

AFTER I WAS THROWN IN THE RIVER AND BEFORE I DROWNED

Dave Eggers

OH I'M A FAST DOG. I'm fast- fast. It's true and I love being fast I admit It I love it. You know fast dogs. Dogs that just run by and you say, Damn! That's a fast dog! Well that's me. A fast dog. I'm a fast- fast dog. *Hoooooooooooo!*

You should watch me sometime. Just watch how fast I go when I'm going my fastest, when I've really got to move for something, when I'm really on my way-man do I get going sometimes, weaving like a missile, weaving like a missile between trees and around bushes and then *pop!* I can go over a fence or a baby or a rock or anything because I'm a fast- fast dog and I can jump like a fucking gazelle. *Hoooooooooooo!* Man, oh man.

I love it I love it. I run to feel the cool air cool through my fur. I run to feel the cold water come from my eyes. I run to feel my jaw slacken and my tongue come loose and flap from the side of my mouth and I go and go and go my name is Steven.

I can eat pizza. I can eat chicken. I can eat yogurt and rye bread with caraway seeds. It really doesn't matter. They say No, no, don't eat that stuff, you, that stuff isn't for you, it's for us, for people! And I eat it anyway, I eat it with gusto, I eat the food and I feel good and I live on and run and run and look at the people and hear their stupid conversations coming from their slits for mouths and terrible eyes.

I see in the windows. I see what happens. I see the calm held-together moments and also the treachery and I run and run. You tell me it matters, what they all say. I have listened and long ago I stopped. Just tell me it matters and I will listen to you and I will want to be convinced. You tell me that what is said is making a difference that those words are worthwhile words and mean something. I see what happens. I live with people who are German. They collect steins. They are good people. Their son is dead. I see what happens.

When I run I can turn like I'm magic or something. I can turn like there wasn't even a turn. I turn and I'm going so fast it's like I was still going straight. Through the trees like a missile, through the trees I love to run with my claws reaching and grabbing so quickly like I'm taking everything. Damn, I'm so in love with all of this.

I was once in a river. I was thrown in a river when I was small. You just cannot know. I was swimming, trying to know why I had been thrown in the river. I was six months old, and my eyes were burning, the water was bad. I paddled and it was like begging. The land on either side was a black stripe, indifferent. I saw the gray water and then the darker water below and then my legs wouldn't work, were stuck in some kind of seaweed or spider web and then I was in the air.

I opened my burning eyes and saw him in yellow. The fisherman. I was lifted from the water, the water was below me. Then shivering on their white plastic boat bottom and they looked at me with their mustaches.

I dried in the sun. They brought me to the place with the cages and I yelled for days. Others were yelling too. Everyone was crazy. Then people and a car and I was new at home. Ate and slept and it was dry, walls of wood. Two people and two girls, thin twins who sleep in the next room, with a dollhouse between them.

When I go outside I run. I run from the cement past the places and then to where the places end and then to the woods. In the woods are the other dogs.

I am the fastest. Since Thomas left I am the fastest. I jump the farthest too. I don't have to yell anymore. I can go past the buildings where the people complain and then to the woods where I can't hear them and just run with these dogs. *Hoooooooooooo!* I feel good here, feel strong. Sometimes I am a machine, moving so fast, a machine with everything working perfectly, my claws grabbing at the earth like I'm the one making it turn. Damn, yeah.

Every day on the street I pass the same people. There are the men, two of them, selling burritos from the steel van. They are happy men; their music is loud and jangles like a bracelet. There are the women from the drugstore outside on their break, smoking and laughing, shoulders shaking. There is the man who sleeps on the ground with the

hole in his pants where his ass shows raw and barnacled and brown-blue. One arm extended, reaching toward the door of the building. He sleeps so much.

Every night I walk from the neighborhood and head to the woods and meet the others. It's shadowy out, the clouds low. I see the blues jumping inside the windows. I want all these people gone from the buildings and moved to the desert so we can fill the buildings with water. It's an idea I have. The buildings would be good if filled with water, or under water. Something to clean them, anything. How long would it take to clean those buildings? Lord, no one knows any of this. So many of the sounds I hear I just can't stand. These people.

The only ones I like are the kids. I come to the kids and lick the kids. I run to them and push my nose into their stomachs. I don't want them to work. I want them to stay as they are and run with me, even though they're slow, so- so slow. I run around them and around again as they run forward. They're slow but they are perfect things, almost perfect.

