I have a good view of the moon tonight from my bedroom window. My neighbor Joshua across the street is up late; I can tell by the single patch of light in his third-floor window. I wonder what he does up there by himself at this time of night. Maybe he’s like me and can’t sleep. Maybe he also wonders where the pets go, and maybe he peeks through his window to catch sight of a phantom cat dashing across the park. In the process he might glance this way and see me pressed against the curtains of my bedroom window, gazing out at the pale glow of stars.

LACY has gone missing. Big fat tabby with long whiskers. Please call day or night.

We had a dog when I was growing up. His name was Scooter and he had bad hips. But that was when he was old. When he was young, he’d dash through the park after the Frisbee and bring it back, over and over. That’s what my mother told me, anyway. I was too young to remember Scooter like that. For me, he was always the dog with the gray around his muzzle who let me play with the silky underside of his ear and who sighed when he eased himself onto the floor.

Back then my mother would stand on the porch and shield her eyes against the sun, looking for Scooter in the distance. She was always afraid he would run away. “Lord help me if the day comes,” she’d say, and shake his red leash into the air. “Lord help me Scooter, come back!”

He always did.

LOST DOG Starlight. Very affectionate, friendly with strangers. Mutt, all brown with white back left foot. Our son misses her dearly.

Every time I pass a lost pet poster on my street or in the park, I let a wave of pity roll through my body and then I keep walking. I’m like anybody else: I glance at the poster, I frown, but I don’t for a second consider looking for the animal. I know better.

Then I find the poster for Starlight, a brown, medium-sized dog that looks like Scooter. I see it in the photocopied black eyes, the way they stare out at me from the flyer stapled to the pole outside my house. Before I stop to think, I tear the poster down. I stuff it in my pocket and dash back into my house, where I uncrumple the paper and tape it to the bedroom wall. I sit on my bed a long time and look at it. My bed is a water bed, so I sway a bit as I sit.
I remember the day my mother told me about Scooter. She was picking me up from school and waited until I climbed in the back seat of the minivan. She didn’t pull away from the curb after I was buckled in, and this was how I knew something was wrong. “Scooter died,” she said. She waited. “Did you hear me? He’s dead. I found him lying on the kitchen floor.” She started to cry, but I stayed quiet. I was seven years old. I didn’t cry for Scooter then and I didn’t cry for him later. I was too busy creating an alternate ending for him: instead of dying, he ran away. He wasn’t gone, just lost, and would surely make it home when we needed him most.

The light drifting through my window grows weaker, but I don’t move. I stay on the bed and stare at the lost dog notice until I’m entirely in the dark.

TRIXIE. Male Shih Tzu mix. Can sit, lie down, heel on command. Trixie is new to the neighborhood and may have lost his way.

In the park the next day, I’m taking down a poster for Trixie, a little white yippy dog—that’s what my mother would have called it—when someone taps me on the shoulder, making me jump.

“What are you doing?”

It’s Joshua. He’s wearing a dark gray coat and a blue-and-white striped scarf. The way the wool gathers around his neck fills me with despair. Or desire. I don’t know if I can tell the difference anymore.

I step back from the poster, leaving it half-attached to the pole. “I thought I saw this dog,” I tell him. The upper corner of the paper curls over, covering the little dog’s face.

“Really?” He steps forward. “Where?” His hands have come out of his jacket pockets and he looks half a step from grabbing me.

“Well. My house is that one, over there? I thought I saw a little white dog run through my backyard this morning.” I’d taken my coffee on the back porch and had spent a good ten minutes staring at the clouds, those little white puffs. Close enough.


“I know. We met at that Fourth of July thing.”

“Oh.”

“Vicky,” I remind him. “We talked about artificial popcorn flavoring. You have a cousin or something who got that popcorn lung disease.”

“You have a good memory.”

“Did she decide to sue?”

Joshua shakes his head. “I don’t know. Look, about my dog. Which direction did he run?”

“Um. Across the park?”

“You sure?” He looks at me closely, and this time he does reach out to put a hand on my shoulder. “Will you help me look for him?”

“He’s a boy and his name is Trixie?”

“My son named him.”

“You have a son and a dog?” I don’t see how this is possible, considering all the time I spend at my window.

“I’d really appreciate some help.”

“Of course,” I say, and we cross the park together. We don’t speak for many steps. A lost cat notice blows across the grass in front of me. Sometimes Joshua glances my way
and I point halfheartedly at Trixie’s supposed path. I wonder how long this will last, how far we will go—can I make him walk all the way across town?

