



MIRA BARTÓK

## Alternate Endings

In my end is my beginning

—*T. S. Eliot*

—*Mary, Queen of Scots*



## Laika

**A**FTER THE DOG ARRIVED, strangers began showing up in town every few months or so. If you asked them why they were there—and people rarely did—the strangers would have said: “I am visiting someone” or “I am lost” or “I am a salesman.” But really, none of these things would be true. If you asked one of the strangers to tell the truth, and of course he would be embarrassed to tell it, he would have looked down at his feet and said, after a long awkward pause, “I am here to see the dog.”

The dog was Laika, Russia’s little cosmonaut, who, after orbiting the earth for one hundred years, had finally come home. The authorities had secretly relocated her to a quiet suburb, deep in the heartland of America. The cold war had been over for some time and we were glad to help.

Laika had lived most of her life trapped in a space capsule. She could sit up and lie down and that was about it. But now that she was given the chance to run free, the dog chose to sit for hours without moving. She sat in the same place every day, in front of a plain yellow house, in the middle of the road, on an average American street. The street was a cul-de-sac with small bungalows and neatly trimmed lawns. One kind of flower—a sort of fragrant pinkish kind whose name no one remembered anymore—lined the edges of the yards. In front of each house was a statue of a bear, a deer, or a wolf, reminders of what used to be, not so long ago. There, on the street, Laika sat still, year after year after year. If you drove up to the yellow house in the falling light and saw Laika’s silhouette, you might think that she too was a statue of something ancient and wild.

**I**N AUTUMN ON SATURDAY MORNINGS, while the women in town made inventories of their cupboards and baked sugar cookies in the shapes of animals and trees, the men came out of their houses to rake and sweep. They swept the yellow and red

leaves into plastic bags, to be taken away by big black trucks in the middle of the night, while everyone was sleeping. Where the leaves were taken, no one knew. But by the next day, the street was always clean again. It was on such a day, one Saturday like any other, that the young man appeared. Something about this stranger was different from the others. Of course, no one in town noticed that fact. They were quite busy with their baking and their sweeping.

“Hi, how-ya-doin’?” said one resident after another as they swept, and as the slight, black-haired man made his way up the hill to the yellow house which sat at the center of the cul-de-sac. When he got to the top of the hill, there was Laika. The dog was just sitting there; looking straight ahead.

After all these years of searching, he had found her. The dog looked just like she did in the pictures only she wasn’t wearing her helmet. The young black-haired man took off his glasses and stepped closer to regard the dog, but the dog did not regard him. The young man thought, perhaps one must pay for this sort of thing. He saw an older man from the yellow house carrying a bag of leaves to the curb. “Excuse me,” the young man called out. “Hello?”

The older man glanced at his watch, and said, slightly annoyed, “You’re early.” He shoved the bag of leaves at the young man. “Don’t look like a leaf-collector but hey, who the hell knows these days, right?” He laughed that bitter laugh that ushers from the mouths of men whose hearts, after many years of disappointment and misfortune, have turned into hard leather sacks.

The young man said, “I’m sorry. I am here about the dog. Are you its owner?”

The older man snickered. “Heh. Not *my* dog. That scruffy thing’s nobody’s dog. People come here thinking they’re gonna get something from that smelly old mutt but they all leave empty-handed. That’s life, right, am I right, am I right?”

Laika, lonely comrade, shining hero—What had she seen all those years in space, viewing Earth from such a distance? Her ears still perked up when she heard a car coming down the road, and her tail sometimes wagged in greeting. But her eyes—they

were so moist and forlorn. They say that some dogs contain all the sorrows of the world—its heartaches and hurricanes, its floods and firestorms of regret. Others contain the world’s secret joys, its mysteries and wisdom. But to the strangers who traveled far and wide to find her—Laika seemed to possess all these things, buried deep within her canine soul.

