Nicky is standing over there by the edge of the field looking at something. He's the one that killed Caspar. He and his friend Rocco. We can't prove it though, since no one actually saw them, and we never found Caspar's body.

He doesn't notice me right away, then he does, and I watch the way his body suddenly goes on alert. He stares at me for a moment, and even though he's still fifty feet away, I can see his eyes. He starts coming toward me, and I stop where I am on the gravel road to see what he will do. As he gets closer, he slows his pace and starts crouching down, his eyes still fixed on me. It's as if he's in slow motion, one leg slowly going out in front of the other. By the time he reaches me his stomach is practically scraping the ground, and his ears are pulled back. It's what they do if they think you're more powerful than they are and they don't want a fight.

He looks up at me now with his weird eyes. One is brown and normal-looking, but the other is pale blue, so it looks fake, like a glass eye. I never know which eye to look at.

'Murderer,' I say to him. He just looks at me. So I say it again, not yelling, but low and quiet, and icy cold.

He takes this as a sign that it's okay to get up, and he does, though he's still doing his slow motion thing, and his ears are so far back his eyes are bulging. He begins to sniff cautiously at my right pocket.

'Not for you,' I say. 'Not for murderers.' I give him a hard look, and continue on my walk up the gravel road.

I have never liked dogs. I'm a cat person. What I carry in my pocket is for my own protection. People are very inconsiderate when it comes to their dogs. They must think people enjoy having a strange animal bark and snarl at them and nip at their pant legs when they're trying to have a pleasant walk or run. I like to keep things friendly, so I always come prepared. It's amazing what a biscuit will do to tame up a snarling dog.
There's a leash law, even out here in the county, but most people ignore it. Most of the loose dogs stay pretty close to home, though. Guarding their turf, my husband calls it. But others, like Nicky, think they own the world.

I used to chase him off our land whenever I saw him. There was Caspar to think about. I'd yell 'Go home! Nicky, go home!' and sometimes wave a broom. After a while he'd cringe when he heard my voice, even if I was just out talking to a neighbor and he happened to be around.

I can't believe he's following me now, but he is. He's never done that before. I turn and look behind me and he stops. When I stare at him, he starts slinking toward the ground again.

Once, during our first year here, I looked out the window and saw Nicky chasing Caspar across the back yard. I ran out on the deck and hollered 'Nicky!' just once, as loud as I could, and he stopped right in his tracks. Caspar bolted up the back steps and into the open door. He was three times his normal size, and his heart was pounding like a jackhammer.

He was six months old and already partially declawed when I got him. My husband surprised me with him on my 43rd birthday. His coat was still creamy, and his tips were a pale bluish grey. He would climb up on my chest and put his little paws around my neck and nuzzle and purr and look at me with his blue eyes. On days when we were home alone, he'd follow me from room to room.

Some people think I should have kept Caspar inside all the time, since he had no front claws. But Caspar loved to go outside and it seemed to me that he had a right to. We have five acres of nice rolling fields full of brambles and wild flowers and brome. I figured if we watched him, and he had places to hide, he'd be okay.

'You're a despicable animal,' I say to Nicky, and continue along the road up toward a cluster of houses.

Most of the dogs around here aren't bad ones. Not like Nicky and Rocco. You just have to get to know them a little. Like Juliet here. She starts barking as I approach, but when she sees it's me she
smiles and comes running. She's a big orange something—I don't know breeds, but she looks like a fat woman stuffed into a thick red fox fur coat. When she runs, she heaves her head up and down, like a work horse straining with a heavy load. Secretly I call her Miss Piggy. She snorts and pushes me a little with her wet nose and I reach into my pocket and give her a biscuit.

In a moment Basil appears. He lives next door to Juliet. And then Pepper, from the house after that, comes lumbering over. I give them both biscuits and they chomp them down and wag their tails. By that time Juliet wants another, so I give them all an extra half. Pepper was hit by a car once so he limps. He's allergic to fleas; I can see the scabs on his back where the bites festered. He and Juliet and Basil are pals, and hang out together.

Nicky watches all this from a little way back. He looks like a coyote. At least how I think a coyote looks—dark and wild and sinewy. Except for his eyes. I don't think any coyote has a blue eye.

Nicky is mostly a loner. Except when Rocco manages to get loose. I'll hear some wild barking and look out to the fields across the road and see a black tail and a brown tail moving fast above the tall grasses. In a little while a head will come up—Nicky's or Rocco's. Once I saw them in a field up the road playing with something. They were throwing it up in the air and catching it in their teeth and having a grand old time. Then I saw that it was a groundhog. I shuddered, wondering if it was dead yet.

