

# Bull

## *The Chain*

The puppy hunkers flat against the seat, tensing as another branch slaps through the window. The pickup, its frame bent, repeatedly veers off course as the man backs it down the dirt driveway. “Damn it,” he curses. The tailgate gets buried in a tangle of scrub trees and he’s forced to hit the brakes, drive forward and start over. Having consumed three malt liquors doesn’t help his situation, but he’s not too upset—he has a new guard dog, traded away for a carton of cigarettes. The puppy came from a mongrel bitch that had a litter of eight, and the owner named him Bull.

As the largest, most playful pup of the lot, Bull could have been sold off as a fighter, left to wander and starve, or dispatched in some creative way—perhaps tied to a tree as a target, or dragged behind a truck—all viable entertainments for the local natives. No, today his owner happened to be drunk and in desperate need of cigarettes. And the man needed a guard dog.

He continues in reverse and is relieved to reach the county road. Things start out well for the pup; his new master has him riding up front with him in the cab. The man pokes

and pushes him across a ripped and taped seat, and each time Bull pounces back onto his hand and gnaws at it with his milk teeth. It seems the man likes to play.

They travel past tobacco fields and piney forests until the man swings the twisted machine into the driveway of his dilapidated homestead. He kills the engine. Bull stares at him a second or two in the silence, his head cocked to the side, and then he's lifted by the scruff and carried to the backyard. A collar is secured around his tiny neck and this is snapped to a chain. The chain runs twenty feet to a thick, iron spike that's staked into the ground, giving Bull a circle within which to roam that is forty feet in diameter. The ground is packed dirt, devoid of anything that would interfere with the sweep of the chain. Just inside the circle sits a doghouse made of car doors, assorted sheet metal and tarps, and filled with straw. The rest of the yard is a chaotic mix of junked cars and car parts, cooler chests, warped tables, a rotting couch, and mounds of unidentifiables so ancient they've sprouted a cover of weeds and even pine saplings. A large, windowless shed stands to one side of the backyard. This and the decrepit house, nearly formless and appearing to grow out of the junk that surrounds it, is the extent of the estate. A six foot chain link fence, rusted and leaning in places, encircles the entire, sad mess. In the midst of all this a lone pup waits,

expectant, looking toward the house where the man has gone.

### *The Birds*

As weeks slip by, Bull feels the loss of his momma and littermates. He does learn his owner is no substitute. When the man would walk to and from the shed, Bull would run up to greet him and they would tussle, like in the truck that first day. But one time, as Bull pounces at his trouser leg, the man nearly trips over the chain. He steps back, yells something and then kicks Bull almost to the center of his circle. The pup staggers to his feet, stunned and whimpering, his ribs aching, his heart throbbing. It's April and the soft, blossomy air is sweet, the birds sing and frogs trill from a nearby swamp—but all this beauty is invisible to Bull. Later, he drags himself low along the ground, ending up prostrate before the man, pawing the air for acceptance, attention, forgiveness. But a man who wants a vicious dog could not tolerate this, and after a stinging rebuke, Bull retreats and begins to feel the wariness of fear.

With nothing to do, his attention is drawn to the tall pine and oak trees that partially surround the yard. He sees amazing creatures with fluffy tails run up, down and sideways along trunks and limbs, even leaping from tree to tree. There are smaller creatures that can fly right through the air, moving out of sight in seconds. Occasionally a squirrel

ventures into the yard, and Bull tenses and lies still until he can't wait anymore. His charge is swift—and brief; the chain snaps him back into the circle and the squirrel scampers away. The birds are even more agile and soon he gives up. As he watches them fly to and fro, he suddenly whines and releases a series of descending howls, full of sadness that no one hears.

### *The Wallet*

The days are now getting longer and hotter—spring has drifted into summer, and Bull obsessively chews on whatever he can find within his circle. One afternoon, as he gnaws on a piece of rubber, the man comes out of his house with something in his hand. He kneels, holds it out and waves it, and Bull warily creeps forward. It's a rib bone, and the man lets Bull take it in his mouth and then plays a tug of war with him. The man seems pleased as the young dog growls and tugs backward, because Bull gets to keep that bone—a very fine day.

But another time, after a gentle rain, Bull finds a small, black object in his circle. It has many folds in it and holds pieces of paper. The leather feels soft and tastes good in his mouth. Then the man comes out of his house. He stops and stares at what's left of his wallet; scattered over several yards are scraps of soggy leather, bills rendered to bits, credit cards

peppered with teeth marks. Bull looks up from his handiwork and sees the man explode into raging words of scorn. Ears laid back, Bull attempts a low, running crawl towards his doghouse, but the man steps on the chain and hauls him in like a fish across the slick, muddy ground. The man has no stick nor does he waste time getting one—he beats the dog with his bare hands. He finally releases the chain and Bull is allowed to limp back to his pathetic shelter, burying his battered body deep into the straw. He remains there for two days, shaking in fits of pain, too terrified to venture out.

