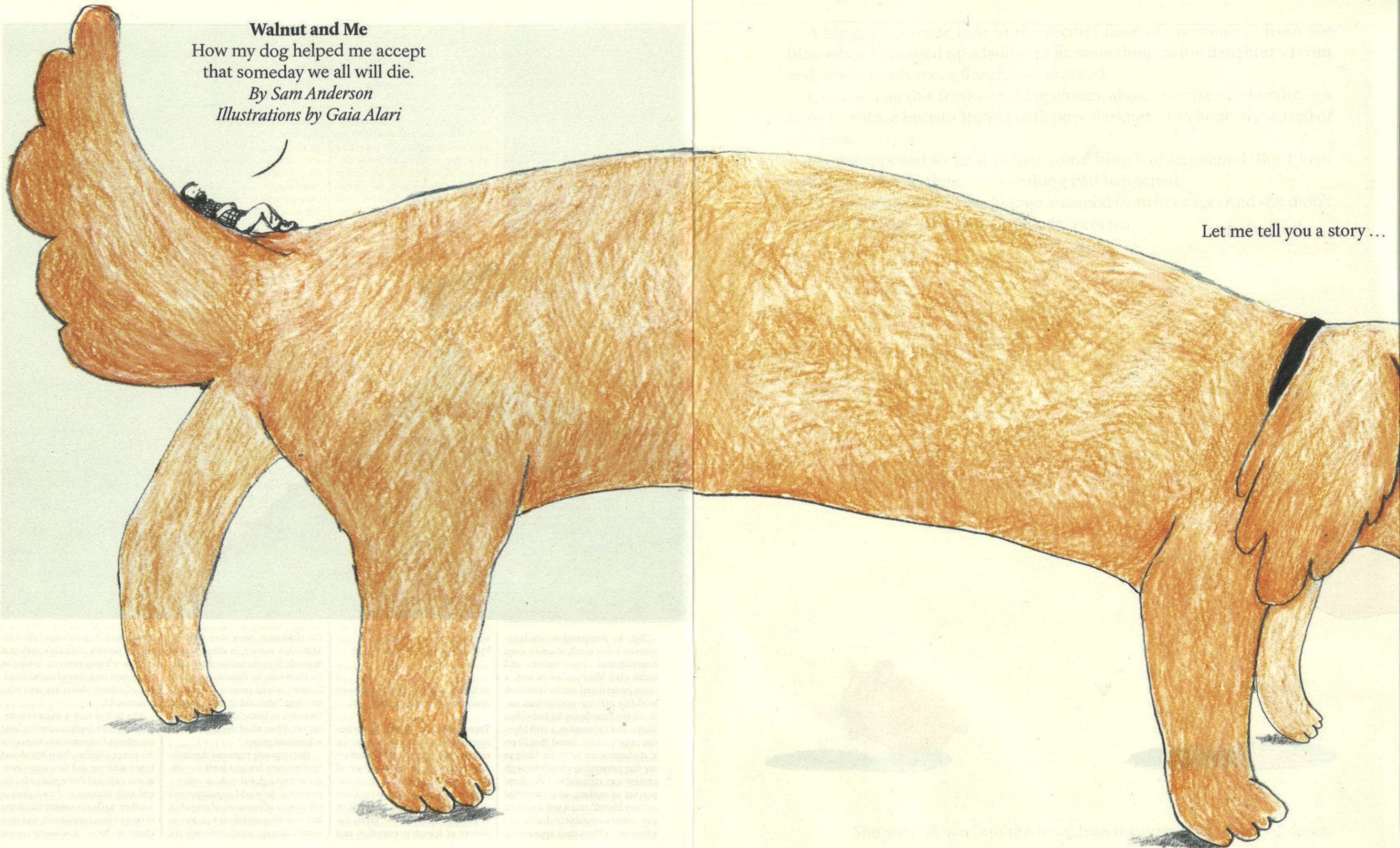


**Walnut and Me**

How my dog helped me accept  
that someday we all will die.

*By Sam Anderson*

*Illustrations by Gaia Alari*



Let me tell you a story ...



... about a hole.



A big gaping black hole in the second floor of my house — from the time when I climbed up a ladder to fix something in my daughter's room and, underneath me, a floorboard cracked.

It opened up this freaky-looking chasm, about the size of a burrito — a large burrito, a burrito stuffed with pure darkness. I'm honestly scared of this hole.

I was supposed to fix it before something bad happened. But I kept putting it off. And then ... something bad happened.