I give Basil and Pepper and Juliet a pat and then I continue up the gravel road. When I turn on to the state road, I see that Nicky is still following me. As I go up the tarmac, he falls into step beside me. I can hear his hard leathery paws and nails clicking on the pavement.

It's dangerous on this state road, and whenever any of the other dogs try to follow me, I tell them to go home, and they do. Brownie used to live on this road, and she was run over by a car last year. She was a nice dog.

But I don't say anything to Nicky. He wanders out into the middle of the road and just barely gets to the other side when a car whizzes by. Then he ambles over to the yellow lines in the
middle sniffing something, and barely moves when another car comes. The driver gives me an ugly look. I wish I had a big sign I could hang around my neck that said: This is Not My Dog; I am Not Responsible.

I wonder for a moment how I would feel if Nicky was hit. I used to tell my husband that if any dog ever killed Caspar I would load up his .22 and shoot the dog. If I had caught them in the act, I would have, too. As it was, I only saw their tails and heads above the weeds in the back field one morning. I thought it was a rabbit they were hunting. I yelled, and they went loping down the road to someone else's yard.

When Caspar didn't come home that night, I hunted all over for him, and called and called until my voice was hoarse. I even put on my tall boots and started over to where I had seen Nicky and Rocco. But it was full of blackberry brambles and thorny wild roses and I had to stop. It may be just as well that I didn't find what I'm sure was there.

Nicky has found something on the side of the road that interests him, and he's sniffing at it enthusiastically. Dogs have amazing noses. I often wish I had a nose like that, although what I smelled would probably disgust me.

Caspar used to sit in the golden rod and Queen Anne's Lace for hours watching and smelling things. Sometimes he brought back birds and baby rabbits and ground squirrels in his mouth. I don't know how he ever caught them without front claws, but somehow he managed. I always scolded him, and tried to take whatever he'd caught away from him. But he'd run off and eat it. I fed him plenty, so it wasn't that he was hungry. It's what cats do, my husband always said.

I reach the stop sign, which is as far as I go, and I turn around and start back. Nicky turns with me. I can't believe he's come this far. We must be two miles away from where he lives.

When Caspar disappeared and I called all the neighbors to ask them to keep an eye out for him, I found out something interesting. Caspar used to go to the neighbor's a quarter mile away and stroll across her deck. He was quite a character, my neighbor said. I had no idea.
It's been five months now, and sometimes I still hear him. Only last month I got up in the middle of the night and ran down to the back door. It must have been a trick of the wind.

When we get back to the gravel road, Nicky goes on a little in front of me. I can see a callous on his right foreleg. It's dark and hard-looking, like the crust on an old wound. He sniffs at something and I pass him. I feel him notice, and pull himself away from the smell to continue behind me, as if we are together. Suddenly this makes me very angry. I turn to face him. His body goes on alert again.

'Stop following me!' I yell in my strongest voice. 'Go home!' He slouches down at my feet, and rolls over, exposing his stomach, the way dogs do to show submissiveness. He stares at me steadily, unblinking. I look first at his blue eye, the same blue as Caspar's, and then at his brown one. I wonder suddenly what it would feel like to sink my shoe hard into his soft belly. But looking at him there, stretched out as if to say, *Go ahead if it will make you feel better,* I don't feel angry any more. Just kind of sad.

I suppose it's possible that it wasn't Nicky at all. It could have been a groundhog. Some huge ones live around here, and Caspar may have gotten a little too nosy with one of their burrows. It may even have been a fox. Or, who knows? Someone might have picked him up and taken him home. He was a such a beautiful, loving cat.

I put my hands in my pocket and turn to go. There's still half a biscuit there, and my hand falls on it. I take it out and offer it to Nicky. He slinks forward and pauses, studying me, as if to say, *Are you sure?* Then, with his eyes still on mine, he takes the biscuit delicately from my hand.

**Biography**

*Simone Poirer-Bures is the author of ‘Candyman’ (1994), a novel set in her native Nova Scotia, and ‘That Shining Place’ (1995), a memoir of Crete. Both books were published in Canada by Oberon Press. Her prose work has won numerous prizes in the United States and Canada, and has appeared in more than 25 journals and anthologies. Simone is a member of the English faculty at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia.*