Free Fiction: “The Dog Days” by Bruce McWhorter

 When he could still speak, when human communication wasn’t all growls, grunts and slapping saliva, Dad used to tell stories with big words. “You see son,” he said, “Every empire has a *hegemony* over the world for a while, but then it declines, someone new takes over. The Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the English, all straddled the earth like gods until their time passed and only their broken statues remained. “Like that poem “Ozymandias”? I asked.

 “Yes, or like the movie *Planet of the Apes*,” he said. It happened in our house, as I suppose it did in everyone’s, over many years and then all at once. Dad said that man *domesticated* dogs when he built *civilization*. Villages had trash heaps where people threw out bones and scraps. Wolves skulked in from the forest sniffing white fat and slick bones; all they had to do was bow their heads, whimper a little, and they wouldn’t have to stalk rabbits with their ribs sticking out anymore.

 They became useful, indispensable: hunting, fetching, guarding, chasing rats, herding sheep. People thought their dogs were servants, but they weren’t; they were students, learning all the time. Old Sparky on the rug in front of the fireplace wasn’t just dozing, his droopy eyes took it all in, and his floppy ears heard everything. Dad said it was the language that did it.

Thinking it was cute, people spoke to their dogs in baby talk:

 “Does wittow Buster wanna treat?” “Does Buster wanna go for walk go pee-pee?” This speciously innocuous infantilization of language helped dogs to understand and, over time, to mimic. People exchanged Tick-tock videos of dogs mouthing, “Rye Ruv Ru,”their canine jaws annunciating the words with startling clarity. All the while humans grew inept, dependent on technology laced with mind-damaging subliminal programs (Chinese in origin some thought, while they still could). In addition, people no longer worked; ninety percent of families drew government subsidies, so humans lost the quickening *sturm und drang* of workplace competition.

 “Who is that mean lookin’ dude on the twenty again?” someone said.

 “I dunno, Goggle it,” came the invariable reply.

 As dogs grew closer to their humans, mimicry morphed to envy. Lines blurred and places changed; dogs occupied baby strollers while human children were tugged around the mall on leashes. Social media influencers paraded their dogs in designer fashions, and the masses followed suit. Entrepreneurs opened doggy gyms; with proper resistance training, canine hindquarters could be strengthened, so dogs could walk on two legs

 I remember the day when the October Revolution, the Storming of the Winter Palace, happened at our house. It started at Breakfast. Rex, our yellow Labrador Retriever, sat on his haunches at the head of the table. At first we thought it was cute, but now he refused to sit on the floor. Rex sported doggy Levis 501s with a hole for his tail, and a pink shirt proclaiming MOMMY’S LITTLE PRINCESS - Rex wasn’t much of a reader. Dad slumped over the table in a mustard stained wife-beater with uncombed hair; mom tried to look pretty, but we weren’t sure why. While Rex tore into his steak and lapped from his silver dish, Mom, Dad and I ate air-fryer tater tots and chicken wings with our hands - knives, forks and spoons had become a hassle.

 Rex wolfed his steak, looked at dad and barked, “Rex rant go rog park!” My father looked confused, “Daddy play C-Call of Duty with friend,” he stuttered, drooling.

 “Rex rant go rog park rite row!” Rex said, his words trailing into a shivering growl. Daddy bowed his head, got up, fetched the spit-stinking tennis ball bucket. We exhaled when Rex’s tail started wagging.

 That night was worse. My parent’s bedroom door stood open, so Rex could use his indoor litter box. Mom played Tetris on her phone waiting for dad to brush his teeth; she wore a silky nightgown and had combed her blonde hair smooth. Rex hoarded the middle of the bed, his head on her lap. On my way to get a drink of water, I stood in the dark hallway feeling uneasy, wondering what would happen. Thinking he had earned Rex’s favor at the park, Dad switched off the light, sat assertively on the bed and said, “C’mon big fella, time for you to go down on the floor.” When Dad playfully shoved his head, Rex shot up to a sitting position growling and baring his teeth. Their eyes locked, Rex rumbled like thunder, Dad didn’t back down. Then Rex lunged and caught Dad by the mouth, his canines pinched dad’s lower lip and cheek. He didn’t bite down or draw blood, but Dad didn’t move a nerve, eyes round as moons. Rex let go and Dad sagged from the bed onto the floor. He balled up like a fetus in the corner, staring into the blue glow of his phone.

 Rex licked mom’s face, and then pulled down her nightgown’s shoulder strap with his teeth. Mom giggled like a teenager. She didn’t pull away when he nuzzled beneath the covers either. I felt kind of sick and dirty inside. I couldn’t watch anymore, but I heard them; Rex grunted faster and faster while mom growled with pleasure.

 That was five years ago. Me and fifty other teenagers live in a barbed-wire enclosed concrete kennel. German Shepherds, wearing long overcoats, walk on their hind legs patrolling the perimeter. They carry rifles too; animal rights activists crafted special gloves that fit over their paws so they can aim and pull triggers. Drinking from buckets and sleeping on pissy mattresses is degrading, but they let us charge our phones. Even animals know that watching pixels keeps us humans docile. I’m using my phone to keep this journal. After they breed me, I hope to pass reading and writing on to my whelps. Maybe in a few hundred years, when the dog days are over, humans will get a chance to take the world back.