

Milo
Lauren Chivington

HE TROTS CONTENTEDLY THROUGH THE CHOPPY, post-winter grass that looks like a bad haircut, pointing his nose toward the cloud-spotted sky with closed eyes, peacefully allowing the spring wind to push his satellite dish ears back toward his neck. His eight pound body bristles and growls at the fifty pound boxer across the street in an understanding of mutual protection as old as our species. Time has seemed to accelerate since the first time I saw him in the gray, metal shelter cage. While all the other dogs barked shrilly and pawed at the bars, he was silent, observing my fiancé and me as we observed him. We attempted to take him outside to play, but he just sat there by the door, whether stunned or stubborn I didn't know because I had not yet learned how to read him. Looking back I see that he was afraid of the outdoors, perhaps rightly so as he had been left there before being rescued.

As they handed the puppy called Limoncello into our arms, my fiancé and I immediately decided a new name was in order, and I mused about our authority to call him whatever we liked and how the now-unnamed puppy would have to abide by it. As I awkwardly carried him out of the building and into the car, I was amazed that the shelter would just hand us a tiny piece of life to care for with no prior experience and frankly no real clue. We had so much to learn. When we took him home it was below freezing outside, and he was so small that we had to carry him down the stairs and set him onto the perfectly-cut square stones jigsawing the backyard. The cold hurt him, and he did not understand it. That kind of thing was and is heartbreaking to see in a being without malice. We tried to buy him a coat but none of the stores had any in stock. The best we could do was a dog-sized lamb costume. It wasn't much, but we fastened it securely to give him the feeling of being hugged in protection when out in the cold. He was so

timid, bopping tentatively in the likeness of another animal.

There is a huge black dog living in the home next door. One night when Milo—then only nine weeks old—was outside with me, the dog charged at him. I have never seen a living thing more terrified in all my life. His fear was just as visceral as mine, but his only way of coping was by running to his only protector, a muscleless girl under five feet tall with back problems and a heart condition. We would be utterly doomed in the wild, but here in the suburbs we could play at safety. I scooped his wriggling body and wildly clawing paws into my arms, held him close, and promised him with everything I had that I would keep him safe. For the first few weeks I didn't sleep more than a few hours at night, and even then only within reach of his bed, because an ancient instinct I never knew I had was telling me to protect this fragile bit of growing life.

For the past month I have witnessed the incredibly quickening growth that comes with puppyhood: in size, in intelligence, in rebellion, in confidence, in security. I have watched Milo's face mature and his muscles begin to show under his fur. I've made eye contact with this little, sentient thing and watched him see, recognize, interpret, determine a course of action, and in a blink's time pounce with full trust in his prize. I can predict with

perfect accuracy the moment Milo will strike, because I too am learning to see, to recognize, and to react to his every movement. I have seen the moment when timidity gives over to bravery, as well as the falls, scrapes, leaps, and recoveries as knowledge is acquired for next time. We cannot truly know what is happening within our dogs' minds, but lack of language is a pitiful excuse for the justification of mistreatment or neglect of these creatures. There is definitely something behind those eyes. Δ