

## Ashes

It was the end of December in Western Massachusetts and it had already been a cold winter. There was no way I was going to dig a grave, let alone one that complied with the local ordinances or my own vague sense of how flesh interacted with the microbiology of the local soil. That is when our dog's kidneys gave out. He was 14 years old and it was time to say farewell, which we did unceremoniously with him in the trunk of our car behind the vet's office – under layers of grey clouds, fleece, and tears.

Three weeks later there was a message on the answering machine saying I could pick up the ashes. The ashes were slid across the counter in a brown bag along with a certificate verifying that these were, in fact, his ashes – I guess there could be scams in the canine cremation business, but I had never thought about that. I paid and left. Since I hadn't had the foresight to look at Shopzilla or Price Grabber, I had no idea if it was a fair price. I did try to do a quick back-of-the-envelope calculation on the energy required to reduce 55 pounds of flesh and bones to a pound of ash at today's energy prices. Then there was the cost of transporting biohazards and so on. This macabre diversion ended and I drove home.

When warmer weather rolled around it is time to think through the options. I thought of the Hindus in India, where cremation is a tradition going back to at least 1,000 BC, with the ashes being scattered in a river, preferably the Ganges. There were plenty of candidate water bodies around, but this was a Belgian Shepard, not a Lab or Water Spaniel, and I could imagine his ghost tugging at my arm as I approached any river or stream. I thought of the spectacular, renting a hot air balloon or persuading one of the local glider pilots to take him aloft.

But finally, ashes to ashes, dust to dust seemed right. But where could I deposit the small tin canister that had been patiently waiting on an old oak chest-of-drawers? For years he would play with our younger dog near an old weathered barn behind our house. It was one of those you-chase-me games with no goal or end point except the sheer pleasure of movement. But slowly he lost his sight, his hearing, and his ability to maneuver and would just stand, perfectly grounded, in one spot. Even with all his frailties, he could drive our younger dog in endless playful loops with a few good head fakes – he was just that smart. In the end, he became the center of his universe. And that is where he lies.