Our daughter's hamster, Mango, escaped from her cage. And she didn't just climb under a blanket, or hide in a corner.

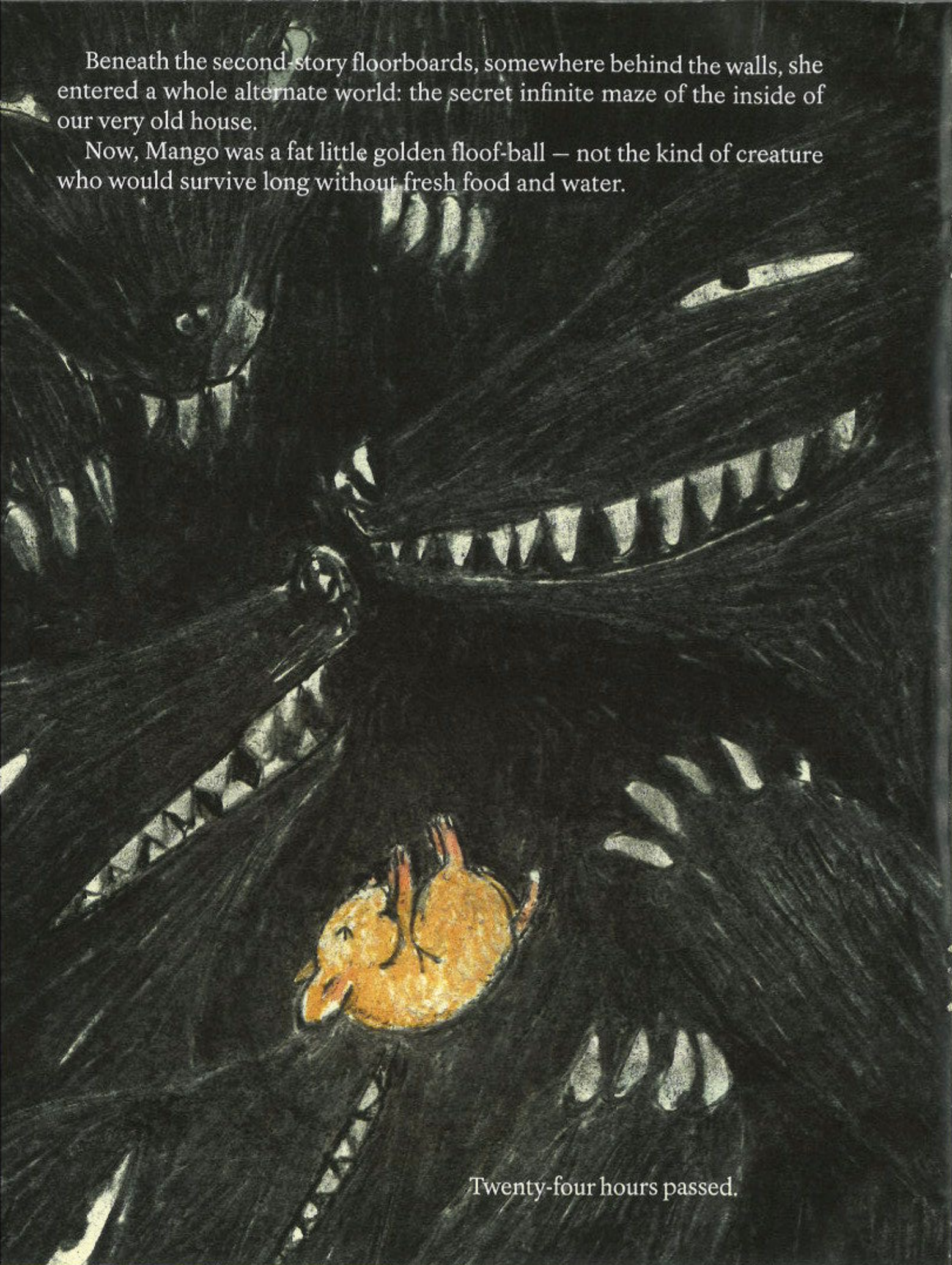


She went down into the hole. Into this yawning vortex of doom.



Beneath the second-story floorboards, somewhere behind the walls, she entered a whole alternate world: the secret infinite maze of the inside of our very old house.