I pass the buildings. Inside, the women are putting strands of hair behind their ears, and their older children are standing before the mirror for hours, moving tentatively to their music. Their fathers are playing chess with their uncles who are staying with them for a month or so. They are happy that they are with each other, and I pass, my claws ticking on the sandpaper cement, past the man laying down with his arm reaching, and past the steel van with the music, and I see the light behind the rooftops.

I haven't been on a rooftop but was once in a plane and wondered why no one had told me. That clouds were more ravishing from above.

Where the buildings clear I sometimes see the train slip through the sharp black trees, all the green windows and the people inside in white shirts. I watch from the woods, the dirt in my nails so soft. I just cannot tell you how much I love all this, this train, these woods, the dirt, and the smell of dogs nearby waiting to run. In the woods we have races and we jump. We run from the entrance to the woods, where the trail starts, through the black-dark interior and out to the meadow and across the meadow and into the next woods, over the creek and then along the creek until the highway.

Tonight is cool, almost cold. There are no stars or clouds. We're all-impotent but there is running. I jog down the trail and see the others. Six of them tonight-Edward, Franklin, Susan, Mary, Robert, and Victoria. When I see them I want to be in love with all of them at once. I want us all to be together; I feel so good to be near them. Some sort of marriage. We talk about it getting cooler. We talk about it being warm in these woods when we're close together. I know all these dogs but a few.

Tonight I race Edward. Edward is a bull terrier and he is fast and strong but his eyes want to win too much; he scares us. We don't know him well and he laughs too loud and only at his own jokes. He doesn't listen; he waits.

The course is a simple one. We run from the entrance through the black-dark interior and out to the meadow and across the meadow and into the next woods, along the creek, then the over the gap over the drainpipe and then along the creek until the highway.

The jump over the drainpipe is the hard part. We run along the creek and then the riverbank above it rises so we're ten, fifteen feet above the creek and then almost twenty. Then the bank is interrupted by a drainpipe, about four feet high, so the bank at eighteen feet has a twelve-foot gap and we have to run and jump to clear it. We have to feel strong to make it.

On the banks of the creek, near the drainpipe, on the dirt and in the weeds and on the branches of the rough gray trees are the squirrels. The squirrels have things to say; they talk before and after we jump. Sometimes while we're jumping they talk.

"He is running funny."

"She will not make it across."

When we land they say things.

"He did not land as well as I wanted him to."

"She made a bad landing. Because her landing was bad I am angry."

When we do not make it across the gap, and instead fall into the sandy bank, the squirrels say other things, their eyes full of glee.

"It makes me laugh that she did not make it across the gap.

"I am very happy that he fell and seems to be in pain."

I don't know why the squirrels watch us, or why they talk to us. They do not try to jump the gap. The running and jumping feels so good even when we don't win or fall into the gap it feels so good when we run and jump-and when we are done the squirrels are talking to us, to each other in their small jittery voices.

We look at the squirrels and we wonder why they are there. We want them to run and jump with us but they do not. They sit and talk about the things we do. Sometimes one of the dogs, annoyed past tolerance, catches a squirrel in his mouth and crushes him. But then the next night they are back, all the squirrels, more of them. Always more. Tonight I am to race Edward and I feel good. My eyes feel good, like I will see everything before I have to. I see colors like you hear jet planes.

When we run on the side of the creek I feel strong and feel fast. There is room for both of us to run and I want to run along the creek, want to run alongside Edward and then jump. That's all I can see, the jump, the distance below us, the momentum taking me over the gap. Goddamn sometimes I only want this feeling to stay and last.

Tonight I run and Edward runs, and I see him pushing hard, and his claws grabbing, and it seems like we're both grabbing at the same thing, that we're both grabbing for the same thing. But we keep grabbing and grabbing and there is enough for both of us to grab, and after us there will be others who grab from this dirt on the creek bed and it will always be here.

Edward is nudging me as I run. Edward is pushing me, bumping into me. All I want is to run but he is yelling and bumping me, trying to bite me. All I want is to run and then jump. I am telling him that if we both just run and jump without bumping or biting we will run faster and jump farther. We will be stronger and do more beautiful things. He bites me and bumps me and yells things at me as we run. When we come to the bend he tries to bump me into the tree. I skid and then find my footing and keep running. I catch up to him quickly and because I am faster I catch him and overtake him and we are on the straightaway and I gain my speed, I muster it from everywhere, I attract the energy of everything living around me, it conducts through the soil through my claws while I grab and grab and I gain all the speed and then I see the gap. Two more strides and I jump.

