

## An Excerpt from *Dog on Fire*

Terese Svoboda

The auctioneer uses his face. Some of them try not to, they move the skin around their lips while speaking the way a clarinet player puts danger into a tune, but not this one. He uses his face and works it.

Music does play in between each bid, however, clarinets and whatnot from the radio as if to make much of each little lot of mismatched silverware, each hardly worn Sunday suit and right tie. The things of a life are all clues to it. You put your arm up to your wrist into a bag of old shirts and my brother is inside, as much as a person is inside anything. But my brother's books — a lot of them — surprise everyone, their backs so unbroken his buying them at all is what's shocking. Most were collected from unread clumps lying around on the clean floor he always kept, with the book shelves used for the storage of everyday changes of outfit, for shirts, ripped and smelly.

Some shiny shovels go for what they are worth.

So many people come because he had four beans more or some less than others and they like to see how he spent them, or else they come to see what mourning looks like on this set of people. They all look like friends, friends from the feedlot, the kids from the Stop-and-Go, the lawnmower man, even the priest. They are good enough friends of the family that they think to ask when's your mother coming back, and I say next week as if I mean it. They and their wives bring nuts and bolts food, cake with impediments of raisins or actual pecans, hams socked with cloves. Everyone eats from their gifts and the others' while they stand inside, paddles up or down to the auctioneer, or turn over the stuff in bins on the sidewalk and get it priced. All of them walk around the fill the Shove-it boys left, who are not — what a relief — in evidence. Two of the Shove-it boys have fathers who are wealthy and, I hear from a neighbor, one of their father's a

cop, which is enough say in the town to have the making of the mound of fill in front of his place just an accident. There is one of the fathers now, kicking a cardboard box over to the fill. The younger boys like sliding down the mound on other cardboard, all the way to the soft spring weeds that have sprung up that we have beaten a path through. They slide down as if it were snow and not dirt.

The neighbors carry their curiosity close, like something that can't be exchanged but that they can't make up their minds to keep. Already they want to use the toilet or at least drink from his tap. My father doesn't mind. He's not sad about my brother right now, especially with all this turmoil in and out of the house. His job is to direct those who don't want to bid back out to the bins of clothes on the sidewalk. Over there, he gestures to Aphra, who has turned up late but is looking at the things on display in the bins as if they were drawers. I have found not a single thing that might be Aphra's inside, not a dropped pen with her initials on it, nor something with sequins for the bed. Did she clear out everything that might look like evidence before calling for an ambulance? Was he that tidy?

Out of one of the bins Aphra pulls a shirt of my brother's and goes behind a tree that the Shove-it boys have gashed, and tries to make the shirt fit over her. Of course the shirt gapes and loses buttons and seams until it is only right for the junk bin, until it is only right on her.

I watch through the window not far from the paddlers and the auctioneer's amp while someone takes her two dollars.

We have a Native American story in our family, one where we, or rather, the we that we were a hundred years ago, are looking out this same kind of window. Gallopers come up, not dressed well or overdressed in, say, feathers and makeup, nor are they making a lot of noise as if they are unhappy. They smile.

The Native Americans want bread.

They don't ask for the bread but we in the past have given it to them. We are not generous every day or even now,

we give it not because they might kill us – that problem has been dealt with, overdealt – but because we know we shouldn't have ever built towns at all where they ride, we should just be visiting, See you later is what we should be saying to them as if we are just passing through, but by then we've stayed long enough in their area to raise all of what goes into this kind of bread and we want to raise more. Not to mention having a good start on all the graves.

They want the bread. At least.

We see in close-up, giving them our loaves, that although they are not so painted, they have painted their faces not so long ago. There is paint where it would surprise you, on their horses too, to make them spotted. While their horses lift their feet and they put up their hands in a salute, we also see that one of them is not what he appears to be – a woman – but is someone with whiskers. After they gallop off, breadcrumbs in their beards, we figure out that the one with whiskers is also not Native American and has robbed a train – Jesse James. The delay he and his gang made with the bread caused the cavalry to miss them, to trot right on by.

Time was all these scoundrels wanted with our bread.

My brother didn't have more time, disguised or not.

No one walking inside, or down the aisle the bins make ask Did you find out why he died? They come for what's to be sold, and such a question's answer might force bids higher. The auctioneer quips with that possibility at the tip of his quick tongue – Coming up is the hot tub! – for sometimes people will pay more for the true taint of the body. Anyway, they don't so much as bid for everything as wait for the last item. Some of them want it but not everyone lives in a way that they could use it. This item is on blocks out by the garage where a new car would have been if he had had the money to buy one and no seizures. The crowd inside goes outside and floods over to the item. People like to inspect what my son had guessed correctly after the firemen came to put out its steaming because of the round emptiness they see when they lift the lid, that death. I tell my boy not to ever sit inside one because maybe he is predisposed.

My son opens the tub anyway, he's a big boy, he wants to see if the insides bears a warning, a label that on a mattress you are not allowed to tear off, but of course he is looking where everyone else has looked, to see if something of the body is somehow still in there. Four holes show where that label has been screwed off the way they do when it is a secondhand item, and no other label is anywhere else, either inside or out, not even the one warning pregnant women and small sweaty children about death deluxe in the amniotic waters of a hot tub. Nothing about seizures.

My brother had just left this tub at the time of his death.

But if he died from that hot tub getting him so hot his brain fried, the papers that we have of his death would have said so. They just say his heart stopped and it looks as if they mean it, although no one in this family has problems with his heart, and not him either that we know of.

People love the hot tub regardless. It is a grown up above-ground tub that shows you are above-ground with your wants and your wishes, just look at it. The auctioneer starts speling. Someone who already has a hot tub but wants two, bids higher and higher against a large family who could use an extra so the littlest can pee in the other one. If he who just does shovel work can have a hot tub, then they of course need more than one. How much for his hot tub? Another one wants it just to have it and would put plants in it and say this is what happened in it.

We let them all bid. The money will go to a place in the country that keeps the country wild and undug, with his name on it. Or else my father will take it. He hasn't decided.

Soon someone loads it onto a pickup.

Not a mark on him and just out of the tub. No one believes that, but some believe that enough to want it and bid high.

My boy says he'll have to try one and I say some girl will make you.

Excerpted from *Dog On Fire* by Terese Svoboda by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. ©2023 by Terese Svoboda.