**THE YOUNG MAN DECIDED** to take a walk around the cul-de-sac in order to clear his mind and gather information. Some people were out on their lawns, trimming small bushes into the shapes of birds; others were still sweeping up leaves. The young man asked a couple of people how long the dog had been in town but no one seemed to know. One old-timer said the dog had always been sitting in the road. “I remember playing kickball right in that very spot,” he said, pointing to where the dog sat. “Damn dog wouldn’t budge, even when we threw the ball at its head.”

“That dog was here before they even built this road,” said another man.

“*That* dog? She was here before they built the town,” said a woman walking her cat. It seemed to be the only cat in the neighborhood, at least from what the young man could see. The woman whispered in his ear, “I think that dog is lost—but no one gives a damn anymore.”

He’d heard the stories. How Laika—from living in a continuous state of rapture in space, blessed by starlight and God—was one of the points in the universe that contained all points. It was said that, if you were so fortunate as to look into the dog’s eyes, and it chose to look into yours, you could go on the Magellan voyage of a lifetime—experiencing the world from every angle, every single moment in time, every source of light and eternal truth.

The young man sat down on the curb a few feet from the dog. He fumbled in his pockets. “I’m sorry,” he said to Laika. He had forgotten to bring a treat for her. Did space dogs like treats? What did Laika eat all those years floating above in the nether sphere? He thought about the dog’s sacrifice for science—how those she trusted had sent her on a doomed mission to circle the

Earth. No one thought she'd ever return. What do you feed a dog raised on stardust and betrayal?

The young man thought about how sad it must have been to be gone so long, away from everyone and everything you loved. "Hey there, girl," he said, not knowing what to say. What did one say to a dog like that? "Good dog," said the young man, and patted Laika on the head.

The man scratched behind Laika's ears, rubbed her a little beneath her chin in that place that's hard to get with your paw. "Good dog," he said again. He thought he felt something stir inside Laika, but he wasn't sure.

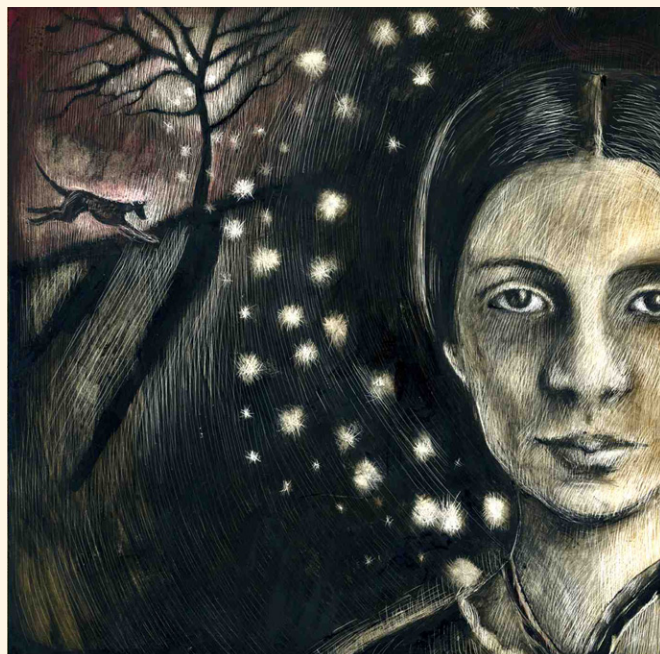
Then the young man knelt before the dog and looked into her eyes. To Laika, the man's face, unlike all the other faces of the strangers who had come to town to find her, seemed not to resemble a question mark but rather, some kind of answer.

The young man thought a thought to the dog. And, being who she was, the dog understood. The man told Laika that he wouldn't ask anything of her—knowledge of the cosmos, or the answer to the beginning of time. He wouldn't ask for prophecies or any good fortunes. He just wanted to know if Laika wanted to come home with him. "I could give you a nice little bed," he thought to the dog. "I could give you hot dogs and cheese. Or tuna fish." He told Laika that she could go on as many walks as she wanted—if walking was what she wanted to do, if she was into that sort of thing. "Or we could ride my bike to the park," the young man said to Laika. "You could sit in the basket. There's a water slide at the park too. I think you'd like it."

