

Black Lab

Steven R. Vogel

I did not learn about death
when our aunt backed over the pup,
smiling and waving to us
motioning and screaming at her
from the edge of the gravel
while he sat, pink tongue out,
grinning widely for us,
trying to learn about *come*,
trying to have his own name.

I did not learn about death
when she stopped at the bump,
when she stood from the door,
looked behind to see what it was,
told us it was too bad,
that he should have known better,
that we should have warned,
there would be some new dog,
we could reuse a name.

I did not learn about death
when I found out how heavy
a shoulder could be—
just a pup, just a shovel, just me
to the edge of a forest,
north side of a hill
where the sun never rises or sets,
where the white pines were soft,
but the fallen bed ocher and crisp.

Not when I swept clear
the dirt-mingled sand—
as I undertook two feet of cover,
uncover, and cover again.
I did not learn about death
from the tears that took me unfairly,
that held me long after
my rough-fashioned cross,
two brittle birch twigs.

Not the dark or the cold
when the sun left alone, not the dusk
that I dared to return with
wet sleeves, not the man in the boy.
Not the sound of the shovel put back,
not the silence of questions.

I learned about death when I forgot
his name and which tree
holds him still.