We circle the park three times and finally take a cold seat on the jungle gym. I try to bait him with a few questions, testing to see if he remembers our conversation from last summer. I had told him the truth then, about my career as an engineer, and about how my father died when I was young. But Joshua seems to be thinking only of his dog. Our breath forms clouds in the sky. It’s like breathing out little Trixies.

“I’ll get my car,” Joshua says finally. “I’ll start in the direction you saw him run.”

So he still believes me.

LOST. Beans, small black female, spayed, has all claws and not afraid to use them.

My lost pet collection grows to include signs for six cats and nine dogs. I tape the flyers one by one onto my bedroom wall, with Starlight in the middle. It says right there that Starlight’s back left foot is white. Scooter didn’t have any white markings, on his feet or elsewhere. Still, I look at Starlight and think, “You are Scooter.” I wish I could call my mother and tell her that I had been right about Scooter only being lost. We could ignore the passing of all these improbable years to focus on the very real and very found dog sitting before us. But most likely I’ll settle for calling Joshua instead, later in the night after his light blinks off. That’s when I want to catch him, when he’s breathing into the dark.

The first time Joshua comes over for dinner and doesn’t leave right after dessert, I wonder if he’ll kiss me. I wonder if he might want to go upstairs.

“I’m painting my bedroom,” I tell him. This is the cleverest plan I can come up with. “So it’s a mess up there right now, but soon it will be seafoam green. Very calming.”

He doesn’t care. He just refills my wine glass and, on his way back from the kitchen, stops to look through my CD collection.

“It’s so quiet,” he says.

I laugh. “I don’t have kids, I don’t have dogs. Nice, huh?”

He looks at me funny. I file this moment away, yet another thing I must learn.

“It’s just,” I add. “You live right across the street and I never knew you had a dog. Isn’t that strange? You’d think I would have noticed you walking it or something.”

“I only got Trixie a few weeks ago.”

“Still. It’s funny, isn’t it, how two people can live in such close proximity and know nothing about each other?”

“We know something now.”

“Maybe,” I say. He edges closer on the couch and I shut up, fast. It’s been a long time since I had a boyfriend, too long, and just having Joshua next to me on this worn sofa with the stretched-out slipcover makes me want to hold my breath. So I do, and I close my eyes and wait for him to lean in for a kiss. I wait and I wait. Finally, I open my eyes to find he’s not on the couch anymore; he’s gotten up and has gone to stand by the window.

The room is still. I decide he’s right, that my house is too quiet. I need something to fill it.

That night, after Joshua has left, I return to my pet posters. I start from the upper left corner and work around the perimeter. I always return to Starlight in the middle. She looks out at me, her head tilted slightly to the left, her expression poised and passive and entirely lost.
A faint sound from the street carries up through my bedroom window. I part the curtains. A woman is there on the sidewalk, stapling a piece of paper to the telephone pole. A little girl in a pink coat stands next to her, crying.

LOST. My name is Malcolm. I am a male tabby, 2 years old. On Sept 26, I decided to wander off from my home at 548-1 Alberts Street. Please find me and call my owner.

I decide to call the numbers on the flyers. I start with the cat poster the little girl and her mother put up last night, and then I call the others, everyone except Starlight’s family and Joshua. I dial, listen to the voice and the breath on the other end, and then I hang up. Whenever someone doesn’t answer, I think, See how careless you’re being? See? They should have answered, just in case.

Joshua has his son this weekend. I have to spy on them from my bedroom window because Joshua has decided not to introduce me to Colin yet. We need to give it time, Joshua said. But from here I watch Colin wander around the front yard. He carries a big stick and stops periodically to wave it like a flag or a threat. He slashes the air like he’s carrying a sword and then he looks straight up into my window.

We make eye contact. I raise my hand, as if I’m about to be sworn in. Colin squints, shakes his head, and turns away. Beats at the grass with the stick.

I turn from the window and face my wall of pets. Trixie’s little white face is pasted to the bottom right corner. Joshua only has Colin one weekend a month, so I can see how I missed him. But why hadn’t I noticed Trixie?

Maybe I can only see the pets that are already gone.

ALL IS LOST. Mr. Chipmunk, $100 reward.

On Saturday, I stroll through the park to check the posters, but none of them are new. Lacy, Beans, Malcolm, Mr. Chipmunk. The grass under my feet is short and grayish, as if the green has leaked out.