You should do this sometime. I am a rocket. My time over the gap is a life. I am a cloud, so slow, for an instant I am a slow-moving cloud whose movement is elegant, cavalier, like steep.

Then it speeds up and the leaves and black dirt come to me and I land and skid, my claws filling with soil and sand. I clear the gap by two feet and turn to see Edward jumping, and Edward's face looking across the gap, looking at my side of the gap, and his eyes still on the grass, exploding for it, and then he is falling, and only his front paws, claws, land above the bank. He yells something as he grabs, his eyes trying to pull the rest of him up, but he slides down the bank.

He is fine but in the past others have been hurt. One dog, Wolfgang, died here, years ago. The other dogs and I jump down to help Edward up. He is moaning but he is happy that we were running together and that he jumped.

The squirrels say things.

"That wasn't such a good jump.

"That was a terrible jump."

"He wasn't trying hard enough when he jumped."

"Bad landing."

"Awful landing."

"His bad landing makes me very angry."

I run the rest of the race alone. I finish and come back and watch the other races. I watch and like to watch them run and jump. We are lucky to have these legs and this ground, and that our muscles work with speed and the blood surges and that we can see everything. After we all run we go home. A few of the dogs live on the other side of the highway, where there is more land. A few live my way, and we jog together back, through the woods and out of the entranceway and back to the streets and the buildings with the blue lights jumping inside. They know as I know. They see the men and women talking through the glass and saying nothing. They know that inside the children are pushing their toys across the wooden floors. And in their beds people are reaching for the covers, pulling, their feet kicking.

I scratch at the door and soon the door opens. Bare white legs under a red robe. Black hairs ooze from the white skin. I eat the food and go to the bedroom and wait for them to sleep. I sleep at the foot of the bed, over their feet, feeling the air from the just-open window roll in cool and familiar. In the next room the thin twins sleep alongside their dollhouse.

The next night I walk alone to the woods, my claws clicking on the sandpaper cement. The sleeping man sleeps near the door, his hands praying between his knees. I see a group of men singing on the corner drunkenly but they are perfect. Their voices join and burnish the air between them, freed and perfect from their old and drunken mouths. I sit and watch until they notice me.

"Get out of here, fuck-dog."

I see the buildings end and wait for the train through the branches. I wait and can almost hear the singing still. I wait and don't want to wait anymore but the longer I wait the more I expect the train to come. I see a crow bounce in front of me, his head pivoting, paranoid. Then the train sounds from the black thick part of the forest where it can't be seen, then comes into view, passing through the lighter woods, and it shoots through, the green squares glowing and inside the bodies with their white shirts. I try to soak myself in this. This I can't believe I deserve. I want to close my eyes to feel this more but then realize I shouldn't close my eyes. I keep my eyes open and watch and then the train is gone.

Tonight I race Susan. Susan is a retriever, a small one, fast and pretty with black eyes. We take off, through the entrance through the black-dark interior and out to the meadow. In the meadow we breathe the air and feel the light of the partial moon. We have sharp black shadows that spider through the long gray-green grass. We run and smile at each other because we both know how good this is. Maybe Susan is my sister.

Then the second forest approaches and we plunge like sex into the woods and take the turns, past the bend where Edward pushed me, and then along the creek. We are running together and are not really racing. We are wanting the other to run faster, better. We are watching each other in love with our movements and strength. Susan is maybe my mother.

Then the straightaway before the gap. Now we have to think about our own legs and muscles and timing before the jump. Susan looks at me and smiles again but looks tired. Two more strides and I jump and then am the slow cloud seeing the faces of my friends, the other strong dogs, then the hard ground rushes toward me and I land and hear her scream. I turn to see her face failing down the gap and run back to the gap. Robert and Victoria are down with her already. Her leg is broken and bleeding from the joint. She screams then wails, knowing everything already.

The squirrels are above and talking.

"Well, looks like she got what she deserved."

"That's what you get when you jump."

"If she were a better jumper this would not have happened."

Some of them laugh. Franklin is angry. He walks slowly to where they're sitting; they do not move. He grabs one in his jaws and crushes all its bones. Their voices are always talking but we forget they are so small, their head and bones so tiny. The rest run away. He tosses the squirrel's broken form into the slow water.