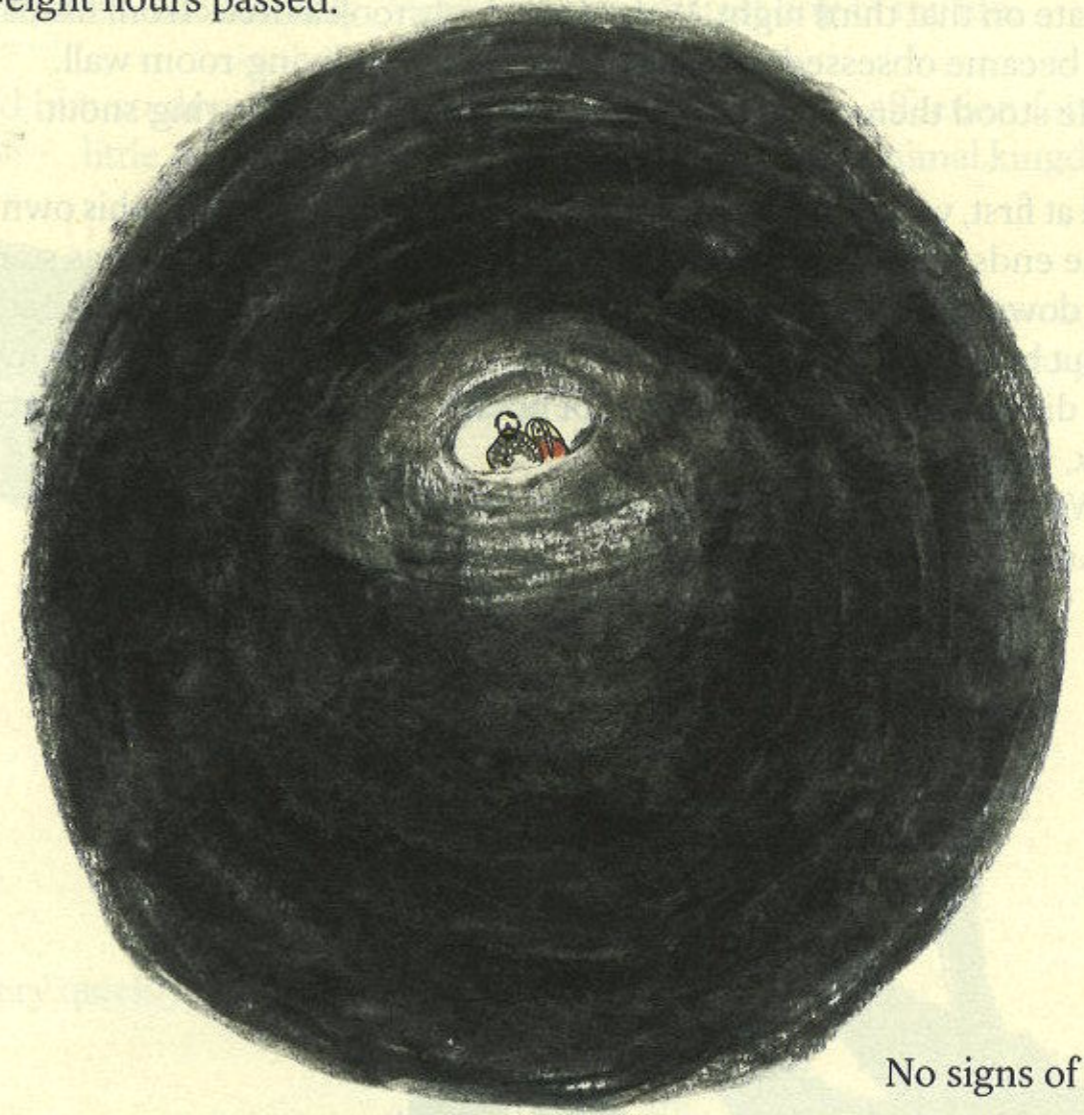
Now, Mango was a fat little golden floop-ball — not the kind of creature who would survive long without fresh food and water.



Twenty-four hours passed.

We looked everywhere. But she was just — gone. Occasionally we thought we heard rustling — in a closet or under a dresser — and we'd shine our lights in there. Nothing.

Forty-eight hours passed.



No signs of life.

We tried to go on with our lives, but we all felt sad and on edge. It was as if the whole house had a toothache.

Finally, on the third day, we gave up.

It seemed silly to keep hoping. We all just had to swallow hard and accept the fact that our sweet little Mango, who had been our daughter's 16th-birthday present — who used to nibble fresh raspberries right out of our fingers — had met her maker somewhere deep in the walls. All because I didn't fix that stupid hole.

