

*Fifteen
Dogs*

An Apologue

ANDRÉ ALEXIS

Coach House Books, Toronto

copyright © André Alexis, 2015

first edition, twenty-ninth printing



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Canada

Published with the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Coach House Books also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.

For Linda Watson

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Alexis, André, 1957-, author
Fifteen dogs / André Alexis.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-55245-305-6 (pbk.).

I. Title.

PS8551.L474F53 2014

C813'.54

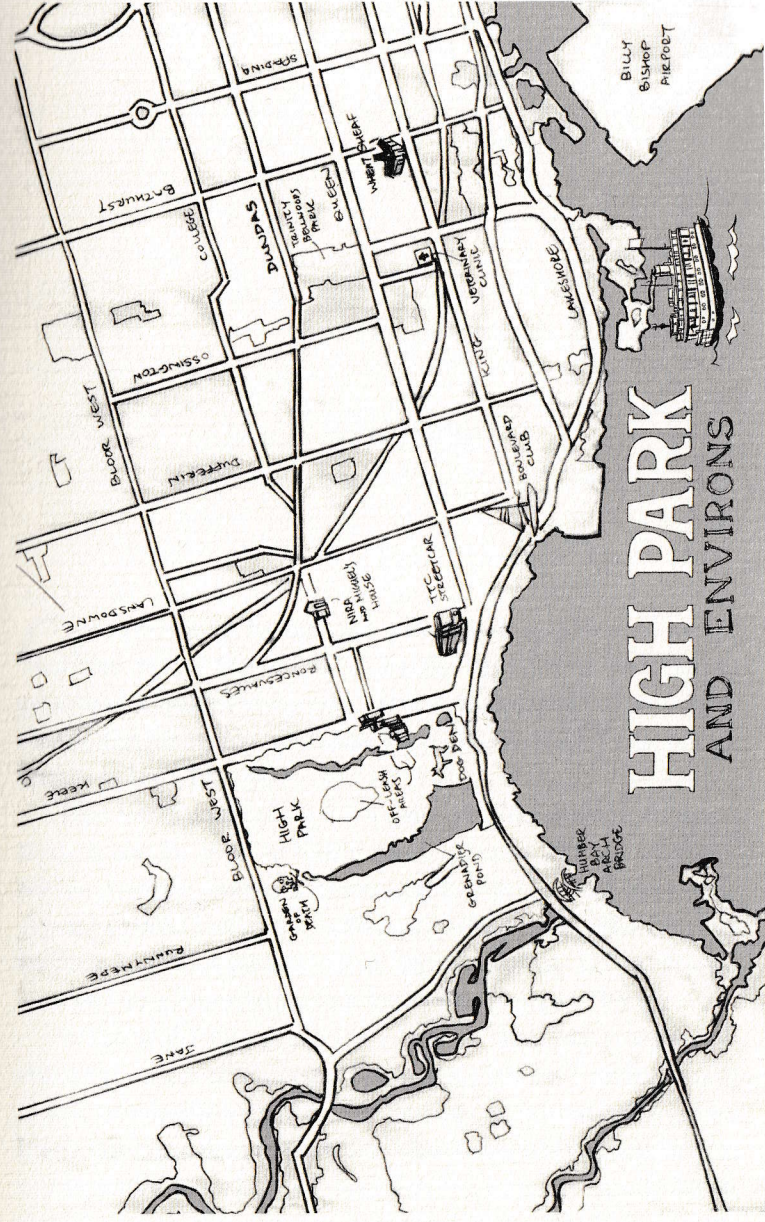
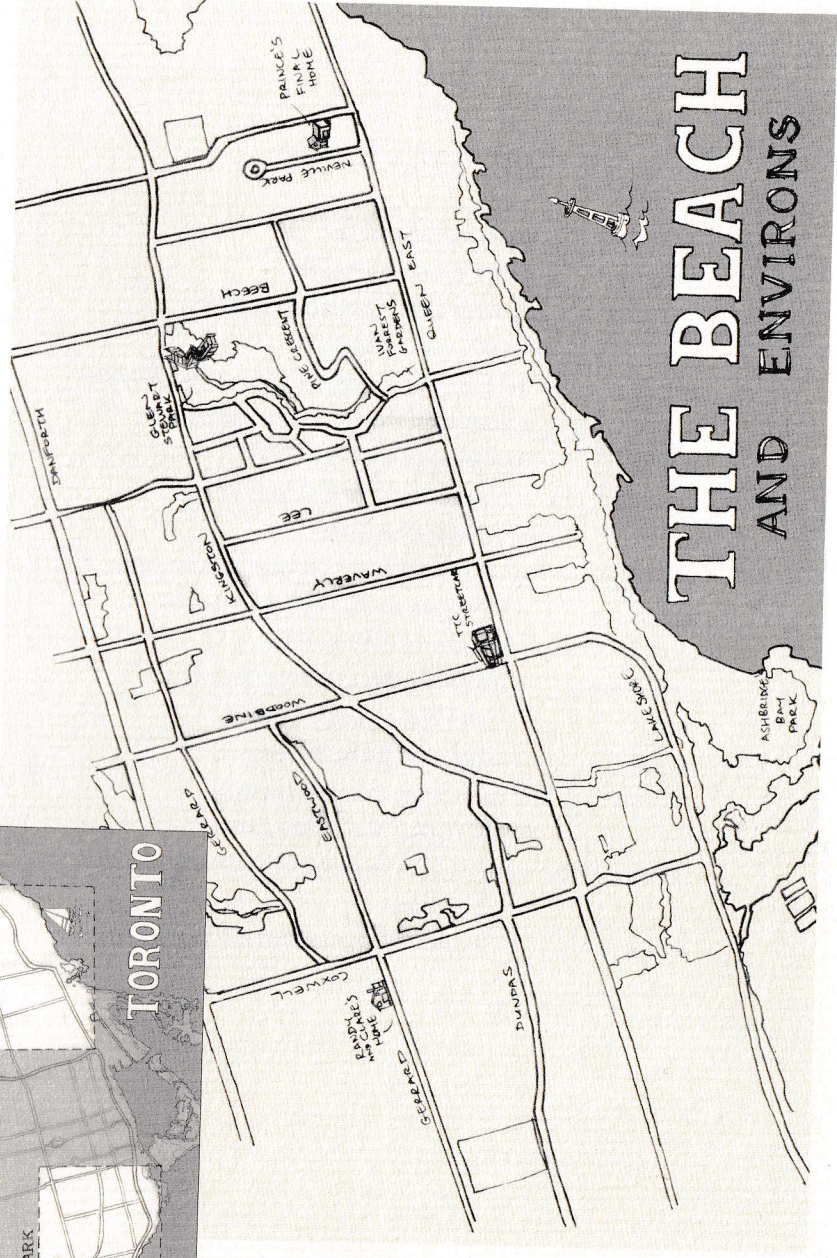
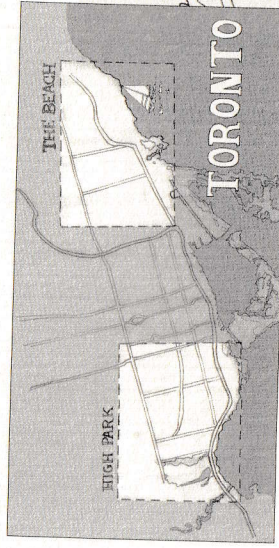
C2014-907934-6

