

DREAM FOR JOEL

(Circle of Life)

By Tom Leskiw

A number of loose ends required our attention before we could depart our winter home in Arizona to return to Northern California. They included writing, woodworking, landscaping projects, phoning various utilities to suspend or transfer service, and finally, loading and hitching the canoe trailer to our vehicle.

In the crush, I'd managed to backburner my grief over the failing health of our dog, Gypsy. Despite being 13 years old, she'd been the picture of health a mere four months before, when we'd traveled south. Then, one night, we found her blind and drooling. She seemed to have lost her sense of smell and some of her coordination. It had been nearly 40 years since I'd owned a dog. The loss of a trusted, long-time companion cuts deep, as painful then as it is now.

We'd elected to make a minor detour on our route through southern California. Sue's Aunt Ann was nearly 91 years old. Looking in on someone that you've known for that long is always the right thing to do. Ann's dog Pixie didn't like other dogs, so it would take a bit of work keeping Gypsy and her separated.

The next morning, we sat in the backyard with Ann and her son Alan, talking and playing catch-up. I had trouble concentrating on the conversation, as waves of grief periodically washed over me. Even in my present state, though, I had to acknowledge signs of spring, of a world awakening from its winter slumber. Soaring by in a northwest direction was a kettle of migrating Turkey Vultures, riding the late-morning thermals. Scores of bees worked the blossoms of a *Myoporum* tree. A purple bejeweled male Costa's Hummingbird made frequent visits to the feeder. Painted lady butterflies sped past us flying

north, pausing here and there to sip nectar from trees and shrubs. These glimpses into the Circle of Life comforted me, for their movements continued unabated, each of these creatures sensing that it was their time.

The phone rang. It was a neighbor informing us that they could hear Gypsy howling from the front courtyard. Gypsy was silent when I approached her. Head trembling, her clouded eyes were staring into nothingness, which communicated life's precious and transitory nature. I sat down next to her, my eyes filling with tears as I submitted to the waves. Some time later, I opened my eyes to see a young boy and girl on their bikes, just outside the gate.

"My name's Joel," said the boy. "We heard your dog howling, so my parents phoned to tell you..." The boy came closer to the gate and reached out, trying to pet Gypsy.

"I wouldn't do that," I warned. "Gypsy's blind and it will startle her."

He withdrew his hand and paused. "Why is your dog blind?" he asked. At that moment, my thoughts were so consumed by darkness and the fragility of life, all I could think of to say was, "Because everything gets old and sick and then it dies." But, of course, I didn't—I couldn't—say that. His question was a sincere one and, on a gorgeous spring day that held so much promise, who was I to upset him?

"We're not sure," I responded. "One day she was fine. It happened all at once."

He looked at me with earnest eyes and then at Gypsy. The expression on his face stopped short of challenging what I'd said, but I could tell he didn't totally believe me, either. As if on cue, Gypsy stumbled off the sidewalk into landscaping—knocking over a long metal handle that controlled the sprinkler valve. It landed with a clatter onto the sidewalk and I could tell that Joel was now convinced of her condition.

I couldn't help but be reminded of the lyrics to a David Crosby song, "Dream for Him." The song was prompted by a car ride Crosby took with his young son. While driving, he reflects on what he'll tell his son, should they come across a car wreck where the occupants have died. What's the correct way to introduce the young and innocent to a dark subject like death?

Joel turned to his sister. Whether to break the awkward silence or to commiserate with me, he offered, "Yeah, we know a

one-eyed dog.” While he and his sister rode circles in Ann’s driveway, Joel and I chatted. I kept things light—not a word about the mortality of people and dogs. “We know this yard,” he shared with me, a declaration of his haunts, a disclosure that Ann’s yard and driveway lay within the territory explored by his sister and him on their bikes.

As Joel and I made small talk in the warm spring sunshine, I studied his face and thought about how he and his sister had their whole lives ahead of them. Hopefully, their existence had yet to be tainted by life’s unpleasantries. Their future was one of infinite possibility. And I thought about how—even though we’d just met—I had a dream for him: the same, or similar, one I have for every child I encounter:

May you be cared for and mentored by people who love you dearly. My wish for you is to always have the freedom to investigate life’s mysteries, to expand your present horizons. May you reap the best that life has to offer and reach your full potential. I hope that your days include lazy afternoons, lying in tall, overarching grass with your dog at your side. I wish for you to be awestruck that such an amazing dog is your companion, one who wants nothing more from you than to love and be loved in return. And, in an odd way—bear with me, now—I also wish you grief. Because, as painful as it is, grief is a kind of Certificate of Authenticity, proof that you’ve lived and loved, not merely observed life from the sidelines.

The next day, we had a couple of hours to visit with Alan and Ann before we’d have to hit the road. We pulled several lawn chairs into a circle on the front lawn next to a densely-branched cedar tree and talked. Sue pointed out a pile of feathers beneath the tree. Looking over the pile, I noted that it contained an array of feathers—larger ones from tail and wing, in addition to a puffy cluster of small, buoyant, downy feathers. I examined a tri-colored tail feather: dark gray at the base, narrow black band near the middle, and a wider, pale-gray band at the tip. The description of the tail feather matched that of the numerous Eurasian-collared Doves in the neighborhood. I surmised that a predator—probably a Cooper’s Hawk—had killed, plucked, and then eaten the dove while perched in the cedar tree.

Sue, Ann, and Alan posed for several photos. Later, Alan left for his volunteer shift and Sue and Ann went inside to

make lunch, while I kept an eye on Gypsy. Suddenly, I heard the tell-tale low-frequency hum of an Anna's Hummingbird coming from the middle of the cedar tree. It took me awhile to locate the bird, but when I did, I watched as it hover-descended slowly toward the ground. When it was only an inch or two from the ground, it reached out and snatched in its bill a downy feather.

Then, it burst from the protective embrace of the cedar limbs and buzzed down the street, veering sharply to avoid a parked camper. I strained to keep the tiny bird in view as it disappeared into a row of pines. *Lining its nest with downy feathers... I've only seen hummingbirds carrying nest materials on two other occasions... Circle of Life. How cool is that?*

This stark reminder that new life can spring from death served as a tonic. And, thanks to my conversation with Joel, I vowed to try to adopt a child's perspective—that the future holds limitless possibilities and that my best days were ahead of me.

Tom Leskiw lives outside Eureka, California with his wife Sue and their dog Gypsy. He considers his explorations of the natural world with Gypsy to be among the highlights of the past 13 years. An avid birder, he is a member of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE). His essays, book and movie reviews appear in print and online journals including *Adventum; Birding; LBJ; Avian Life, Avian Arts; The Motherhood Muse (1st place contest winner); Snowy Egret; Terrain.org; Watershed* and forthcoming in *Riverwind*. His monthly column appears at www.RRAS.org. and his website resides at www.tomleskiw.com