However.

When I say that we gave up on Mango, I should actually say that the *humans* in our house gave up on her.



Because at that moment, a different golden floofy creature came to the rescue: our dog Walnut, a purebred, longhaired miniature dachshund with thick fur as creamy as vanilla pudding and a tail so fancy it should probably be on a tropical fish.

Late on that third night, Walnut suddenly took a break from his napping and became obsessed with a small patch of our living-room wall.

He stood there, staring at it, pointing his long, quivering snout.

And at first, we ignored him. Walnut's nose is too powerful for his own good, so he ends up fixated on the tiniest things. Also, the spot he was staring at was downstairs, not even remotely close to our daughter's upstairs bedroom.

But he kept at it for hours, until, finally, we got the hint. I took out my tools and disassembled an ancient set of pocket doors in the wall — to expose a dark, empty cave.

We put an open jar of peanut butter on the floor as bait.

And we all held our breath.



And a few minutes later — miraculously — out staggered Mango.

She was filthy, covered with the grime of the centuries, and probably starving and dehydrated. She looked as if she had climbed out of her own grave. Which, basically, she had.

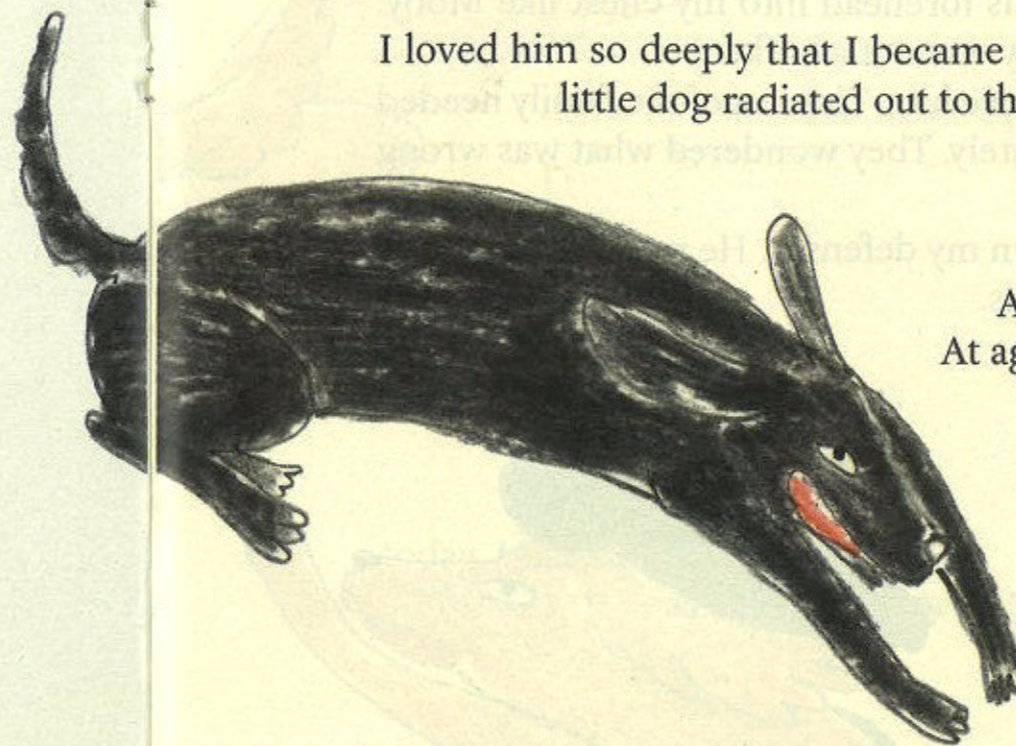
We dusted her off and put her back in her cage. And we all showered Walnut with extra love and praise and snuggles and treats. And then he went right back to sleep.

● Walnut had rescued me from death once before.

He was our second wiener dog — a very deliberate replacement of our first, whose name was Moby.

I won't say too much about Moby here, because I'm trying to tell you about Walnut, but basically: Moby was the greatest dog of my life.

I loved him so deeply that I became a vegetarian — my affection for this little dog radiated out to the whole rest of the animal kingdom.