Fifteen Dogs is available as an ebook: ISBN 978 1 77056 403 9

Purchase of the print version of this book entitles you to a free digital copy. To claim your ebook of this title, please email sales@chbooks.com with proof of purchase. (Coach House Books reserves the right to terminate the free digital download offer at any time.)

DRAMATIS CANES

AGATHA	an old Labradoodle
ATHENA	a brown teacup Poodle
ATTICUS	an imposing Neapolitan Mastiff, with cascading jowls
BELLA	a Great Dane, Athena's closest pack mate
BENJY	a resourceful and conniving Beagle
BOBBIE	an unfortunate Duck Toller
DOUGIE	a Schnauzer, friend to Benjy
FRICK	a Labrador Retriever
FRACK	a Labrador Retriever, Frick's litter mate
LYDIA	a Whippet and Weimaraner cross, tormented and nervous
MAJNOUN	a black Poodle, briefly referred to as 'Lord Jim' or simply 'Jim'
MAX	a mutt who detests poetry
PRINCE	a mutt who composes poetry, also called Russell or Elvis
RONALDINHO	a mutt who deplores the condescension of humans
ROSIE	a German Shepherd bitch, close to Atticus



A WAGER

One evening in Toronto, the gods Apollo and Hermes were at the Wheat Sheaf Tavern. Apollo had allowed his beard to grow until it reached his clavicle. Hermes, more fastidious, was clean-shaven, but his clothes were distinctly terrestrial: black jeans, a black leather jacket, a blue shirt.

They had been drinking, but it wasn't the alcohol that intoxicated them. It was the worship their presence elicited. The Wheat Sheaf felt like a temple, and the gods were gratified. In the men's washroom, Apollo allowed parts of himself to be touched by an older man in a business suit. This pleasure, more intense than any he had known or would ever know again, cost the man eight years of his life.

While at the tavern, the gods began a desultory conversation about the nature of humanity. For amusement, they spoke ancient Greek, and Apollo argued that, as creatures go, humans were neither better nor worse than any other, neither better nor worse than fleas or elephants, say. Humans, said Apollo, have no special merit, though they think themselves superior. Hermes took the opposing

view, arguing that, for one thing, the human way of creating and using symbols, is more interesting than, say, the complex dancing done by bees.

– Human languages are too vague, said Apollo.

– That may be, said Hermes, but it makes humans more amusing. Just listen to these people. You'd swear they understood each other, though not one of them has any idea what their words actually mean to another. How can you resist such farce?

– I didn't say they weren't amusing, answered Apollo. But frogs and flies are amusing, too.

– If you're going to compare humans to flies, we'll get nowhere. And you know it.

In perfect though divinely accented English – that is, in an English that every patron at the tavern heard in his or her own accent – Apollo said

– Who'll pay for our drinks?

– I will, said a poor student. Please, let me.

Apollo put a hand on the young man's shoulder.

– My brother and I are grateful, he said. We've had five Sleemans each, so you'll not know hunger or want for ten years.

The student knelt to kiss Apollo's hand and, when the gods had gone, discovered hundreds of dollars in his pockets. In fact, for as long as he had the pants he was wearing that evening, he had more money in his pockets than he could spend, and it was ten years to the instant before their corduroy rotted to irrecoverable shreds.

Outside the tavern, the gods walked west along King Street.

– I wonder, said Hermes, what it would be like if animals had human intelligence.

– I wonder if they'd be as unhappy as humans, Apollo answered.

– Some humans are unhappy; others aren't. Their intelligence is a difficult gift.

– I'll wager a year's servitude, said Apollo, that animals – any animal you choose – would be even more unhappy than humans are, if they had human intelligence.

– An earth year? I'll take that bet, said Hermes, but on condition that if, at the end of its life, even one of the creatures is happy, I win.

– But that's a matter of chance, said Apollo. The best lives sometimes end badly and the worst sometimes end well.

– True, said Hermes, but you can't know what a life has been until it is over.

– Are we speaking of happy beings or happy lives? No, never mind. Either way, I accept your terms. Human intelligence is not a gift. It's an occasionally useful plague. What animals do you choose?

As it happened, the gods were not far from the veterinary clinic at Shaw. Entering the place unseen and imperceptible, they found dogs, mostly: pets left overnight by their owners for one reason or another. So, dogs it was.

– Shall I leave them their memories? asked Apollo.

– Yes, said Hermes.

With that, the god of light granted 'human intelligence' to the fifteen dogs who were in the kennel at the back of the clinic.

Somewhere around midnight, Rosie, a German shepherd, stopped as she was licking her vagina and wondered how long she would be in the place she found herself. She then wondered what had happened to the last litter she'd whelped. It suddenly seemed grossly unfair that one should go through the trouble of having pups only to lose track of them.

She got up to have a drink of water and to sniff at the hard pellets that had been left for her to eat. Nosing the food around in its shallow bowl, she was perplexed to discover that the bowl was not dark in the usual way but had, rather, a strange hue. The bowl was astonishing. It was only a kind of bubble-gum pink, but as Rosie had never seen the colour before, it looked beautiful. To her dying day, no colour ever surpassed it.

In the cell beside Rosie's, a grey Neapolitan mastiff named Atticus was dreaming of a wide field, which, to his delight, was overrun by small, furry animals, thousands of them – rats, cats, rabbits and

squirrels – moving across the grass like the hem of a dress being pulled away, just out of his reach. This was Atticus's favourite dream, a recurring joy that always ended with him happily bringing a struggling creature back to his beloved master. His master would take the thing, strike it against a rock, then move his hand along Atticus's back and speak his name. Always, the dream *always* ended this way. But not this night. This night, as Atticus bit down at the neck of one of the creatures, it occurred to him that the creature must feel pain. That thought – vivid and unprecedented – woke him from sleep.