As I pass the jungle gym and head toward the basketball court, I hear distant barking that slowly grows louder. A medium-sized brown dog appears far off by the tree line and hurries in my direction, her tail flapping like a helicopter propeller. She comes closer and closer and slides to a stop at my feet. I hold out my hand, which she sniffs. She’s not wearing a collar.

“Hello, Starlight,” I say. She hesitates and finally, slowly, starts to wag her tail.

She follows me home and right into the house. In the kitchen, she turns in three circles and sniffs the linoleum. I fill a ceramic mixing bowl with water and put it on the floor. Then I go up to my bedroom, pull down the poster, and bring it back down the stairs.

I hold the paper right next to the dog’s face. Starlight develops a nervous air, like she’s auditioning for something. I peer closer at the poster, then at the dog, until I remember the white paw. At first I think it’s a bust, but then I reach down and rub the dust from her feet. She lets me. I reveal a white patch on her foot.

“Well,” I say to Starlight. “I guess that’s it.”

We stare at each other. Starlight yawns and curls up for a nap. Only then do I grab my jacket and race through the neighborhood to rip down every Starlight flyer I can find.
LOST CAT. Diamond, all black with two white front paws. No collar. She’s an indoor cat and it’s a mystery how she escaped.

“Where’d you get the dog?” Joshua asks.

I’m making dinner, vegetarian chili. The cornbread comes from a boxed mix, but I hid the box in the trash before Joshua came over.

“The shelter.” I peer into the chili pot. Its contents bubble back at me. Joshua has bent to scratch behind Starlight’s ears. “What’s her name?”

“Scooter.”

“Isn’t she a girl?”

I salt the chili. “You’re the one with a male dog named Trixie.”

Joshua is frowning at Starlight. “I feel like I’ve seen her before.”

“You know what they say. All dogs look alike.”

“No one says that.”

I shrug.

“So you got her at the shelter,” he says, and then stops like he has to mull this over for a while.

“Yep.” I pull the pan of cornbread out of the oven. It smells amazing. Starlight comes over to rub against me. At first I think she’s being affectionate, but then I realize she’s trembling, just a little, just enough to feel against my leg. She’s looking blankly in the distance, like she’s remembering something. I reach down and pat her head, trying to bring her attention back in the room. Joshua watches.

“I wonder if Trixie will ever come back,” he says.


Lost Dog I think my ex-husband might have stole her if you see this dog or Kurt Franklin call me immediately, Day or Nite.

Starlight sits obediently at my feet. In a few minutes, her tail will start to flip lightly against the floor. She’s smart. It’s been less than a week and already she knows when I will take her for a walk. We’ll stroll to the other end of Barnard and then back, and then we’ll go through the park and I’ll throw the tennis ball. I have to be careful, though, and stick to the protection of the trees so no one will spot us, and even then I only let her off the leash for short stretches. She still gets that faraway look sometimes, like she’s listening to something my human ears can’t hear.

After our walk, I put the teakettle on the stove and drop a biscuit into Starlight’s bowl. I’m humming along to the radio. Starlight clicks up and down the linoleum. I look at her skinny toes and think that winter will be here sooner than later. Maybe I’ll learn to knit.

The doorbell rings. I wipe my hands on the dish towel and head to the front door, where I find Joshua standing slouched at the shoulders with his hands in his pockets.

“Can I come in?”

“Yes.” I pull the pan of cornbread out of the oven. It smells amazing. Starlight comes bounding in to greet him, and then she follows his pacing stride for stride.

“Come into the kitchen. I’m making tea.”
Joshua thrusts his hand into his jacket pocket and pulls out a crumpled piece of paper. “Are you sure the shelter held Scooter long enough?”

“What are you talking about?” I make a point of not looking at the paper in his hands.

“The shelter holds lost dogs for a little while, to see if someone claims them. I think they let Scooter go too early.” He holds the paper out and, with shaking fingers, I take it. It’s Starlight’s poster. I hold it tightly in my hands, the very same picture tacked up to my bedroom wall.

“This isn’t Scooter,” I say. “Can’t you tell by the face? Totally different dog.”

Joshua snatches the paper back. “Look,” he says, and holds it up to Starlight. “The shelter people told me this dog had been there for weeks and weeks. They were just about to put her down.”

Joshua is crouched by Starlight, staring from the dog to the paper, back and forth. “It’s the same dog. Can’t you see? It’s obvious.”

I go to the fridge and grab a beer, the lager Joshua likes, and pop it open with my art deco bottle opener. I put a smile on my face and hold it out to him.

“Here, drink this. You’ll feel better.”