When the young man was finished, he sat quietly and waited. Maybe Laika didn't understand him. Maybe she was so tired of people and she just wanted to be left alone. But after a moment, the young man saw Laika's eyes light up just a bit. Then the dog regarded the man and the man regarded the dog. Laika thought this thought to the young man who was now petting her back quite softly—"I would like a nice little bed. And I have never been on a water slide, not even in space. But first, I shall give you a gift, for you are the only one who has ever given something to me and not asked for something in return."

IT SEEMED TO THE YOUNG MAN that he sat there for a lifetime that day. For, in one glorious and unbounded moment, while he stared into the little dog's eyes, he grasped the infinity of all things. He saw every point in the cosmos; every tumultuous sea, each and every equatorial desert, each forest leaf and dampened bed of moss; he saw enduring marvels both imaginary and real, a canon of horrors, a canon of beautiful things: a glowing carbuncle, a gilded walnut carved into a minute and magical city. He saw an elephant transform into a child, and the child become a glittering stone. He saw a bird pluck the stone in its beak and drop it on the head of a dragon and inside the dragon's mouth he glimpsed the heart of hell; he saw the tusk of a narwhal rise from the foam of the sea, and the sea was a drop of water inside the palm of his mother's hand, and inside her hand he saw a glimpse of heaven. He saw a phoenix die and become a golden mountain, embraced by all the oceans of the world. He saw a wave become a flock of doves; he saw a chameleon swivel its eye and its eye became the eye of God, and God a crystal of ice upon the eyelash of his own pale face. Within the crystal he saw the circulation of his blood, he saw all words, every grain of sand, all vapors rising from the earth. He saw inside his own beating heart, and inside his heart was a sun-dappled forest, where he saw a pack of dogs running free. And at the end of his vision, the young man felt infinite compassion, innumerable joys, and boundless light.

LAIKA, LITTLE LOST COSMONAUT, champion of space, got up, stretched her legs, and wagged her tail. She nudged the young man's foot with her nose and made a small grunting sound. Then Laika barked. It was a soft, reedy sort of bark, her first in years. She barked again, this time louder. The young man looked down at the dog. The dog looked up at him. The young man knew exactly what to do next. He took out a bright green tennis ball from his pocket and tossed it as far as he could. Laika bounded after the ball. "Good dog!" the young man said, and the two of them ran and played their way down the hill, to the open road that always leads to home.



## EMILY, Called Back

**Y**OU COULD SAY she had very few friends but then again, there were the portraits on her wall of the Reverend and the Judge, and she spoke to them daily. There was her small cane chair and desk (which she spoke to as well), and her books and her drawers of poems. And of course, her family—sister, sister-

in-law, brother, the whole complicated lot of them. And Carlo, her large lump of a dog. But in the last year of her life, the poet surrounded herself with more luminous friends.

On her desk, Emily kept a list of all her visitors that year: phosphorescent beetles, bacteria, jellyfish, worms, crustaceans, protozoa, lichen, fireflies, fungus, dinoflagellates, mold, and a few mollusks—so many creatures brimming with light. At night, the small clams that came to her were particularly demonstrative in their love, ejaculating a twinkling light show before Emily went to bed. The poet told no one, not even her beloved sister Lavinia. Some relationships are best kept secret.

As soon as the sun set upon Amherst Common, the fireflies sought out their host. So many glowworms and bioluminescent bacteria converged in Emily's bedroom that she arranged tiny bell jars for them beneath her bed. She drew them to her and she was drawn to their light. Each life form's radiance gathered lovingly into her living cells, making a home there, multiplying and multiplying until there was no more room for blood or darkness, sorrow or loss.

Her health was failing, true, but her heart felt lighter than it had in years. The doctor finally diagnosed Bright's disease, an untreatable disorder of the kidneys, but who really knew what ailed the poet in the end? In all the years he had treated her, she would not let the doctor enter her room. No pulse or temperature was taken, no blood drawn from her frail white arms. No one had been in her chambers for years.