All around the kennel, dogs woke from sleep, startled by strange dreams or suddenly aware of some indefinable change in their environment. Those who had not been sleeping – it is always difficult to sleep away from home – got up and moved to the doors of their cells to see who had entered, so human did this silence feel. At first, each of them assumed that his or her newfound vision was unique. Only gradually did it become clear that all of them shared the strange world they were now living in.

A black poodle named Majnoun barked softly. He stood still, as if contemplating Rosie, who was in the cage facing his. As it happened, however, Majnoun was thinking about the lock on Rosie's cage: an elongated loop fixed to a sliding bolt. The long loop lay between two pieces of metal, effectively keeping the bolt in place and locking the cage door. It was simple, elegant and effective. And yet, to unlock the cage, all one had to do was lift the loop and push the bolt back. Standing on his hind legs and pushing a paw out of his cage, Majnoun did just that. It took him a number of attempts and it was awkward, but after a little while his cage was unlocked and he pushed the door open.

Though most of the dogs understood how Majnoun had opened his cell, not all of them were capable of doing the same. There were various reasons for this. Frick and Frack, two Labrador yearlings who had been left overnight for neutering, were too young and impatient for the doors. The smaller dogs – a chocolate teacup poodle named Athena, a schnauzer named Dougie, a beagle named Benjy – knew

they were physically incapable of reaching the bolt and whined their frustration until their cells were opened for them. The older dogs, in particular a Labradoodle named Agatha, were too tired and confused to think clearly and hesitated to choose liberty, even after their doors had been opened for them.

The dogs, of course, already possessed a common language. It was language stripped to its essence, a language in which what mattered was social standing and physical need. All of them understood its crucial phrases and thoughts: 'forgive me,' 'I will bite you,' 'I am hungry.' Naturally, the imposition of primate thinking on the dogs changed how the dogs spoke to each other and to themselves. For instance: whereas previously there had been no word for 'door,' it was now understood that 'door' was a thing distinct from one's need for liberty, that 'door' existed independently of dogs. Curiously, the word for 'door' in the dogs' new language was not derived from the doors to their cells but came, rather, from the back door to the clinic itself. This back door, large and green, was opened by pushing a metal bar that almost bisected it. The sound of the metal bar, when pushed, was a thick, reverberant *thwack*. From that night on, the dogs agreed that the word for *door* should be a click (tongue on upper palate) followed by a sigh.

To say that the dogs were bewildered is to understate it. If they were 'bewildered' when the change in consciousness came over them, what were they when, all having left the clinic by the back door, they looked out on Shaw Street and suddenly understood that they were helplessly free, the door to the clinic having closed behind them, the world before them a chaos of noise and odour whose meaning now mattered to them as it had never mattered before?

Where were they? Who was to lead them?

For three of the dogs, the strange episode ended here. Agatha, who was in constant and terrible pain and had been left at the clinic to be put down, could find no point in going on with the others. She had lived a good life, had had three litters and, so, had had all the respect she needed from the bitches she sometimes met while out

with her mistress. She wanted no part of a world in which her mistress did not figure. She lay down by the clinic's door and let the others know she would not leave. She did not know that this decision meant her death. It did not occur to her – it *could* not – that her mistress had left her to face death on her own. The worst of it was, the following morning, when those working at the clinic discovered her – along with the mutts, Ronaldinho and Lydia – they were not kind. They took their frustration out on Agatha, hurting her as she was brought to the silver table where she was to be put down. One of the workers slapped her as she raised her head in an effort to bite him. She knew as soon as she saw the table that the end had come, and her final moments were spent in a useless effort to communicate her desire to see her mistress. In her confusion, Agatha hoarsely barked the word for 'hunger' over and over until her spirit was released from her body.

Though Ronaldinho and Lydia lived longer than Agatha, their ends were almost as unhappy. Both had been left at the clinic for minor ailments. Both were sent home to grateful owners. And in both cases their new ways of thinking poisoned what had been (or what they remembered as being) idyllic and relatively long lives. Ronaldinho lived with a family that loved him, but at his return from the clinic he began to notice how condescending they were. Despite the palpable evidence that Ronaldinho had changed, the family treated him as no more than a plaything. He learned their language. He would sit, stand, play dead, roll over or beg before the commands were entirely spoken. He learned to turn off the stove when the kettle's whistle sounded. And once, when it was asserted in his presence that dogs could not count to twenty, he stared at the person who'd said so and barked – ironically, bitterly – twenty times. No one noticed or cared. Worse: perhaps because they suspected Ronaldinho was 'not his old self,' the family shunned him somewhat, perfunctorily petting his back or head as if in memory of the dog he had once been. He died bitter and disillusioned.

Lydia fared worse. A cross between a whippet (her mother) and a Weimaraner, she had always been something of a nervous creature.

The advent of human intelligence made her more nervous still. She, too, learned the language of her masters, scrupulously doing or anticipating whatever was wanted of her. She did not mind their condescension. She minded that they were inattentive and neglectful, because along with 'primate mind' there came an acute awareness of time. The passage of time, each moment like a scabies mite crawling under her skin, was an unbearable scourge. The scourge was assuaged only by the presence of her masters, by their company. As her masters, a professional couple who smelled of lilacs and citrus, were often away for eight hours at a stretch, however, Lydia's suffering was terrible. She would bark, howl and plead for hours on end. Finally, when her mind could no longer bear the repeated agony, it chanced on a typically human haven from suffering: catatonia. One day, her masters discovered her in the living room, her legs rigid, her eyes unclosed. They took her to the clinic on Shaw, and when the vet told them there was nothing he could do, they had her put down. They had not been considerate masters but they were sentimental. They buried Lydia in their back garden, planting – in her honour – a carpet of yellow flowers (*Genista lydia*) on the mound that marked her resting place.

The twelve who set out from Shaw were driven as much by confusion as anything else. The world seemed new and marvellous and yet it was familiar and banal. Nothing should have surprised them, yet everything did. The pack moved warily, going south on Strachan: over the bridge, down to the lake.

They were, it has to be said, almost instinctively drawn to the lakeshore. Its confluence of reeks was as bewitching to the dogs as the smell of an early-morning bakery is to humans. There was, first, the lake itself: sour, vegetal, fishy. Then there was the smell of geese, ducks and other birds. More enticing still, there was the smell of bird shit, which was like a kind of hard salad sautéed in goose fat. Finally, there were more evanescent whiffs: cooked pork, tomatoes, grease from cow's meat, corn, bread, sweetness and milk. None of

them could resist it, though there was little shelter by the lake, few places to hide if masters came for them.

