The dog is our therapist. We walk on either side of her; we are children in time-out. She paces between us wearing her special collar that keeps her from jumping, the “Gentle Leader.” People on the street mistake it for a muzzle, but she could speak if she wished to. Right now she is listening, though she pulls just enough to let us know who is leading whom; the leash is the thread that separates and binds us.

We speak in code, representing the inside news from our contiguous countries: your secret drinking, my controlling nature. How we ended up in a small town, and the world has not changed because of us. The dog has dual citizenship. She doesn’t take sides.

“I shot a 49 on the front nine,” you say, “but the back nine came together. I knew I couldn’t afford any double bogies.”

I am not a golfer. I listen, wait, then mention dinner, wonder what we might have that doesn’t have to go with wine. Tuna salad? A hot dog?

The words we speak in our respective countries have resemblances, but they do not mean the same things: “false friends” abound. When you say “the back nine came together,” I wonder, is this an elliptical request that I should hang on; the past year was rough with a lot of mistakes, but the next months will be par? Perhaps you wonder whether there’s a clue to my next move in “tuna salad,” something served cold.

We are grateful for the dog. If she isn’t reassuring exactly, walking with her is a respite. The world we live in is tilted, a place without clear boundaries.

Children draw with fat pieces of colored chalk on the sidewalk. Two girls, plump in their cami’s and hot pink leggings, play hopscotch. A young tuxedo cat with a goofy, split face lies beneath a tree; its ears swivel along the path of the dog. You carry a bag in your back pocket to pick up what the dog leaves. A neighbor calls out and we wave. Sometimes we even hold hands. We are not only what we seem: an educated, articulate, middle-aged couple. The red coat of the dog catches the late afternoon light.

We smile at people in their yards, remarking on their zinnias, how much
we delight in them every year. The dog allows herself to be stroked on the head. She closes her eyes; she is conferring a favor. A train whistles. There are no passenger trains here anymore, just freight. Sometimes a person drinks too much and falls somewhere on the line and is killed or hurt, but that’s rare. Mostly, it’s just an old railroad town down on its luck.

At the corner of an alley a retired police dog rushes his chain link fence, barking sonorously. He is three times the size of our dog, but she looks neither to the right or left; he’s no threat to her.

The alley joins the backsides of houses from the town’s two most elegant streets. On the front side there are spacious porches and stained glass windows. Here is where the garbage cans live alongside garage doors and the rear entrance to the old Carnegie library. We like the alley. Someone’s been neatening: there’s a line of drooping hostas along a fence. A man is sitting with his young daughter in a glider in the middle of his yard with his shirt off as the sprinkler goes around. One yard is all tomato plants. Someone else has laid a slab for a patio. We have a sense we’re seeing the real neighborhood from this behind-the-scenes vantage point, though it is probably an illusion.

Just after we pass the back of the library you say, “I’ve been researching butt joints.” You’ve been building model boats in the basement, making them from patterns not kits, doing the complicated math yourself. At night you disappear down there and then the grinding and sanding starts up, a high-pitched, tediously on going whine. When it’s quiet, I know you’re contemplating the boat, pulling out the secret vodka from behind the paint thinner. The dog is afraid of the basement; she stays with me in the living room.

“A butt joint,” you are saying, “is the weakest type of joint—just one piece of wood laid up against another.” You gesture enthusiastically as you speak. In my mind’s eye I see the candid picture from our wedding that hangs in the bedroom. We are facing each other, sideways to the camera, heads bent over our two loosely joined hands as if we are replaying the moment of sliding the rings down our fingers. “Just to the first joint,” we were told by the old priest. “Don’t force it over the knuckle.” Now you say, “It’s the glue you have to rely on with a butt joint, though you can overlay the joint with another piece of wood. It’s still not as strong as a dovetail or a mitered joint, but it can work.” You marvel at what you have learned. You smell sweet, like vodka. We walk facing forward, facing the dog, heading to where the alley opens up to the street, our bodies not quite touching.

I want this to be metaphor. I want you to be saying that there is glue we can rely on even at this weakest juncture between us. What I don’t understand is this is your painful attempt to make conversation, to speak not in code but just
about something that interests you when so much else is fraught and painful.

As we pass the last house on the alley, the dog lunges against the leash, straining at something red in weeds on the other side of a picket fence: a ball just out of reach. She looks back at us and whines, then noses towards the ball, leaning hard against my hand, pulling me off balance. You understand she is saying something. You reach between the pickets, pluck the ball from the weeds, and toss. The dog catches it neatly, and we resume walking. Her plumed tail wafts with grave happiness. The ball is red and grimy, an abandoned child’s toy we will add to the collection of found balls on the front porch.

We turn down the last street towards home. You reach for my hand. The dog smiles around her ball.

“It’s important to know when to ask for help,” you say. My stomach clenches with hopefulness, though I fear you only mean the dog, the ball, that simple desire.