocket for treats. A few blocks away, Madonna, the rottweiler, struggled with her gait. When her owner, Josh, ducked into a store, she stood hunched slightly on the sidewalk, seeming reluctant to sit down if it meant having to get up again. In the evening, I caught up with Pavla, the Catahoula, as she walked toward Avenue D with her owner and a brindle pit bull at her side. "Do you have two now?" I called, and they turned, the brindle dog danced in front of me, while Pavla looked into the distance.

"She can't stand him," he said.

Meanwhile I was relieved. It wasn't just Brando. It wasn't just me. We were all getting older.

A few weeks later, in Charlottesville, at the Virginia Festival of the Book, I sat on a panel with David Rosenfelt, who writes thrillers and spends a lot of time with dogs. He and his wife have rescued over 4,000 dogs. The Tara Foundation is named after their deceased golden; when Tara passed away in 1993, the couple began volunteering at local shelters in Southern California. They wanted to be around dogs, but they weren't ready for another dog to take Tara's place in their home. The conditions they found in shelters inspired them to begin rescuing dogs on their own terms. At the time, they lived in an apartment that limited tenants to one dog. They kept four golden retrievers at a time, but walked them individually, telling anyone who asked that they were all the same dog.

David and his wife now focus on older dogs that have been left behind in shelters and are unlikely to find a home. No one wants a dog past its prime, but David and his wife are galvanized by their experiences sharing their home with dogs at the end of their lives. They've moved out of the apartment, needless to say. "We always have anywhere between twenty-five to thirty-five dogs, either ten years or older, or younger but with a disability that would make them unwanted by others," David explained to the audience. We were, in fact, doing our panel at the Charlottesville Senior Center. "They have the complete run of the house, four sleep on our bed with us, and they have an open door to the outside property should they choose to use it. We have a fruit orchard, duck pond, riding area for the horses we don't have, etc., so there's plenty for them to do. Having said that, they choose to stay in the house, near us humans, ninety-nine percent of the time."

He said it looks like a battlefield in the house—sleeping bodies strewn everywhere. They usually don't know that much about the dogs that come to them, except that their lives probably weren't that great, if they ended up in a shelter at the end. Their low energy level is a big plus he admits, as is the fact that they are usually housetrained, and people friendly. Those are likely the skills that have allowed them to survive this long. But it is their dignity that really knocks David out. "They have a

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gentleness, a dignity, a gratefulness, and a good nature that is amazing considering what they have been through."

"Because their lives have not been good," he says, "we feel a need, often urgent, to make sure that they end their lives happy, safe and loved. Because of age and health, we often don't have them for very long, and there is simply no feeling greater than to know that we have made their last months or years a significant counterpoint to what happened before."

Brando continued with his injections. At the park, he developed a fierce crush on a one-year-old border collie named Leah. Leah's energy was through the roof, in typical border collie fashion. Leah's owner threw the ball, Leah went after it, and Brando chased after Leah. If we arrived at the park and Leah was missing, Brando sought out the idle tennis ball, and flounced onto the middle of the field to wait for her, sprawled out just like Leah after a long round of fetch. At home, he began leaping over furniture, not for any particular reason—just to show that he could.

Now, in the middle of the night, I open my eyes and Brando pounces. He's been waiting for me and, just as when he was a puppy, he needs to celebrate our consciousness by licking my face. And licking and licking. He sticks his tongue in my ear and makes an unappealing slurping noise. I get up and head to the back of the house. He runs into the yard while I stay at the door, waiting for him to do his business and return. I watch as he hunts for a spot. He disappears beneath the ginger tree and begins to dig. Brando is looking for his blue ball, the one that has traveled with us for years. Its three a.m. and he wants to play. The girls are back inside the dark house, wondering what's gotten into him.

"Come on back inside" I call.

It is true. Brando has become young again.

Unfortunately, I am still old.

Ken Foster is the author of the bestselling memoir *The Dogs Who Found Me* and a collection of essays, *Dogs I Have Met*, both published in the US by Lyons Press. His work has also appeared in *Salon*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Village Voice*, *Paper*, and dozens of other publications. His collection of short stories, *The Kind I'm Likely to Get*, was a New York Times Notable Book. He lives in New Orleans with his dogs: Brando, a pit bull/Great Dane mix; Zephyr, a rottweiler/shepherd; and Sula, a pit bull who is the figurehead of *The Sula Foundation* www.sulafoundation.org

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