None could resist the lake, but it occurred to Majnoun that they should. It occurred to him that the city was the worst place for them to be, filled as it was with beings that feared dogs who would not do their bidding. What they needed, thought Majnoun, was a place where they would be safe until they decided on a course that was good for all of them. It also occurred to him that Atticus, who was at the head of the pack, was not necessarily the one to lead. It wasn't that he himself wanted to lead. Though he was swept up in the present adventure and fairly happy to be with the others, Majnoun was more comfortable around humans. He did not trust other dogs. This made the thought of leadership unpleasant to him. The true things – food, shelter, water – would have to be dealt with by all, but who would lead, and whom would he choose to follow?

It was dark, though the moon fell out of its pocket of clouds from time to time. Four in the morning, the world full of shadows. The gates to the Canadian National Exhibition loomed as if they might totter and crush anything beneath them. There were not many cars, but Majnoun waited for the green light at the bottom of the street. Half of the pack – Rosie, Athena, Benjy, an Albertan mutt named Prince and a Duck Toller called Bobbie – waited with him. The other half – Frick, Frack, Dougie, Bella the Great Dane, and a mutt named Max – blithely crossed the boulevard with Atticus.

Once they had all crossed, the dark and shushing lake lay before them, while along the promenade lay various types of dung, various bits of food, and other things to be sniffed out. Atticus, a crumpled-face dog whose instinct was to hunt, could also feel the presence of small animals, rats and mice most likely, and he wanted to go after them. He exhorted the others to hunt with him.

– Why? asked Majnoun.

The question – asked with an innovation of the dogs' common language – was stunning. Atticus had never considered that it might be right to hold himself back from rats, birds or food. He considered

the 'why?', distractedly licking his snout as he did. Finally, innovating in language himself, he said

– Why not?

Frick and Frack, delighted, immediately agreed.

– Why not? they asked. Why not?

– Where will we hide if a master comes? answered Majnoun.

A more subtle question no dog could have asked. The assumptions behind it felt both right and yet strangely wrong. Majnoun, though he respected his own master, assumed the dogs would all want to hide from their masters. Freedom, thought Majnoun, came before respect. But the word *master* evoked in all of them feelings that did and did not call for hiding. For some, the idea of a master was comforting. Prince, who since coming to the city had been separated from Kim, his master, would have done anything to find him. Athena, all three and a half pounds of her, was used to being carried wherever she went. She was exhausted already, having kept up with the pack for such a long stretch. Faced with all the walking they would have to do, faced with the uncertainty that now seemed to be their lot, she thought she would happily submit to one who fed her and carried her about. However, as most of the other, bigger dogs seemed to dislike the idea of submission, she pretended to dislike it as well.

Even Majnoun's position was not without subtlety or ambivalence. He had always been proud of his ability to do what his master asked. He had earned the biscuits and treats that had come to him, but he had resented the ritual, too. He had sometimes had to suppress himself to keep from running away. In fact, he would have fled his master, had he been able to take the treats with him – not just the treats, mind you, but the whole *feeling* of treats, the being patted, the being spoken to in the way his master spoke when pleased. Of course, now that he was free, there was no use thinking about treats at all.

Frick and Frack, both too immature to have fully understood or experienced the pleasures of servitude, were the only ones entirely in agreement with Majnoun's suggestion that they would need a hiding place at the appearance of a master.

Atticus, whose feelings were as nuanced as Majnoun's, nevertheless said

– Why hide? Don't we have teeth?

He bared his teeth and all understood the terrible suggestion.

– I couldn't bite my mistress, said Athena. She would not be pleased.

– I do not know what to say, said Atticus.

– The small bitch is not wrong, said Majnoun. If we were to bite masters, other masters would notice us and resent our freedom. I have seen many free dogs beaten. We should not bite unless we are attacked. And we should find shelter.

– All this talking, said Atticus. It is not like dogs to talk so much. We'll find food. Then we'll look for shelter.

They went hunting. That is, some went in search of what they knew as food and others went after the animals they atavistically associated with sustenance. They were tremendously successful. Their instincts led them infallibly to the small animals – four rats, five squirrels – that they killed with ingenious efficiency, corralling or ambushing the poor creatures. After two hours, as the morning sun lit the land and turned the lake bluish green, there were rats, squirrels, hot dog buns, bits of hamburger, handfuls of French fries, half-eaten apples, and sugary confections so covered in dirt it was difficult to say what they had been. The only real disappointment was that they had not managed to catch any geese. Also: most of the dogs resisted the small animals and went for the scraps of human food. They left the headless, half-chewed remains of rats and squirrels in a neat row on the hill beside the Boulevard Club.

In the days that followed, there were a number of signs – both subtle and obvious – that their newfound thoughtfulness had led to collective change. To begin with, a new language flowered within them, changing the way they communicated. This change was especially evident in Prince. He was constantly finding words within himself, words he shared with the others. It was Prince, for instance, who came up with the word for 'human' (roughly: *grrr-ahhi*, the

sound of a growl followed a sound typical of humans). This was a significant accomplishment, as the dogs could now speak of the primates without speaking of mastery. It was also Prince who devised what might be called the dogs' first witticism: the word for 'bone' in the new language (roughly: *rrr-eye*) and the word for 'stone' (roughly: *rrr-eeeye*) were very close. When Prince was asked one evening what he was eating, he replied 'stone' while indicating a bone. A number of the dogs found this – the first conspicuous pun in the language – both diverting and right, suggesting as it did that the bones in question were difficult to chew.

Then, too, they became sharper hunters and more discriminating scavengers as they became intimate with their territory: Parkdale and High Park, from Bloor to the lake, from Windemere to Strachan. All quickly learned the places where they could congregate without attracting undue human – or canine – attention. Moreover: spurred by Prince's observations of sunlight and shadow, they learned to segment the day into useful units. That is, collectively, they discovered a use for time, which discovery was salve for their awareness of its passing. (Day, from the first appearance of sun to the first moment of its descent, was broken into eight unequal units, each of which was given a name. Night, from the first quieting of the world to the first noisy birds, was broken into eleven. In this way, the dogs' day was made up of nineteen units, rather than twenty-four.)

It was, in part, this new relationship to time and place that influenced the creation of their den. Atticus, practical and persuasive (though he mistrusted the new language from the beginning), suggested they take over a coppice in High Park, a clearing beneath a cluster of evergreens, to which they brought tennis balls, running shoes, human clothing, blankets, squeaky toys ... anything they could find or steal to make the place more hospitable. They did not intend to stay in the coppice forever. It was, Atticus said, makeshift and temporary, a place to meet at the start of night, but it soon began to feel as if it were theirs. It smelled of pine gum, dog and urine.