We go home. I jog to the buildings with Susan on my back. We pass the windows flickering blue and the men in the silver van with the jangly music. I take her home and scratch at her door until she is let in. I go home and see the thin twins with their dollhouse and I go to the room with the bed and fall asleep before they come. The next night I don't want to go to the woods. I can't see someone fall, and can't hear the squirrels, and don't want Franklin to crush them in his jaws. I stay at home and I play with the twins in their pajamas. They put me on a pillowcase and pull me through the halls. I like the speed and they giggle. We make turns where I run into doorframes and they laugh. I run from them and then toward them and through their legs. They shriek, they love it. I want deeply for these twins and want them to leave and run with me. I stay with them tonight and then stay home for days. I stay away from the windows. It's warm in the house and I eat more and sit with them as they watch television. It rains for a week.

When I come to the woods again, after ten days away, Susan has lost her leg. The dogs are all there. Susan has three legs, a bandage around her front shoulder. Her smile is a new and more fragile thing. It's colder out and the wind is mean and searching. Mary says that the rain has made the creek swell and the current too fast. The gap over the drainpipe is wider now so we decide that we will not jump.

I race Franklin. Franklin is still angry about Susan's leg; neither of us can believe that things like that happen, that she has lost a leg and now when she smiles she looks like she's asking to die.

When we get to the straightaway I feel so strong that I know I will go. I'm not sure I can make it but I know I can go far, farther than I've jumped before, and I know how long it will be that I will be floating cloudlike. I want this. I want this so much, the floating.

I run and see the squirrels and their mouths are already forming the words they will say if I don't make it across. On the straightaway Franklin stops and yells to me that I should stop but it's just a few more strides and I've never felt so strong so I jump yes jump. I float for a long time and see it all. I see my bed and the faces of my friends and it seems like already they know.

When I hit my head it was obvious. I hit my head and had a moment when I could still see-I saw Susan's face, her eyes open huge, I saw some criss-crossing branches above me and then the current took me out and then I fell under the surface.

After I fell and was out of view the squirrels spoke.

"He should not have jumped that jump."

"He sure did look silly when he hit his head and slid into the water."

"He was a fool."

"Everything he ever did was worthless."

Franklin was angry and took five or six of them in his mouth, crushing them, tossing them one after the other. The other dogs watched; none of them knew if squirrel killing made them happy or not. After I died, so many things happened that I did not expect.

The first was that I was there, inside my body, for a long time. I was at the bottom of the river, stuck in a thicket of sticks and logs, for six days. I was dead, but was still there, and I could see out of my eyes. I could move around inside my body like it was a warm loose bag. I would sleep in the warm loose bag, turn around in it like it was a

small home of skin and fur. Every so often I could look through the bag's eyes to see what was outside, in the river. Through the dirty water I never saw much.

I had been thrown into the river, a different river, when I was young by a man because I would not fight. I was supposed to fight and he kicked me and slapped my head and tried to make me mean. I didn't know why he was kicking me, slapping. I wanted him to be happy. I wanted the squirrels to jump and be happy as we dogs were. But they were different than we were, and the man who threw me to the river was also different. I thought we were all the same but as I was inside my dead body and looking into the murky river bottom I knew that some are wanting to run and some are afraid to run and maybe they are broken and are angry for it.

I slept in my broken sack of a body at the bottom of the river, and wondered what would happen. It was dark inside, and musty, and the air was hard to draw. I sang to myself.

After the sixth day I woke up and it was bright. I knew I was back. I was no longer inside a loose sack but was now inhabiting a body like my own, from before; I was the same. I stood and was in a wide field of buttercups. I could smell their smell and walked through them, my eyes at the level of the yellow, a wide blur of a line of yellow. I was heavy-headed from the gorgeousness of the yellow all blurry. I loved breathing this way again, and seeing everything.

I should say that it's very much the same here as there. There are more hills, and more waterfalls, and things are cleaner. I like it. Each day I walk for a long time, and I don't have to walk back. I can walk and walk, and when I am tired I can sleep. When I wake up, I can keep walking and I never miss where I started and have no home.

I haven't seen anyone yet. I don't miss the cement like sandpaper on my feet, or the buildings with the sleeping men reaching. I sometimes miss the other dogs and the running.

The one big surprise is that as it turns out. God is the sun. It makes sense, if you think about it. Why we didn't see it sooner I cannot say. Every day the sun was right there burning, our and other planets hovering around it, always apologizing, and we didn't think it was God. Why would there be a God and also a sun? Of course God is the sun. Everyone in the life before was cranky, I think, because they just wanted to know.