But Emily was never without company.

She met her friends at night in the forest, or in the garden, when a hush fell over the town, or in her quiet room upstairs in the big yellow house on Main Street. They even followed her in her dreams, singing her to sleep as the moon rose above the trees outside her window.

Then, one gentle night in May, Emily slipped out to the garden and into the woods for the last time. She placed small bits of phosphorescent lichen between her toes to light her way. It was here, in the darkling woods, months before, that she had first met her incandescent congregation.

The leafy world unfurled below her as she walked, catlike, to her secret place among the mosses, the mushrooms and the newts. She felt the pain in the small of her back again but no matter. She had made it here one last time to say goodbye. “Come, my little ones,” she said. “Let me read you a poem.”

**THE NEXT MORNING**, after knocking for over an hour, Emily’s sister entered the poet’s room for the first time in twenty years. When Lavinia saw what rose before her, above her sister’s bed, she dropped the breakfast tray, scattering scones and tea things everywhere: it was Emily’s white dress, but woven from light, dazzling as a star, floating upward toward the ceiling. A cloud of fireflies circled round it as the garment made its luminous ascent. Emily was nowhere to be found. But as her sister’s dress faded from this earthly plane, Lavinia felt, for one brief moment, a collective, trembling sigh from inside the hundreds of glass jars beneath her sister’s bed.



## Jewel Casket

**I**N JOSEPH CORNELL’S HOUSE on Utopia Parkway, inside this small, secret room where the artist once built his magical worlds—cluttered with swan feathers and sea glass, soap bubbles, maps, postage stamps, jars of tiny tin spoons, fortune telling

cards, a blue egg, a labyrinth, a music box, an ivory thimble, and a photograph of the Aegean Sea—there is a box.

The box is filled with small transparent blocks that resemble cubes of ice. Beneath the cubes, under blue glass, there are necklaces, sand, crystals, and rhinestones resting on a mirror. If you gaze at the mirror at just the right angle, you can see infinity—room upon room upon room. Cornell dedicated the box to one of his most beloved obsessions, the legendary nineteenth-century ballerina Marie Taglioni, who, it is said, was so adored by fans that following her final performance, a man purchased a pair of her pointe shoes for two hundred rubles, cooked them in a fine sauce, and served them to several of his closest friends.

Inside the top of Marie Taglioni's box, Cornell wrote a story, describing a pivotal event in the life of the famous ballerina. What happened was this: on a moonlit night in the winter of 1835, a Russian highwayman halted Marie Taglioni's carriage. The bandit spread a panther skin over the snowy earth and demanded that the enchanting prima donna dance for him. The ballerina acquiesced and gave one of her best performances, for an audience of one, under the stars. From this story arose the legend that, to keep alive the memory of her adventure in the moonlit snow, Marie formed the habit of placing a piece of ice in her jewel casket where, melting among the sparkling stones, she evoked a hint of, as Cornell puts it, "the atmosphere of starlit heavens over the ice-covered landscape."

There were other prima donnas that Cornell immortalized after Marie Taglioni. He kept the memory of Marie's rival, Fanny Cerrito, alive in a box of faded daguerreotypes and ephemera. Throughout the years, he commemorated Carlotta Grisi, Fanny Elssler and a host of other Swan Princesses, and Sleeping Beauties in one magical box or another. But Marie Taglioni's box was the most beautiful of them all.

**AFTER CORNELL DIED** his boxes were collected and dispersed. Some were destroyed by fire or humidity, others by floods, termites or frost. Many survived, however, but only to be placed in storage in various museums scattered across the continents.

What most people do not know is that the Jewel Casket that Cornell made for his favorite ballerina resides in two places at the same time. There is one box stored deep in the bowels of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. And there is another, still sitting on Cornell's worktable in his family home on Utopia Parkway. You could easily miss it if you walked into the room—it is buried beneath a pile of old newspapers, postcards, mouse droppings, and recipes for pies. Cornell possessed quite a fondness for pies.