Perhaps the most striking sign that 'primate thinking' could be useful, however, was in the relationship between Bella and Athena. The two were, of course, at opposite ends of the scale where weight and height were concerned. They were the same age – that is, three – but Athena was all of three or four pounds and her legs were short. She could not keep up with the others when the pack moved. Bella was three or four feet tall and weighed somewhere around two hundred pounds. She did not often run. Rather, though she wasn't the most thoughtful of dogs, she moved with something like deliberation, majestically. Seeing Athena could not keep up with them and remembering how a four-year-old girl had ridden on her back, Bella offered to let Athena ride.

This was no problem for Bella. She knelt, her front legs tucked under her, and waited for Athena to climb up. This Athena did, but in the early going she would almost immediately fall off again and it hurt to fall from Bella's back. She learned quickly, though. By the third day, using her claws to steady herself and biting into Bella's neck to keep in place, Athena was so well balanced it would have been difficult to dislodge her. This made for an especially curious sight when, after a few days, Bella – with her loping and rhythmically arrhythmic gait – felt confident enough to run if she wanted, her withers dipping and rising while Athena, like a furry passenger on a ship's fo'c'sle, joyfully held on.

Exhilarating as this was for the bitches – and the two were soon as close as litter mates – the arrangement caused trouble for the pack. Athena and Bella brought unwanted attention. One day, as the dogs were scavenging for food along the lakeshore, a group of young human males noticed the way Athena rode on Bella's back. Amused and immediately scornful, they began to chase after the dogs. Strange in the way that humans are strange, the high spirits of the young males were, to Bella and Athena, indistinguishable from aggression or dislike. The boys took up rocks and began to throw them at the dogs. Bella was not fast and she could not run for long distances at a stretch. After a while, she slowed and one of the rocks

hit Athena, who yelped in pain and fell from Bella's back. Athena's misfortune and pain provoked even greater amusement in the humans. They gathered more rocks, intent now on causing the dogs as much distress as they could.

Though Bella was by nature even-tempered and difficult to rile, as the young males approached she was at once protective and ready to kill. Using the only guile that occurred to her, counting on taking out the biggest of her attackers first, she went at them snarling and single-minded. And she was on the leader before he or any of the others could react or run away. Launching her two hundred pounds at him, she went instinctively for his throat and, had he not raised his arm at the last moment, she would have bitten through the flesh of his neck. Instead, she bit his right hand straight down to the bone. Blood spurted as he cried out beneath her. The others, though armed with stones, were petrified. They stood still, listening to their friend cry for help. Their fear worked entirely to Bella's advantage. In an instant, she was off the first human, done with him, running directly at the next one closest to her. He ran off at once, screeching in distress, leaving his friends to their fate.

Atticus and Majnoun, who had been scavenging nearby and had come at the sounds of an affray, snarled at the humans and ran after them, chasing them farther off, ensuring they did not turn back, though, in fact, turning back was the furthest thing from any of their minds. The rout, in other words, was thorough and swift. The six or seven boys, none of them older than fourteen, were traumatized and humiliated. But when the dogs saw that Athena was not badly hurt – she had bled and there was a clump of wet fur above her left eye – Majnoun said

– This is not good. Humans don't like it when you bite them. We will have to change territory.

– I agree it is not good, said Atticus, but why should we leave? They will be looking for these two. The bitches will have to keep out of sight. The big one is the one who did damage. They will come for her, but they will not come for us.

– I do not agree and I do not disagree, said Majnoun.

But the dogs took precautions. Bella and Athena scavenged in High Park and stayed close to the coppice. They kept away from the lakeshore and Athena did not travel on Bella's back until evening, when shadow obscured them. During the day, the others went about in small groups, no more than two or three together, drawing as little attention as possible.

These precautions were taken for the sake of humans. It wasn't that humans were inevitably dangerous, but they were unpredictable. While one might kneel to pat your back or scratch your beard, another who looked exactly like the first would kick you, throw stones, or even do you to death. It was, in general, best to avoid them. Contrary to expectations, however, in the first weeks after their change, the worst confrontations were not with humans but with other dogs. No matter how polite the pack were or how non-committal, some would attack them at once, without so much as a snarl or a baring of teeth.

– They think we're weak, said Atticus.

But it wasn't as simple as that. The dogs who attacked were aggressive, but they also seemed afraid. They weren't frightened of the bigger dogs alone, of Bella or Atticus, Frick or Frack. They were also intimidated by Dougie, Benjy, Bobbie and Athena, none of whom should have been threatening to any reasonably sized creature. The dogs who did not immediately attack them were, at times, immediately submissive, and this was almost as strange. It was, to the smaller dogs, as if they were being mistaken for fierce and towering versions of themselves.

The twelve dogs reacted differently to their altered status. Atticus found the situation intolerable. It was traumatic to know oneself to be a simple dog but to live in a world where other dogs treated you as something other. For Atticus, all the old pleasures – sniffing at an anus, burying one's nose where a friend's genitals were, mounting those with lower status – could no longer be had without crippling self-consciousness. In this, he, Majnoun, Prince and Rosie were alike.

The four of them were inclined to a thoughtfulness that all save Prince – and to an extent, Majnoun – would have abandoned in order to lose themselves once more in the community of dogs. Prince was the only one who entirely embraced the change in consciousness. It was as if he'd discovered a new way of seeing, an angle that made all that he had known strange and wonderful.

At the other end of the spectrum were Frick, Frack and the mutt, Max. They, too, were troubled by self-consciousness, but they learned to suppress thinking. They used their newfound thoughtfulness, certainly, but they did so while remaining faithful to the old way of being dogs. When challenged by unknown dogs, they defended themselves with lascivious efficiency, ganging up on their attackers, treating them the way they would sheep: biting through their tendons, leaving them to bleed and suffer. When they encountered submissive dogs, their pleasure was just as intense. The three would fuck anything that let them. In a way, then, their new (or different) intelligence was at the service of what they understood to be their essence: the canine. They were worthy of the fear 'normal' dogs showed them.

In fact, the dogs that caused Frick, Frack and Max the most trouble were the others in their own pack. Yes, the other nine shared their intelligence and swiftly evolving language. And, yes, the others were the only creatures who understood them. But 'understanding,' reeking as it did of thought, was the last thing they wanted. 'Understanding' was a reminder that, despite their efforts to live as dogs, they were no longer normal. What they wanted from the others was submission or leadership and, at first, they got neither.

Of the other dogs, Prince was, naturally, the one who annoyed Frick, Frack and Max most. Prince was a mutt of some sort, his fur russet with a white patch on his chest. He was big but his disposition nullified any physical threat. He was never less than accommodating. He could be dominated. The irritant was that Prince had strange ideas. It was he who had divided the day into portions. It was he who asked endless questions about trivial things: about humans,

about the sea, about trees, about his favourite smells (bird flesh, grass, hot dogs), about the yellow disk above them in whose light one could be warm. The three had, of course, loathed Prince's pun on 'stone' and 'bone.' Nor would Prince stop. Encouraged by the others, his play with language was a constant affront to clarity.

