

## Dog Talk

By Drew T. Noll

Behind our house was a hill planted with freshly established lantana, juniper, and sage, my father's favorites. I was forbidden to set foot on the hill alone, because of its steep incline. At the top there was a small fence, which could just be seen from the yard down below. One day, my father carried me to the top. It was a magical place that my father showed me, that day, while cutting open root-balls and depositing each new plant into the steep earth. My dad was two meters tall, giving me a view once reaching the top. As he placed me down onto our side of the fence, I saw a new black-top access road with a crisp, dotted yellow line disappearing in both directions down the hill. When I could no longer see the road behind the fence, I committed it to memory as my father placed me back onto the ground. He held my hand, my dad, pointing down with his other, showing me our backyard and the roof of my childhood home from above.

Turning back to the fence, I grabbed it with the fingers of my other hand, pressing my face to the fence's holes. Directly across from where we stood sat a puzzling building, as if the black tar road running between us was a suburban mote protecting some kind of futuristic citadel, or a space ship that had crash-landed on the hill behind our house. Covered with spikes, like an alien beacon, the building looked outward towards the heavens, paying us no mind at all. The fence we stood behind was chain-linked together from pole to pole, the whole scene glittering in my mind and dancing in the sunlight, with black asphalt separating and in-between.



Before I had finished exploring the world above, I was carried back down to the prison yard below. I pleaded daily to return, but my cries went unheard. So, one night, I snuck out of bed in the wee hours before the sun woke, and tiptoed down the hall, risking it all. Ruff, the black Labrador I named inadvertently as my parents heard us conversing, was waiting for me at the door, his tail wagging for adventure in store. His tongue lapping to greet me, I crept through the sliding glass door, and out onto the patio in the backyard. I glanced warily upwards for the opossum that sometimes hung from his tail eating my father's grapes from the pergola. I moved stealthily beneath the vines, and then crossed the manicured grid of grass beyond to the base of the freshly planted hillside. I hoped that my mother would not wake to see me through the aluminum framed kitchen windows that rattled at each sonic boom overhead. The jets flew over at night sometimes, since they were stationed nearby, and I hoped they didn't fly by on this particular day.

Sun beams had just reached into the backyard with crisp, wet dew glistening from the plant balls spattered across the hillside, beckoning me to explore. Ruff wanted to talk, jumping up and down all around me. When Ruff saw I was on a mission and had no time to speak, he looked me in the eye, but then let me pass without a word. I was worried he would start yelling at me for being outside, but he stepped aside. He and I stood eye to eye, me on two legs and him on four, but he let me pass, thankfully quiet, without a single word. With Ruff prancing with me all the way, I arrived at the edge between the green lawn and the hillside of dirt, where I could see



the little plants arranged across its steep surface like suspended asteroids about to fall. Ruff stopped jumping and sat down. We locked eyes for a moment again and he became calm, seemingly waiting for me to take the first step over the line and onto the forbidden hill of soil.

Bending my knee and raising my foot, I stepped onto the slope. Ruff didn't say a word. I began to climb on all fours, slipping back into the loose earth with each movement. Ruff just waited for me at the bottom as I climbed, even though he knew, as I did, that we weren't allowed. My hands and feet became muddy as I scratched my way up the steep, freshly turned soil, but I didn't care. I left my socks at the bottom, since they were all wet from the morning dew melting onto the lawn. All I wanted was to see over the top, to the secrets that were kept from me by the hill incessantly peering down into my back yard. I could hear Ruff begin to mutter to himself, but when I looked back down my head spun from the potential tumble. So, with my head down in front, and my arms and legs scratching across the crumbling dirt, I climbed.

I only had a few more scrabbles to go, and was almost able to see over the dark horizon at the top of the hill. As I climbed those last few steps I could see in my mind's eye the glittering towers covered with sparkling dew, swooping wires draped between them, communicating with the heavens. I imagined the energy gleaming from each surface, shimmering in the morning light, and could hardly wait to see the castle of wire and spires once again. This time would be without the threat of not having enough time, of being forced down, once again, like an infant into prison. This time



would be different; just a little further, just a little more... My feet kept slipping... The towers at the top were waiting... just one more surge.

I felt a sharp pressure clamp onto my arm, just below the shoulder. I heard a scream echo out into the morning air – *was it mine?* No, my mouth was clenched tight, my teeth grinding together with each step I took — in the wrong direction. I tried to see my feet under me. I tried not to fall back down into the waiting jail below. No — I was being dragged, and at a speed my legs had never moved. I was flying with feet barely touching, my citadel with spires receding, lost forever somewhere up above.

Airborne across the edge between soil and grass, I sprawled onto the wet lawn, Ruff prancing up ahead towards my mom. She had just burst from the patio door with a spent scream still clinging to her lips, and in that moment I knew what had happened. I sat on the grass crying, curling deeper into my core, my arm sore and throbbing. My knees were skinned from where the wet grass had torn in, but it wasn't the pain that made me cry, it was the ache my heart felt. Ruff had abandoned me. He had finally ventured up onto the forbidden slope, against my command, his better judgment pulling me from my mission; a traitor to the core.

Ruff didn't say a word at the bottom. He slunk back to me with his tail wagging and ears draped low, and then returned to my mother expecting a scolding; but, a scolding never came. Ruff should have been in big trouble, dragging me as he had, but I was wrong. Once I stopped crying, and my mom checked the patch of bruised skin on my arm, brushing me off and



standing me up, Ruff and I could only glare at one another. He hadn't broken any skin, he wasn't in any trouble, and they even gave him attention. I was in trouble, not Ruff, and I never got to see the alien crash site at the top of the hill behind my house. Instead of convincing my parents of its importance, I was in trouble for climbing the hill, and Ruff got praised. I wanted that attention. So, from that moment on, I never spoke with Ruff again, even forgetting his language altogether.