### *The Dream*

Bull has the misfortune to grow into a very large and mean looking dog. His more unpleasant attributes include a large head and short, bristly fur—a dark brown with black spotting that gives him the appearance of being in a state of perpetual filth. And given that he looks mean, it's even more pressing in the mind of his master that he should be mean. Beaten badly one more time—for digging holes that caused the man to stumble—he now hides in his doghouse whenever the man comes near. He barks at every visitor that comes to the shed, at every strange noise or shadow. He stops watching the birds and squirrels, stops digging holes, and starts to gnaw chunks of fur off his body. For hours he paces the circle at the end of the chain, head down, his spirit slipping away.

He begins to sleep more, and in his sleep he begins to dream. At first he's as himself, running free—exploring the nearby fields and forests and chasing rabbits. And then, dozing one day in the hot sun, he finds himself transformed.

He's high on a ridge, looking down into a narrow valley. He's with his family, but they're not dogs—they're wolves. Sporadic gusts of cold air reach their noses, confirming the situation below. There is a signal and they head down single file, moving in silence like ghosts. Other scents swirl past: that of old bones and desiccated skin; the damp, lichen-covered rock; the smell of sleet within churning, gray clouds. But it's one scent that drives him forward today and from which he will not stray.

In a flash, at the base of the rocky slope, he runs with the entire pack straight into the browsing herd. The giant elk wheel about and bound away toward a steep moraine, their clattering hooves echoing off walls of rock and ice. As they crest the hill, one of them lags behind. Bull is in the lead as the wolves close in, running through pools of icy water, leaping over tussocks and then up the stony mound, now so close he can hear the animal's hoarse breath, glimpse the fearful eye, sense the fatal flaw . . .

“Bull, get up damn it—y'all are one, lazy dog.”

His legs stop quivering and his eyes open to the bright,

baking sunlight of his resting spot. He rises in time to avoid the rusted pipe thrown by his master; it clinks and rolls away in puffs of dust. Cowering, he listens to expletives on how worthless he is, sleeping day and night. After his master enters the shed, Bull sits and exhales a long, slow sigh. Panting, tongue out, he looks vacantly about his circle, his world, and the exhilaration of the dream fades from his heart.

### *The Yellow Dog*

Bull avoids the thrown pipe but not the chain—it's always attached. He gets up and walks over to his water bowl. He slowly laps at the warm liquid. It tastes better when the empty bowl is replenished with cool well water. But the bowl often stays empty. He sniffs about his food dish—an aluminum pie plate—for any of the dry bits he might have missed from the morning. It seems the food is being cut back.

Too hot to pace, he wanders back to his favorite spot just outside the doghouse and lies down on his haunches, half closing his eyes. Cicadas start to click into a loud, sweeping buzz and then just as quickly their din fades. Heat waves shimmer off the shed's metal roof, distorting overhanging leaves into a flickering mirage. A squirrel shakes an oak branch, the insects suddenly go silent, and Bull opens his eyes. There, outside the back fence, at a place where the overgrown field begins, he sees something that causes his fur

to bristle. A pale, yellow dog stands in the hot stillness, watching him. He trots over to the edge of the circle, head down, growling. The other dog stares and then wags her tail. Bull begins a rapid-fire bark; the yellow dog returns a few yelps and then falls to her side, rolls on her back and paws the air. All the barking draws the man out of the shed; he stands in the glaring sun stoned, gun in hand, looking about with red eyes. Bull turns briefly toward his polluted master. When he again faces the fence, he sees only the usual weeds and scrub, and in the distance, pale green in the humid haze, a forest explored only in dreams.

That night Bull endures a fitful sleep, interrupted by nightmares—scenes of beatings and the running from dark, unknown things. In the final dream, the yellow dog appears in his yard. She walks into the circle and they play and chase each other and she even licks his face. She finally walks away to the fence, periodically looking back. Bull tries to follow but he's frozen in place; he awakes whimpering as robins sing in the dim, cool dawn.

### *The Butterfly*

For the past three days the man has been tinkering with a junked car, stuck out in the weeds beyond the shed. He's been swatting flies, cursing, and generally getting hammered by late afternoon. Today he's at it again, and Bull watches



him warily from his doghouse. Some strange men had previously arrived and drove off with his truck, the one with the ripped up seat. The man continues to try and start the junker. Finally giving up, he staggers over to the circle and delivers an incomprehensible speech, full of arm flourishes and spilt beer. Bull listens but only wishes the man would not forget to feed him.

Nights are getting cooler, the air less humid, and overhead lie millions of silent, flickering stars. During the day the sky is an infinite, deep blue, and from over the fields crickets ramp up their chorus into a loud, hypnotic din.

Autumn has arrived and Bull is starving. He's losing fur and if possible, looks meaner, uglier, and more worthless than before. One dark morning, desperate with hunger, he barks nonstop at the house for his food. When the sun rises into the trees, streaking the circle with light, he gives up and lies down, still keeping an eye on the back door, waiting for the man to come out.