It seemed to Frick and Frack as if Prince were intent on destroying their spirit.

But Prince's witticisms were not the worst of it. Previously, they, like all dogs, had made do with a simple vocabulary of fundamental sounds: bark, howl or snarl. These sounds were acceptable, as were useful innovations, like the word for 'water' or the one for 'human.' At Prince's instigation, however, the pack now had words for countless things. (Did any dog really need a word for 'dust'?) Then, one night, Prince sat up and spoke a strange group of words:

The grass is wet on the hill.

The sky has no end.

For the dog who waits for his mistress,

Madge, noon comes again.

Hearing this grouping of growls, barks, yips and sighs, Frack and Frick had jumped up, ready to bite the face off the weary dog's mistress. They assumed a master was among them, ready to inflict pain. But Prince's words had not been meant as warning. Rather, he had been playing. He had been pretending. He had been speaking for speaking's sake. Could there be a more despicable use for words? Max got up, snarling, ready to bite.

He had not counted on the pleasure some of the others had taken in Prince's words, however. Athena thanked Prince for his evocation of wet hills and endless skies. Bella did the same. Far from feeling that Prince had abused their tongue, a number of the dogs felt that – as with his play with words – he'd brought something unexpected and wonderful to it.

– I was moved, said Majnoun. Please, do it again.

Prince performed another set of howls, barks, yips and clicks.

Beyond the hills, a master is
who knows our secret names.
With bell and bones, he'll call us home,
winter, fall or spring.

Most of the dogs sat in silence, no doubt trying to understand what Prince was on about. But it was too much for Max. It wasn't just that Prince was twisting their clear, noble language, it was that Prince had gone beyond the canine. No true dog could have uttered such tripe. Prince was not worthy of being one of them. In defence of their true nature, someone had to do something. Max could sense that Frack and Frick felt as he did, but he wanted to be the first to bite Prince into submission or force him into exile. He charged at Prince without so much as a growl. Prince was at his mercy. He was about to bite the mutt's throat when, as quietly and viciously as Max had attacked, Majnoun came to Prince's defence. Before Frick or Frack could intervene, Majnoun had Max down, his teeth securely in Max's throat. Max peed in submission and lay still.

– Don't kill him, said Frack.

Majnoun growled in warning, bit down harder, drawing blood.

– The dog is right, said Atticus. It is not good to kill one of our own.

Majnoun felt – with every fibre in him – that killing Max was the right thing. It was as if he knew the time would come when he'd be obliged to kill him. So why not now? But he listened to Atticus and released Max, who slunk quickly away, his tail between his legs.

– There was no need for violence, said Atticus. The dog was only trying to show his feelings about the words we heard.

– His feelings were not hidden, said Majnoun.

– You have shown him his place, said Atticus. You did right.

Aside from Frack and Frick – who were deliberately *unthoughtful* – most of the dogs were bemused by what had passed between Max and Majnoun. In the old days, one would have said they had witnessed a struggle for dominance, a struggle that Majnoun had clearly won and, so, increased his status. But, here, there was the

matter of Prince. Prince had offended Max. His *words* had offended. So, had Max and Majnoun fought over words or status? Could dogs fight to the death over words? It was strange to think so.

As Bella and Athena lay beside each other on the verge of sleep, Athena said

– These males fight for any reason.

– It has nothing to do with us, said Bella.

That was the end of the matter, as far as they were concerned, and the two were soon asleep, Athena growling quietly at a squirrel that, in her dream, was much smaller than she and deliberately annoying besides.

Two evenings after the fracas, Atticus spoke to Majnoun.

Autumn had come. The leaves were changing colour. Night itself seemed darker, for being more cool. The pack had settled into a routine: scavenging, avoiding humans, hunting rats and squirrels. The coppice provided shelter from rainfall and storms. So, although they had meant it to be a temporary dwelling, a place from which they could consider what had happened to them, the coppice had become a home, and it was increasingly difficult to imagine leaving it.

Majnoun had been expecting some sort of approach from Frick, Frack, Max or Atticus. He had expected one of them to bring up the matter of leadership. The pack had done without a leader for some time, an unnatural situation. And although he himself did not want to lead, it would have been an insult for the others to foist Atticus – the likeliest candidate – on the pack without seeking his (that is, Majnoun's) opinion first. In the old days, they would have fought about it, no doubt. But after the change that had come over them, a physical contest no longer seemed, to Majnoun at least, the best way to resolve a matter as complicated as leadership.

(How odd the change was! One day, while listening to humans address their pet, Majnoun experienced a curious thing. It was as if the sun had, in an instant, burned off a thick morning fog. He understood what the humans were saying! It wasn't just some of

their words he understood – words he'd heard a thousand times himself. He believed he understood the thought behind them. As far as Majnoun knew, no dog had ever understood a human as he had at that moment. He wasn't sure if he were cursed or blessed, but this new thing – this *understanding* – surely demanded a change in behaviour, something to help them deal with the unabated strangeness of the new world.)

Majnoun and Atticus walked out of the coppice together and into the park. The sky was filled with stars. The lights of the Queensway were off to the south. All was quiet, save for the endless noise of the crickets, it not being cold enough to silence them.

– What are we to do? asked Atticus.

The question was a surprise.

– About what? answered Majnoun.

– I have asked the wrong question, said Atticus. I mean, how are we to live, now that we are strangers to our own kind?

– They are right to be afraid of us, said Majnoun. We no longer think like they do.

– But we feel like they feel, don't we? I remember what I was before that night. I am not so different.

– I did not know you before, said Majnoun, but I know you now and now you are different.

– Some of us, said Atticus, believe the best way is to ignore the new thinking and stop using the new words.

– How can you silence the words inside?

– No one can silence the words inside, but you can ignore them. We can go back to the old way of being. This new thinking leads away from the pack, but a dog is no dog if he does not belong.

– I do not agree, said Majnoun. We have this new way. It has been given to us. Why should we not use it? Maybe there is a reason for our difference.

– I remember, said Atticus, how it was to run with our kind. But you, you want to think and keep thinking and then think again. What is the good of so much thinking? I am like you. I can take

pleasure in it, but it brings us no true advantage. It keeps us from being dogs and it keeps us from what is right.

– We know things other dogs do not. Can we not teach them?

– No, said Atticus. Now it is for them to teach us. We must learn to be dogs again.