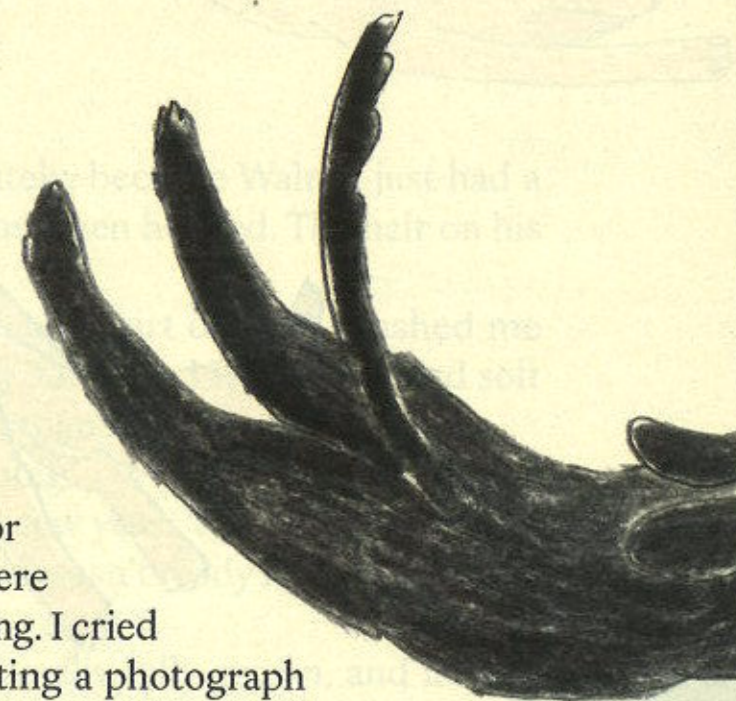


And then, all that love turned to pain.  
At age 12, Moby got cancer,

and very quickly wasted away and died.

That first night, in bed, I reached out for him, just pure muscle memory — and there was nothing there, and I broke down sobbing. I cried for days. At one point, I found myself petting a photograph of his face.

I was also full of rage. I wanted to burn down the universe. I either wanted Moby back, which I knew was impossible, or I wanted nothing — no dog ever again. Life seemed to be some kind of scam, a little shell game, in which every living thing secretly carried the pain of its own loss. And I was determined never to fall for it again.





This is when my wife, Sarah, brought home Walnut.

He was from the same breeder as Moby, the same bloodline even. And he was outrageously cute: big-eyed, fuzzy, clumsy.

But he was not Moby. He was a different color, with long fur instead of short. He didn't cuddle in bed like Moby, didn't make little huffing noises out of his snout when he mashed his forehead into my chest like Moby. Also, he barked at everything. (Moby was not a barker.)

And so, for a long time, I did not love him. The rest of the family needed zero seconds to love Walnut completely. They wondered what was wrong with me.