He finally turns away and stares at the distant forest. He spots a butterfly resting on the tip of a goldenrod at the circle's edge, its sulfur wings back-lit with morning light. It flutters down and lands on the earth beside him, opening and closing its wings. He paws at it and it lifts away with fitful ups and downs, flying into the sun. His eyes follow as it

reaches the fence and then he feels a sharp leap within his heart. She is there again—the yellow dog—this time outside the fence where there are scattered pines and where one had fallen on the fence, crushing it down. She becomes agitated, prancing and whining, then barking—moving away from the fence, then coming back. There’s a tiny wag in his ragged tail, a spark of light that makes it way through his despair.

Bull doesn’t notice them at first, not until a boot clicks into a bottle does he turn to see the three men coming—not to the shed but directly toward him. His master is leading two men—the same men who took the truck, and they carry a club and two leashes between them. A primordial fear rises within him, a fear that sends saliva foaming in the mouth, that curls lips, that strangles everything else. The yellow dog is silent but watches as the three men fan out in a circle. One of the strange men thrusts his wooden club into Bull’s face and he latches onto it, shaking it so hard he nearly rips the man’s arm out of joint. The other two, holding leashes, close in. Amid the dust and chaos that follow, the men botch the simple sequence of their plan. The other strange man has unhooked the chain from Bull’s collar before he’s gotten the leash on. His master screams “no” but manages to grab the collar. Bull is now off his chain, shaking the club, when he hears the yellow dog burst out barking. The startled master

looks away. Bull lets go of the club and crunches down on the man's arm, giving it a ripping tug. He barely feels the club's sting as he starts running toward the fence, running like he did in his dreams, running like the wolf. The men are right behind him as he forces his weak and battered body toward the yellow dog. He nearly misses the downed pine with his front legs, but in a flurry of claws and flying bark, he scrambles over and is down the other side. The yellow dog is already running, dodging around trees, and in the surreal state of first flight, Bull hurries after her.

### *The Lady*

They travel for a day and a half, skirting backyards with barking dogs, traversing tangled woods and crossing a busy highway—the yellow dog always ahead, always leading. She finds him a drainpipe to rest in overnight and stands guard at the entrance as he falls asleep. In the morning Bull has trouble getting up; she licks his face—time to move on. By noon they reach a large, high pasture as gusts of dry wind sweep over them. She leads him down a slope toward some farm buildings. As the local dogs begin to bark, she licks his face once more, turns, and walks away. Bull attempts to follow but his shaky legs will not obey. Above the slashing hiss of whipped grass, he can hear the dogs coming.

The lady comes out onto her porch, wondering what

this latest ruckus is about. Her five dogs, all mutts and former strays, are barking at a strange animal that stands in the upper pasture like a statue, its head down, tongue out—defenseless.

“Oh my god, is that a dog?” The lady calls her dogs in and they reluctantly come back, one by one. She puts them in her house, gets some dog food and water, and walks back out toward the dark and large-headed thing.

“Oh no, what a mess, hope he’s not too weak—you have to eat this, boy.” She places the bowl of food and bucket of water about six feet away as Bull emits a few, weak growls. She backs away, turns, and returns to the house.

Bull catches a whiff of the bowl. He wanders over and stares at it. He laps up some water and, ever so slowly, eats of the soft, wet food. Curling up in a clump of high grass, he falls into a deep sleep. When he awakens, there is a blanket around his body and he’s being carried awkwardly down the slope. He whines and the lady speaks to him quietly, saying, “It’ll be fine, boy, you’ll be okay. You’re home now.”

Far above them, unnoticed, blackbirds shoot across the sky, blown sideways, driven before the relentless wind.

### *Reprise*

Within the bounds of our limited senses, confined in a physical world that appears so familiar we become sightless, events occur which defy the odds, logic, or simple

explanation. Bull survives a long, tenuous chain of events to arrive at a new home, a new life. Why or how each step turned out a certain way and not another reflects the mystery inherent in all life. To say the outcome is miraculous explains nothing, for can we truly define where the normal ends and the miraculous begins?

Bull is now a strong runner and he loves to run and be a dog. Sometimes when he is alone on the high pasture, a familiar scent will stop him and he'll sniff the air, his ears alert, his eyes scanning the forest's edge. But he never finds her. And he never retraces the steps of their journey back to his former home. His old home is, in fact, now deserted. The sheriff came and took the man away shortly after Bull escaped. Faded yellow police tape remains wrapped about the shed and the chain still lies where it fell in the dirt of the circle. The sheriff and his deputies took careful note of many things. What they couldn't have noticed is covered by an overgrown pile of used tires. Buried there long ago, within a shallow patch of earth, lie the remains of a lab mix—a once gentle, straw colored female. She was a guard dog.