

Aphelion

a short story by MICHAEL SHILLING

Everyone hated that dog.

Every time my friends and I walked by the Hanson house, it was there, chained to a basketball pole at the far end of the long driveway: a huge retriever-mutt-thing, a hundred-and-some-odd pounds of pissed-off mange.

She hated everyone.

The dog's name was Aphelion. Mrs. Hanson had named her, after the day of the year that the sun is farthest from the earth, back in the seventies, when she was a hippie following the Dead in a sky blue VW Microbus. But those days were long over.

Every time Aphelion saw Ben and Evan and me, she lunged. And every time she lunged, that chain went taut, and she whipped backward with a howl.

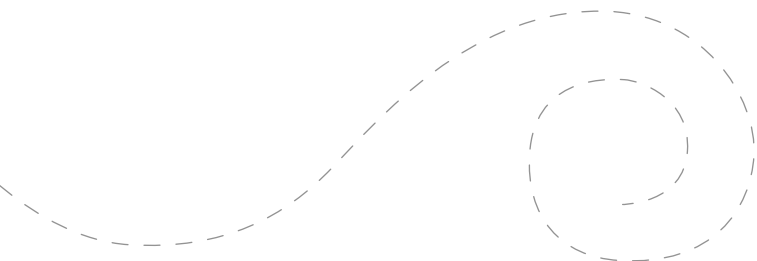
Sometimes I caught a glimpse of Aphelion before she saw us. She'd be licking her paws, or staring at the trees as if they were made of steak. In that millimoment, she looked like a normal dog, a faithful companion and watcher-over, just sitting

around and hoping for a ham to fall from the sky and bonk her on the head. Then she'd see us and snap out of it.

I'm growling, she'd growl. I hate you.

We'd stand at the foot of the driveway and growl back at her, taunt her from a safe distance, make the motions of tough guys.

"You're nothing, Aphelion!" I'd shout, though my knees were shaking.



The summer before we started high

school, Mrs. Hanson got remarried, to a man named Mr. Green, and he moved in with his daughter Daisy.

Daisy made my heart stop. She had full, strawberry lips, big green eyes, and glossy skin. She wore her shaggy blond hair in two loose pigtails that looked like sparklers, and her ripe body had a dangerous majesty. She was the same age as us, but seemed ageless and immortal. She was the collision of bliss and trouble.

Daisy spent her afternoons reading magazines on the lawn in a lime green bikini and white-framed sunglasses. Rainbows from Mrs. Hanson's sprinkler rose above her and rendered her an angel, a dirty rainbow angel without a halo. She slayed us all. She sent me into a painful place. She made me question everything.

At night, while Daisy said prayers she knew would be answered, Mrs. Hanson played the violin from the second-floor balcony, and the neighborhood grew lost in its treble waves.

Daisy didn't notice us at first, but as summer went on she began smiling when we walked by. We smiled back but were too chickenshit to say hello. We didn't care. We had made contact. We had entered her world. Anything was possible.

Aphelion would have none of it.

The more contact we had with Daisy, the more pissed-off the dog became. Her growling and barking and general hideousness grew in volume and intensity.

Daisy went on turning the pages of her magazines and running her sweaty hands over her shimmering golden hair. She was a transmitter of all the things we didn't understand, a lightly humming tuning fork for our dissonant boyish notes.

Ben and Evan and I grew bold. Our hormones gave us courage, and we became immune to the growling. We started to wave on our daily reconnaissance, and, as we'd hoped, Daisy smiled and waved back.

We thought we were geniuses.

A couple of days later, Daisy appeared on the lawn with

two other girls, who were only slightly less fine.

Three of them, three of us.

"No doubt, that's on purpose," Evan said after we did our daily walk-by, Aphelion's barks blaring in the background. "I think she's sending us a message."

"Yeah, I'll buy that," Ben said, wiping sweat from his face with his shirt. "Nothing happens by accident."

The girls played in the sprinkler, jumping around merrily like giants stomping over a village. We took cover in the bushes across the street, but they saw us and began singing a siren song.

"Hello!" they screamed and laughed. "Hello, shy boys!"

At first, their voices were bullets, and we stayed down in the bushes. But with time, those bullets turned into butterflies, so we stood up and let them flutter on our faces.

"Hello!" we yelled back. "Hello, sprinkler girls!"

This thrust and parry went on for a couple of days, and we congratulated each other on our progress. We had come a long way in a short time, the three of us. We were bridging the gap with Daisy and her girlfriends.

Then Aphelion started to do something she hadn't before. She started to howl. She straightened her back and bayed at the sky, registering her complaints with the higher powers. Sometimes Aphelion howled when Mrs. Hanson played the violin. They were two musicians hopelessly out of tune.

"When is she going to stop that shit?" I said one humid day, the sky a marine-colored haze, as we stood underneath a giant beech tree not far from the Hanson house. "Golden retrievers don't howl."

"She's not a golden," Ben said, picking dirt from his nails.

"She's not of this world," Evan said, and he shooed away some gnats.

Aphelion's howling worked. Daisy and her friends were no-shows for a while. We thought they'd been scared off. But then one afternoon we spied them eating lunch on the Hanson porch, their feet up on the table. They were talking loudly and making fun of people. When Mrs. Hanson took off in her Volvo, Daisy whipped out a big water gun, the kind that looked like a pump-action rifle, and started shooting it at Aphelion.

The dog yelped and tried to avoid the jets of water, but she could not escape the misty shrapnel. The chain whiplashed her over and over again. She made pathetic peeps, as if she was choking.

Daisy and her friends laughed their heads off.

"That's right!" Daisy said. "Bark all you want! Bark, bark, bark! Go for it!"

Aphelion acted as if she were being attacked by a hive of invisible bees. I'd never seen a dog that hated water so much. Whatever messed-up mind she had left was being destroyed by the trauma.

"Knock yourself out, you freak of a dog!" Daisy continued, and a rainbow appeared in the arc of water between the trenches.

(end of excerpt)