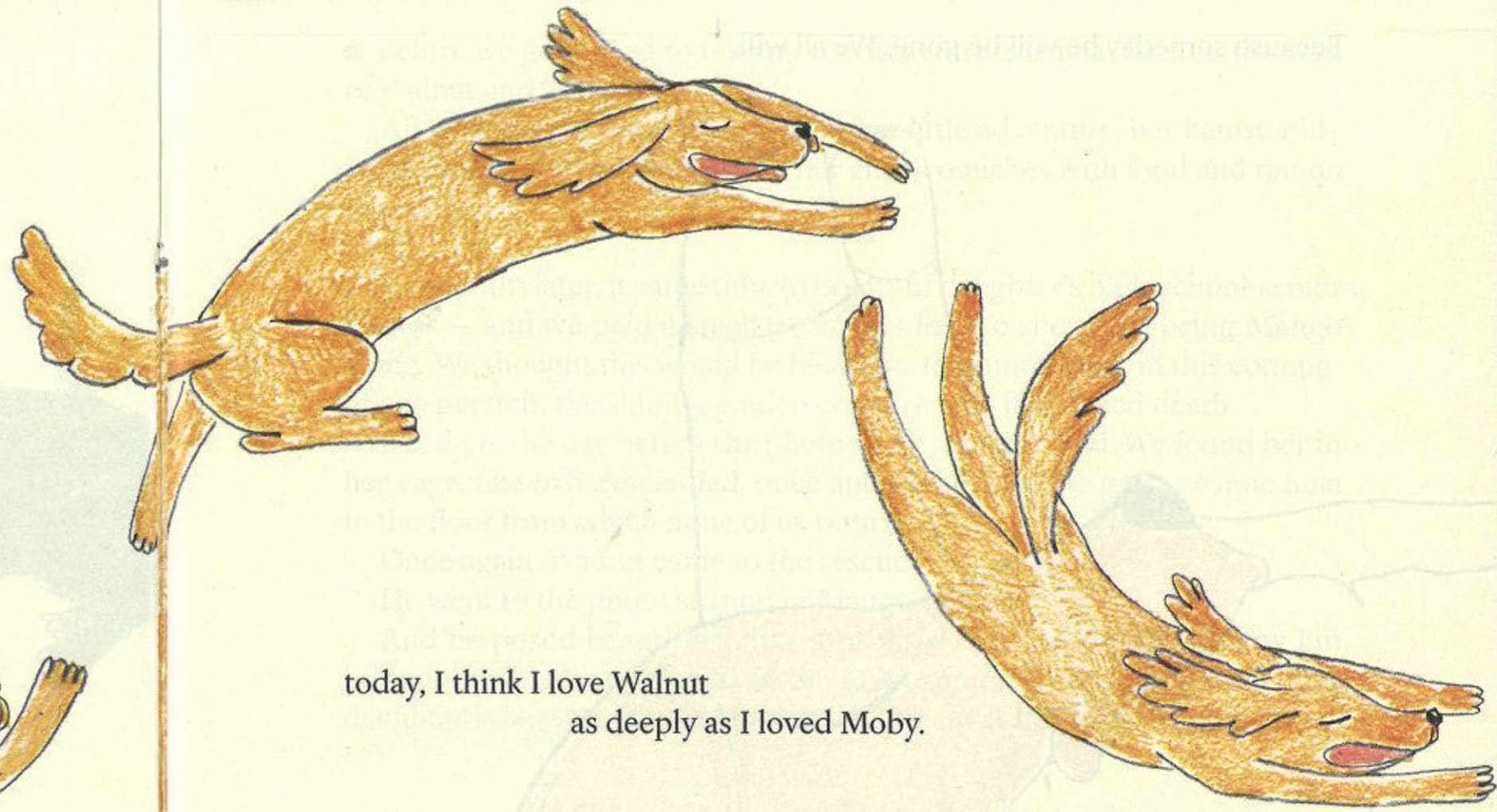
But day by day, Walnut wore down my defenses. He molded himself to my habits, and I molded myself to his.

Until, eventually, I accepted him.



Then I started to love him.

And today — it actually hurts me to say this, but —



today, I think I love Walnut  
as deeply as I loved Moby.

I've been thinking about Moby a lot lately, because Walnut just had a birthday. He turned 12 — the age Moby was when he died. The hair on his face has turned white.

The hair on my face has turned white, too. Part of what crushed me about Moby's death was that it took me by surprise. I was young and soft and naïve. I just assumed we had years left together.

Now I'm old and grizzled. I expect nothing.

And I have experienced other losses. A few years ago, my father got a terrible illness and died, another departure I wasn't ready for and still can't quite speak about.

My own children, meanwhile, are practically fully grown, and lately I find myself thinking a lot about the fact that everything ends.

And so, every morning, as I drink my coffee, I run my fingers through Walnut's luscious fur and think about the fact that he will die.

We just sit there in the moment. We stare into each other's eyes, beaming love back and forth, and I imagine the possibility that this will be our final day together. And I try to savor his presence as if he were already gone.



Because someday he will be gone. We all will.



● Before we go, I need to tell you one last story, the final twist in the saga of Walnut and Mango.

After Walnut rescued Mango from her little adventure, her hamster life went back to normal. She stuffed her cheek pouches with food and ran on her wheel.

A few months later, it came time to book our daughter's high-school-senior photos — and we paid a small extra “pet fee” so she could bring Mango along. We thought this would be hilarious: to immortalize, in this coming-of-age portrait, the shining golden creature who had defied death.

But then, the day before the photo shoot, Mango died. We found her in her cage. She had descended, once and for all, into the great cosmic hole in the floor from which none of us return.

Once again, Walnut came to the rescue.

He went to the photo session in Mango's place.

And he posed beautifully, like a professional dog model. I know I'm biased, but I believe it's one of the great senior photos of all time: Our daughter is beaming, and Walnut is looking up at her with absolute love.



I actually have a poster-size blowup of it over my desk, and I stare at it every day — this frozen moment that holds so many other moments, and so many other creatures, all wrapped up together. ♦

*This essay is drawn from “Animal,” a new New York Times podcast hosted by Sam Anderson about one man's quest to get closer to the animals he loves. It can be found at [nytimes.com/animal](https://nytimes.com/animal) or wherever you get podcasts.*