– Dog, why do you want my thoughts on these things? Do you wish to lead?

– Would you challenge me?

– No, said Majnoun.

The dogs sat together awhile, listening to the sounds of night. In the park, the world was teeming with unseen life. Above them was a vastness as new and haunting as it was ancient. Neither of them had ever paid much attention to stars and the night sky. Now they could not help wondering about it.

– I wonder if the dog who speaks strangely is right, said Atticus. Does the sky really have no end?

– The dog thinks beautifully, said Majnoun, but he knows no more than we do.

– Do you think we will ever know?

Majnoun struggled with the question and struggled with the thoughts within him. All sometimes seemed so hopelessly muddled. He wondered if Atticus wasn't right, in the end. Perhaps it was best to be a dog as dogs had always been: not separated from others by thinking but part of the collective. Perhaps anything else was futile or, worse, an illusion to take you away from the good. But although their new way of thinking was bothersome – a torment at times – it was now an aspect of them. Why should they turn their backs on themselves?

– Someday, said Majnoun, we may know where the sky ends.

– Yes, said Atticus, someday or someday not.

Majnoun's instincts were sound. He'd anticipated a tête-à-tête about leadership and, although Atticus had kept the discussion vague, it *had* been about power. Majnoun, however, had not caught all the

nuances. Atticus was not interested in whether or not Majnoun would challenge him for leadership. Atticus was bigger than Majnoun and, besides, he had Frick, Frack, Max and Rosie on his side. What Atticus had really wanted to discover was whether Majnoun belonged with the pack, given the direction that he, Atticus, had chosen for it. Majnoun, unawares, had given Atticus all the information he needed.

The following day, when they were meant to be out scavenging, Frack, Frick, Max and Atticus met by the lake on the far side of the Humber Bay Arch Bridge, away from the others, away from dogs without leashes.

– I have spoken with all the others, said Atticus. To live as we were meant to live, there must be change. Some may stay. Some must not.

– What about the black dog? asked Frack.

– He is not one of us, answered Atticus. He will have to be exiled.

– It would be better to kill him, said Max.

– You only think so because he mounted you, said Frick.

– No, said Atticus, the dog is right. The black one will not be easy to send away. Some of the others are already faithful to him. I do not wish to kill him, but it would be difficult if he stayed.

– What about the bitch with the high vagina? asked Max.

– She favours the black dog and she is too strong, said Atticus. We will have to lose her.

– Let her take the tiny bitch with her, said Max.

– What about rules? asked Frack.

– There will be two, answered Atticus. No language but proper dog language, and no ways but dog ways. We will live like we were meant to.

– Without masters? asked Frick.

– We will have no masters, said Atticus. Dogs without masters are the only true dogs. There are three who will have to go: the big bitch, the black dog and the one who uses words in strange ways. Once they have gone, we can live as we are meant to.

– Are you going to challenge the black dog? asked Max.

– No, said Atticus. We must get rid of all three at once. We will be quick and do what has to be done, before the rest of the dogs can choose sides or make matters difficult.

– When? asked Frick.

– Tonight, said Atticus.

And although it was not doglike of them, they worked their strategy out to the least detail, the least detail being what they would do if their efforts failed.

Prince had spoken another poem

The light that moves is not the light.
The light that stays is not the light.
The true light rose countless sleeps ago.
It rose, even in the mouth of birds.

and Max had wanted to kill him on the spot.

After the dogs had reflected on what they'd heard, most had gone to their beddings in the den and had fallen straight to sleep, as if lulled by Prince's words. Not Atticus, however. Atticus had invited Majnoun out into the park for another conversation. Then, when the den was quiet save for the small sounds of breathing, Frick and Frack rose from their places. Frick noiselessly padded to where Bella and Athena slept, took up Athena's compact body in his jaws, bit down hard, and made off with her. Despite Athena's strangled shriek, none of the other dogs woke.

After a time, Frack woke Bella, nudging her head with his snout.

– They have taken the small bitch, he said.

Bella rose slowly from sleep, but when she saw Athena was gone she was immediately alert and understood Frack's words.

– Where have they taken her? she asked.

– I do not know. My brother has gone after them. I will take you where they went.

Where he took her – where they ran – was to a street beside the park: Bloor. The street was on a hill and, though it was night, it was

rhythmically busy. That is, groups of cars came fast down the hill and then nothing and then fast cars again. Toward the middle of the incline, on the sidewalk, Frick stood in the light of a street lamp. He was looking at something on the other side of the road.

As Bella and Frack approached, he said

– There she is. Can you see her? She is under the light.

Bella could not see clearly, but there did appear to be something beneath the street lamp on the other side of the road. It was an intimidating road, but, where Athena was concerned, Bella was not cautious. She would have done anything for this, the one being on earth to whom she was devoted. In fact, she would have run across the street at once, had Frack not said

– Wait! My brother will go to the top of the hill and bark when the light has changed and it is safe to cross.

Bella waited anxiously, jumping up and down, trying desperately to see Athena on the other side of the road.

– Go now, said Frack, it is safe.

But, of course, it was not safe. Frick's timing was impeccable. Bella was not a quarter of the way across the road before she was struck and killed by a taxi.

In a word, the murders of Bella and Athena were flawlessly done.

Being certain that Bella was dead, her body unmoving as the humans in the street raised their voices, Frick and Frack returned to the den where, it had been agreed, they and Max would finish Prince off before joining Atticus in killing Majnoun.

There should not have been any complications. Max was to have kept watch on Prince. And this he had done, though he could barely keep himself from biting the mangy mutt that had caused his humiliation. Max had (little by little and quietly) moved close to Prince, lying down near enough to hear Prince's occasional snorts and whimpers. It was not possible that Prince should have gotten away from them. And yet, when Frack and Frick slunk quietly back to the den and, joined by Max, readied themselves to finish Prince

off as quickly as possible, they discovered that what they'd taken to be Prince's body was no more than a pile of human clothes. Max was beside himself with outrage. It was not possible for Prince to have escaped! He had listened for every breath, happy to know they would be among the dog's last! The three made the rounds of the den, going to where each dog lay, sniffing for Prince's smell, but Prince was nowhere to be found.

And yet, Prince was there among them.

The deaths of Bella and Athena, though straightforward as murders go, were problematic for the gods. Hermes and Apollo looked down on Athena's lifeless body (Frick had broken her neck as easily as if it had been a rat's) and on Bella's body where it had landed in the middle of the street.

– They died happy, said Hermes. I win.

– You do not win, said his brother. The small one was terrified and the large one was distressed for her friend. They died *unhappy*.

– You're not being fair, said Hermes. I grant you their final moments weren't pleasant. But before they were killed, neither had known such friendship as they experienced together. They were happy despite the intelligence they were given.