Joshua looks up at me like I’m crazy. He’s still crouched by Starlight with that damn poster. I put my hand on his shoulder, where I can feel the muscles under his shirt. The beer is sweating against my other hand.

“I know what’s going on here,” I tell him, making my voice soothing. “You’re so worried about Trixie that you think bringing back someone else’s dog will make you feel better. But this is Scooter, Joshua.” I remove my hand from his shoulder to gesture to the dog. “And Scooter is mine now.”

Joshua doesn’t take the beer. Starlight moves away from both of us and goes to the back door. She doesn’t whine to go out but instead just stares at the door vacantly, like if she concentrates hard enough I’ll open it to reveal her previous life.

“This dog,” Joshua says slowly, “is Starlight. You need to call this number.” He’s looking down at Scooter and refuses to meet my eyes. “Sometimes I wonder if you ever saw Trixie at all.”

“Of course I saw Trixie. I saw him run through the park, just like I said. Why would I make that up?”

Joshua turns to face me. “Then what?”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“What happened after you saw Trixie? Did you take him home, just like you took Starlight?”

“Don’t be crazy. You need a drink. Don’t you want a drink?” The beer is ice in my hand. “Maybe I should open some wine.”

“I don’t want anything.” Joshua turns and wanders down the hallway, toward the staircase. Starlight snaps out of her trance and follows, trying to grab her own poster with her teeth. I put the beer down and trail behind them. Joshua pauses in the foyer a moment like he’s deep in thought. At one point, his hand lands on the staircase banister and he glances up. Instinctively, I move in front of the staircase and hold out my arms.

“I told you. The bedroom’s being renovated,” I say.

“You said you were painting, not renovating.”
“Same thing.”

He takes a step closer. When he speaks, his voice is very low, so low he doesn’t sound like himself anymore. “I know you look out at my house sometimes. I see you in the window, behind the curtains.”

“I never took you for the paranoid type.” I reach for the poster but he snatches it away from me.

“You’re hiding something.” He glances around again, searching. “Trixie’s up there, isn’t he?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I want to see that bedroom.”

“Joshua. Have some decency.” I try to block the stairs again, but he simply lowers my arm and starts up the staircase without me. Starlight bounds along beside him, her feet clicking on the wooden stairs, and I have no option but to follow.

Joshua first peeks in the bathroom and then the empty spare room before finding my bedroom. He lets himself in while Starlight runs behind him, twirling in circles and barking manically. I creep toward the doorway and lean against the wall, waiting.

“Jesus,” Joshua says. He’s standing in front of the wall of pet posters. By now I have nine dogs and ten cats. Starlight in the middle, of course, but the first thing Joshua notices is Trixie. He rips the flyer off the wall and waves it at me. “What the hell?”

“It’s just a collection. Some people collect stamps or coins. This is cheaper.” I try to smile but can’t quite make it.

“So you never saw Trixie at all.”

“How do I know you’re not the one lying to me? Maybe you saw me looking at that flyer and pretended he was yours to get me to talk to you.” As the words come out of my mouth, I start to believe them. It’s kind of clever, actually. I wish I thought of it earlier, whenever I saw a good-looking guy standing near a lost pet sign on the cafe bulletin board.

Joshua finally registers Starlight’s poster in the middle. “Well, shit. You stole someone’s dog.”

“Stole’ is a strong word. Look, she loves me.” I call to Starlight and she trots over, her tongue lolling out of her mouth. At least it’s not Trixie, I think. Maybe that will be enough to save me.

He rattles the poster in his hands. “If you don’t call these people, I will.”

“Josh. Please.”

He raises his head and looks at me, clear-eyed. “I can’t believe this whole time I lived across the street from someone like you.”

**BLACK CAT. HELLO, THIS IS A PHOTO OF OUR CAT, BUT HE’S NOT ACTUALLY LOST. HE DIED AND I DIDN’T KNOW HOW TO BREAK IT TO MY 3-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER, SO I SAID HE RAN AWAY. SHE INSISTED WE TRY TO FIND THE CAT SO I MADE UP THESE POSTERS. DON’T JUDGE, THIS IS OUT OF LOVE.**

I find this flyer the next day, clear across the other side of town where I bring Starlight for a walk by the railroad tracks. From the distance I could tell it’s a poster I don’t have yet. At first I’m excited to have a new one, then ashamed when I remember my fight with Joshua, and finally conflicted when I actually read it. I consider taking the poster down
and adding it to my collection, but I stop myself at the last minute. It’s not real and it
doesn’t count. That cat is not lost somewhere in the world like the others.