Hidden in the box inside one of the cubes—it is not known which one—lies Joseph Cornell's soul. It is a crumbled sort of soul, the kind you might find inside the pocket of a coat you sent to the cleaner's and forgot to remove beforehand. A thin, papery soul, full of silence and regret, imprinted with the scent of dust and pressed roses. It is a soul that, after many years in storage, longs for reverie and twilight. It travels at night but always returns to its box with the blue glass and the little ice-like cubes. It is a soul that never rests, not in death—nor in sleep—even when embraced within the arms of the most enchanted dreamers.



## The Hunger Artist

**I**N VIENNA, in the silent, white room of a crumbling sanatorium, the day nurse found Kafka's emaciated corpse, slumped over his small desk, his head resting on a letter he had written the night before to an unnamed woman in Prague:

My Dearest, my Nemesis, my Love,

Everything I leave behind bury unread—my books, my heart, my letters inscribed to you on bark and autumn leaves. Bury my portrait, my nightcap, your white dress of lightning. Bury our long embrace, our bodies burning behind closed doors. What the hell. Bury them all!

Well . . . maybe not all. Maybe just one or two. Or maybe just my books? Oh, I don't know. What do you think? I can't make up my mind. Please, my little dumpling—would you call my mother and ask her what she thinks? I know you think she doesn't like you but she's that way with everyone. Trust me.

Oh, my darling crumb cake, my kugeleh, my little prune Danish . . . so many regrets—if only I had been something more to you than a tin of sardines or a plate being cleared from the table . . . If only I had been a king rather than a lowly scribe; or a castle, not a village buried under snow . . . well, you catch my drift.

My little minx, my monster, my delicate angel—winter has been such a slow, tinkling journey of black crows. Is this how it will end? Will sulfur rain down from the heavens while I sit here alone, starving to death? Will an asteroid fall? Will a tornado kill me? A hurricane? A hailstorm? Aliens? Will there be locusts and frogs? Will I get boils? What if I get boils, bad ones, you know the kind. Remember that rash of them I had in Paris? I think we can all agree that those were the worst boils ever. I couldn't sit down for a month.

Well, as Mother used to say, nobody likes a whiner. Therefore, I don't like myself.

Forgive me but I am a dog. No—on second thought, I am just a dog's discarded bone. No . . . wait a minute . . . not a bone. That's not right either. An earthworm. Yes, something squishy with an anus at either end. Is that right though? Do worms have two anuses? I have heard that if you decapitate one, it will grow another head. I wonder if it would grow another anus? I could use another one right now, to tell you the truth. The food they give you here! Don't get me started. Oh, if only I hadn't left my encyclopedia in Prague. Or that zoology textbook you gave me.



You always did give the sweetest gifts. Okay, let's say cockroach to be sure. I know. I've used that one before. But it really works. I am a cockroach. I was born a cockroach and will die one as well.

Oh my nemesis, my love, bury my untouched plate, my fountain pen and shoes, my photograph of you in the snow. And that other photograph that you still have and you said you'd give back to me but you always say you'll do something and then you never do. God, that drives me mad!

So in conclusion, in the end, at my final hour (oh yes, this is it, and once again, you didn't call, you never call—why don't you ever call? Is it too much to ask for you to talk for one measly hour a week?) . . . In the end, I was just a file of words to you, left lying on the floor, just a few scattered teeth and an old, crumpled hat. Bury those as well, my darling, my little golem, my love. I bid thee Farewell. I am going now. This is it. But you still have time to call. I'm not dead yet.

Yours in eternity,

Franz

p.s. I'm not sure about the hat. If you know someone who needs a hat, by all means, give it to him. It was my father's and was quite expensive and stylish in its day. All it needs is a bit of cleaning and it will look as good as new. But listen—if you give it to that asshole you slept with last year, I swear, with God as my witness, I will squash him like a bug. Well, you know, if I come back as a ghost or something.