

## Hallowed Groundhog

Mourning the loss of her dog, a gardener finds solace in the bustlings of a wild visitor

BY NANCY LAWSON



**My dog died** during the second week of June, the kindest month, on a table in the vet's office when she could no longer stand without leaning against walls. On her final ride I could not restrain myself from violating the personal space she normally required, this animal who had always doled out love in short bursts and on her own terms but otherwise demanded a wide perimeter. All I could do was wrap my arms around her sedated, shaking body and hope she knew what I meant.

No one is ever prepared for the emptiness that lies ahead, the split-second moments of forgetting that conjure silhouettes of a dead pet in all her favorite spots. As I

would soon come to realize, most of those flashes of wishful thinking would haunt me in the one place Mattiebo and I wanted to be together more than any other: the garden.

It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that her departure left gaping holes in my life. One was under the deck, where on warm days my wiry pixie dog liked to drum up dramatic dust storms, making her bed in the soft dirt. It was an ongoing project, made more complicated by my husband's repeated insistence on filling the hole back up again, as he feigned annoyance and predicted the far-fetched calamities that would soon befall us if the dog dug too deeply and

disturbed the structural integrity of the deck stairs.

Mattiebo and I liked to feign annoyance back, though we were secretly grateful for his attentiveness, since it wasn't in our nature to properly care about things like the house falling down around us. She was too busy raising her worshipping nose to the winds and defending our borders. I was too busy ensuring the peppers were planted far enough apart and the sunflower seeds were sprouting.

Periodically our goals clashed, Mattie's and mine, and she would take her job of scaring school buses and delivery trucks so seriously that she trampled my new plants

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while running up and down the fenceline and barking ferociously. But the flowers were forgiving and bounced back. And the schoolchildren rode their bikes by on the weekends and laughed.

After she died, I took stock of the evidence of her life and found that I could hardly bear to be in the garden we had cultivated together. Once a source of solace, it became a place of longing. Planted firmly in the tall drooping grasses were my memories of Mattie peeking out of them, her bandit face topped by what looked like a green Medusa wig. Squirrel sightings seemed odd without the little bright flash in tow—a white-tailed-deer appendage of a behind and belly on an otherwise black-and-tan mongrel.

My husband didn't take it upon himself to fill the holes anymore; they sat for a long while, empty and hopeful, a tribute to an industrious dog with her own inner life. My attempts at gardening grew half-hearted, less a passion than a laborious effort to try to regain something that was gone for good. With my companion missing, I had no one to chat with about the baby worms and the just-waking bees and the kind of day that was in store for us, no one to share the joy of a raccoon sighting or a mysterious crosswind holding the promise of a much needed rain. I had no reason to get up at 7 a.m. on a Saturday and sink my knees and hands into the dirt. In short, the

outdoors felt less like a sanctuary of abundance than a reminder of all I had lost.

A year and a half has passed. The metaphorical holes still unfilled, I am a more haphazard gardener, forcing myself into a routine out of habit and obligation and a hope that one day it will help me heal from the death of not only my dog but my cat eight months later. Recently I got my first sign that, as winter approached, it was time for that healing to begin. Going out for a run, my husband saw a woodchuck in the back garden and called me to the window. Munching in the grasses, our unexpected guest appeared to be stocking up, letting his mouth be his guide across the space in zig-zags and circles.

Here was a creature who loved my garden as much as Mattie and I once had. We watched his gentle meanderings until the appearance of a feral cat—and the subsequent noises I issued in an attempt to prevent a fight—sent him scurrying toward a wall made of stacked railroad ties, behind a rhododendron surrounded in summer by ostrich ferns. It's a place I know well: Cool and dark, the soil enriched for years by pine needles and fallen leaves, it once provided a safety zone where Mattiebo could see and not be seen, keeping watch on her small herd from a distance. Back then a shallow pit in the earth sculpted to conform to a hot mutt's belly, the area has taken on new dimensions in the shape of a small mound

with a carefully crafted entryway, still hidden by vegetation and sheltered enough from the elements for peaceful hibernation.

In that protected spot just beyond our comfortable reach, where she clawed out a sanctuary of her own, one of the holes left behind by my beloved friend has at last been filled.

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