It’s like that long-ago time I made posters for Scooter in my crooked child’s hand-
writing. They were meant to be a secret, but I couldn’t resist tacking them up around the
neighborhood. When my mother found out, she brought the posters to me and lay them
down in a row on the living room carpet. She looked straight at me but didn’t say a word.

I bend over at the waist and take a deep, ragged breath. Starlight gives my face a few
nervous licks. I let her. When I’m able to stand up again, I turn away from the cat poster
and wipe the tears from my face. Starlight circles at my feet, panting lightly. She’s looking
into the distance again, her body tensed and ready to run. I left my cell phone at home,
not that it matters, because the only person I’d want to call is my mother so she could tell
me what it was like when Scooter died. How she handled it, how she dealt with this pain.
What it felt to be truly on her own at last. Scooter was just a dog, but he was her life. With
him, she wasn’t alone.

My mother tried to tell me about pet heaven after Scooter died, but she cried the
whole time and I couldn’t bring myself to believe, not even at that young age. Anyone
could tell by looking in her face that it just wasn’t true. And so I pictured instead a loose
Scooter running free.

With Starlight still prancing around my legs, I sit down heavily on the curb. All at
once, I want to believe in pet heaven. I want to think that all these lost animals end up in
a place where they never grow tired or get in fights or go hungry. They take sun-drenched
naps and wake snuggled together, warm, their hearts beating close enough to remind
them of their mothers.

“Come here, Scooter,” I say, and stroke her silky ears. She stays still for this, almost
too still, like she can make up for what I have lost if only she is good enough.

STILL MISSING. $500 reward for Starlight’s safe return.

The new flyer appears that evening. I stare at it for a long time, that dollar amount,
and then glance around, as if someone might be watching. I rip the flyer off the pole in
one quick motion and hurry back home.

I could hide Starlight for a while, maybe with my friend Karen in Ohio. Or I could
disguise her, maybe dye her fur? Turn that back foot from white to black? My mother
would have liked that. She would have encouraged anything that let me keep this dog, I
just know it. I need to think of a better plan.

Or I could call that number and return Starlight to her family.

Starlight’s new poster says she has a nine-year-old boy waiting at home. The parents
had him add, “Please help find my best friend,” in his own handwriting at the bottom.
That was kind of genius. That’s the reason I’m hovering over my cell phone, about to pick
it up.

But I’m not sure. Maybe Joshua is too cowardly to turn me in. Besides, that back paw
isn’t all white. Just partially. And who could tell if these are really Starlight’s eyes when the
poster’s such a bad photocopy? This could be anyone’s dog. It could be no one’s. It could
be mine.

I hold the poster in my left hand and pick up the phone with my right. I don’t
have to do this. Starlight lies contentedly at my feet. She’ll fall asleep soon, then twitch
mid-dream. I sigh and dial the number on the sheet. It rings once, twice. When someone finally answers I close my eyes. I can’t speak.

“Hello?” the voice on the other end says. “Hello? Anyone there?” I bet she hasn’t hung up yet in case it’s about Starlight. It’s been weeks and still they’re hoping.

I open my eyes, ready to speak, when Starlight sits up to study me. I look at her but think instead of Joshua. Then I blink and everything shifts, and I’m seeing my mother, way back when she shook Scooter’s leash into the air. It hurts, it’s paralyzing, and that woman on the phone is breathing into my ear, but I’m not talking.

Starlight bumps her cold nose along the back of my hand, and when I look into her eyes I see the glossy reflection of something hard to translate, some inscrutable combination of freedom and longing. She sits on her narrow haunches and looks at me, waiting, trusting that she’ll be granted a return to her past life. For a moment, I think I understand where pets go when they disappear and why we are left behind, clumsy and grieving and lost, unable to follow.

The woman has started asking, “Are you there? Are you there?” over and over. I hang up and tuck the phone in my pocket. Within seconds, I feel the vibrations of an incoming call, but I ignore it. I call Starlight’s name and she thrusts her snout in my hands. I pet her all over. I speak in low tones and soothe her shivering. I treat her like my own.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

THE FISHERMAN
(for Al)

As we stood in the rain on the west bank of the Gallatin so you could scout the water for trout, you noted

fish were rising near the far bank,
and I agreed, though truly, I realized once I discounted the pockmarks of rain,

I saw no fish, none of the silver flashes you mentioned, no dimples on the surface, just shallow water running fast, and shadows

that were rocks. It takes a trained eye to see things like trout rising in the rain. Some things only a fisherman can see.