– I agree with you, Apollo said, but what can I do? *You* were the one who insisted the crucial moment was death. We agreed that if even one of these creatures *dies* happy, you win. At the moment of their deaths, these two were not happy. So, you haven't won a thing. But, look, Hermes, I don't want to hear about how I cheated you and I don't want you going to Father. So, I've got a proposition for you: because your bet's not as strong as mine, I'll let you intervene in the lives of these creatures. Once. Only once. You can do whatever you like. But if you intervene, the bet's doubled. It's *two* human years of servitude to the loser.

– And you won't intervene yourself?

– Why should I intervene? asked Apollo. These creatures are more miserable than I could possibly make them. They're not going

to cheer up when they die. But if it makes you feel better, I give you my word: I will not intervene directly.

– Then I accept, said Hermes.

And so, while Frick and Frack were returning from dealing with Bella and Athena, Prince had a very strange dream. It began pleasantly enough. He dreamed he was in his first master's house in Ralston, Alberta, a house in which his own scent dominated, a house over which his toys were spread in a secret pattern, a house of which he knew every cranny. He was on his way to the kitchen, drawn by the sound of mice scurrying over the wooden floor, when a dog he did not know entered his dream. The strange dog was jet black, save for a patch of vivid blue on its chest.

– You are in danger, the dog said.

The dog spoke Prince's language flawlessly, with no accent.

– How beautifully you speak, said Prince. Who are you?

– You would find my name difficult to say, said the dog, but I am Hermes and I am not of your species. I am a master of masters and I do not wish you to die here.

– Where? asked Prince.

And all of a sudden he was far from the home of his childhood. He was in High Park looking down on himself as he slept in the den with the others. He saw, because Hermes pointed it out, that Max was lying near him. He saw Frick and Frack return to the den. He noticed, because Hermes wished him to, the place where Bella and Athena had slept.

– Where is the tall female? he asked.

– They have killed her, said Hermes. They will kill you, too, if you stay.

– What have I done? asked Prince. I have not challenged anyone.

– They dislike how you speak, said Hermes. If you wish to live, your only choice is exile.

– But what am I without those who understand me?

– Would you choose words over life? asked Hermes. Consider that, if you die, your way of speaking dies with you. You must wake

up, now, Prince. While I am here, no one can see or hear you, but you haven't much time. Come.

There then followed the strangest interlude in Prince's life. He did not know if he were awake or dreaming, but the strange dog had spoken his secret name, the name his first master used: Prince. Rising up from the den in his dreams, he was yet with Hermes watching himself rise. He saw Frack, Frick and Max as they went about looking for him. They passed in front of him, beside him, almost *through* him. He could barely resist barking to let them know he was there, as if it were all a game. But he did not bark. He followed Hermes out of the den and into High Park proper. There, he was suddenly, fully awake and Hermes was gone.

It occurred to Prince that he was still dreaming. He thought to look in on himself, just to see if he were still asleep in the coppice, his favourite chewing shoe beside him. But as he walked back toward the den, Max, Frick and Frack ran out. Prince immediately crouched down, his ears back, his tail tucked hard behind him. The dogs did not see him. They ran off, but they radiated menace as they went. Prince had no doubt that, dream or not, Hermes had told the truth. The three were murderous. When he was certain they would not see him, he fled, his exile beginning in panic, fear and darkness.

The three who ran out of the coppice ran out to find Atticus. They had agreed that they should all attack Majnoun together. Frustrated by Prince's mysterious disappearance, Max, Frick and Frack now wanted nothing more than to bite the black dog to death. They ran toward the pond, where Atticus said they would find him, as if running to mount a bitch in heat.

For Atticus, the time spent with Majnoun was unpleasant. It was unpleasant because he understood Majnoun and was sorry the dog had to go. In other circumstances, he might have welcomed Majnoun to the pack, but things were as they were. Atticus spent much of the time surreptitiously justifying what he knew was to come: a pack needed unity, and unity meant that all understood the

world in the same way or, if not the world, the rules, at least. Majnoun was one who embraced the new way of thinking, the new language. The dog did not belong.

– Black dog, said Atticus, can there be a feeling greater than belonging?

– No, said Majnoun.

– And yet, said Atticus, I am sometimes afraid that I will not know the feeling again, that I will never again know what it is to be a dog among dogs. This thinking of yours, black dog, it is an endless, dead field. Since the change, I have been alone with thoughts I do not want.

– I understand, said Majnoun. It is the same for me. But we must bear it, because we cannot escape the things within.

– I do not agree, said Atticus. To be with others is to be free from yourself. There is no other path. We must go back to the old ways.

– If we can find them, said Majnoun.

It was at this point that Frack, Frick and Max came upon them. Max said

– The tall bitch is dead.

– What has happened? asked Majnoun.

– She was attacked by our kind, a pack of them. They are near our den now.

– How many? asked Majnoun.

– Many, said Max, but they are not as big as we are.

– We must defend our home, said Atticus.

Frick and Frack ran before Majnoun, Max and Atticus on either side of him. Not far from the coppice, the brothers turned around and attacked Majnoun without warning. Max and Atticus joined in at once. The dogs were quick and merciless, and although Majnoun tried to run for shelter they had him. The four bit at Majnoun, sinking teeth into his flanks, his neck, the tendons of his legs, his stomach and genitals. Had it been daylight, the conspirators might have been gratified by the sight of Majnoun's blood. They might have been even more aroused, so intoxicating was the taste of blood and the adrenaline of murder.

If it had been day and if they had been a little less excited, they might have made certain Majnoun was dead. As it was, they went at him until he no longer resisted, until his body's spasms stopped. Then they left him for dead, returning to the coppice to begin a new life that was to be, in effect, an obsession with the old one.

2

MAJNOUN AND BENJY

When Majnoun awakened, he was in a house that smelled of peanut butter and fried liver. He lay in a wicker basket lined with a thick, orange blanket that smelled of something sweet, soapy and human. He tried to move but found he could not. It was too painful and, as well, moving was awkward. His abdomen was shaved and he was bound with white bandages that smelled of oil and pine and something indefinable. His face itched but there was a plastic cone around his head: the narrow end of the cone was cut so that the aperture fit around his neck, the wide end projecting out like a megaphone. Even if he'd wanted to scratch his face, he could not have done so. All four of his legs were shaven and bandaged. He raised his head, the better to see where he was, but he was nowhere: a whitish room with windows that looked out on a sky that was blue and bright.

During his attack – which he suddenly recalled with a vividness that was painful – he had assumed that the darkness he was falling into would be endless. He had given some thought to death in the