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University of Melbourne

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That dog in me

Abstract:

This essay uses sketchbooks, songwriting, and cartooning as a way of drawing lines and breath into our relationships with animals (dogs in particular), each other, and grief. Using the author’s own sketchbook of repeated drawings of her dog, the sketchbook of her late best friend, and *Bento’s Sketchbook*, where John Berger fills an empty sketchbook as a way of imagining the missing sketchbook of Baruch or Benedict (Bento) Spinoza, often discussing the process of drawing and grief simultaneously, this work looks at repetition in sketchbooks, cartooning, and songwriting as a way of “holding on” to what is fleeting – in a way our own lives, the lives of our friends, and especially the lives of our animal companions.

Biographical note:

Leonie “Luggs” Brialey is a cartoonist and writer working on Wurundjeri country. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Melbourne, where she teaches Critical and Creative Writing and Graphic Narratives. Her PhD looked at sincerity and irony in autobiographical comics, the creative component of which used phenomenology to look at sincerity as a mind/ body problem through the medium of comics. Her comics are interested in archetypal characters such as ghosts, angels, clowns, nuns, and dogs. She has also worked with screen printing, clay, video work, and puppet making, and played various instruments in various bands.

Keywords:

Sketchbooks, cartooning, songwriting, grief, dogs

I started thinking about writing this shortly after Michael Leunig died. I kept hearing myself say to people, “Did you hear Michael Leunig died?” while smiling. Not that I wished death on him, but it did feel like the end of an era of whimsical-poet-cartoon-philosopher that could make way for something sparkier. I was wondering how it was he was so popular despite his increasingly insipid politics when I noticed this:

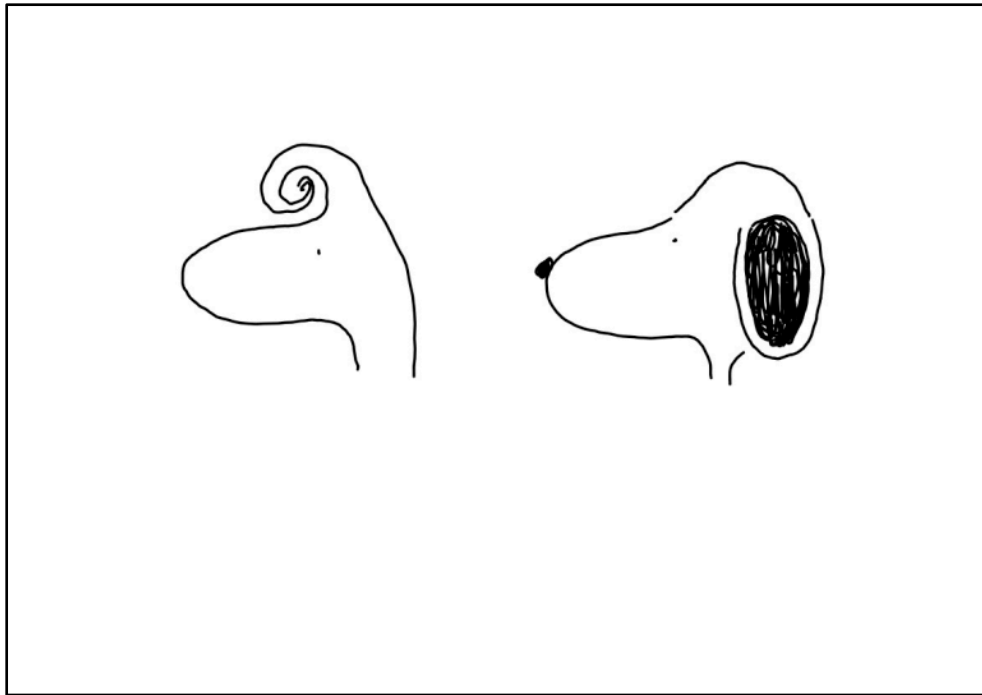


Figure 1: Drawing by the author showing the similarity in profile between Michael Leunig's Mr Curly and Charles Schulz's Snoopy, 2025. (Image supplied).

What is it about this boob-like shape of a snout that cries out for cartoonists to capture? What is it about dogs? What is it moreover about our relationship to animals that proliferates in comics? Krazy Kat, Snoopy, Garfield, *The Far Side*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, Mickey Mouse, *Maus*, Donald Duck, Felix the Cat, Winne the Pooh, *Footrot Flats*, even Snowy from *Tintin*.

In *Cartoon Spirituality*, Ines Estrada says:

To draw is to manifest an image and with it you invoke an idea, a multidimensional concept embedded in a graphic symbol. Even just a simple representation of an animal, like the ones in cave paintings, can take on a life of its own in our mind and become an egregore, a powerful spiritual entity. I think this is what cartoons are. (2022, 7)

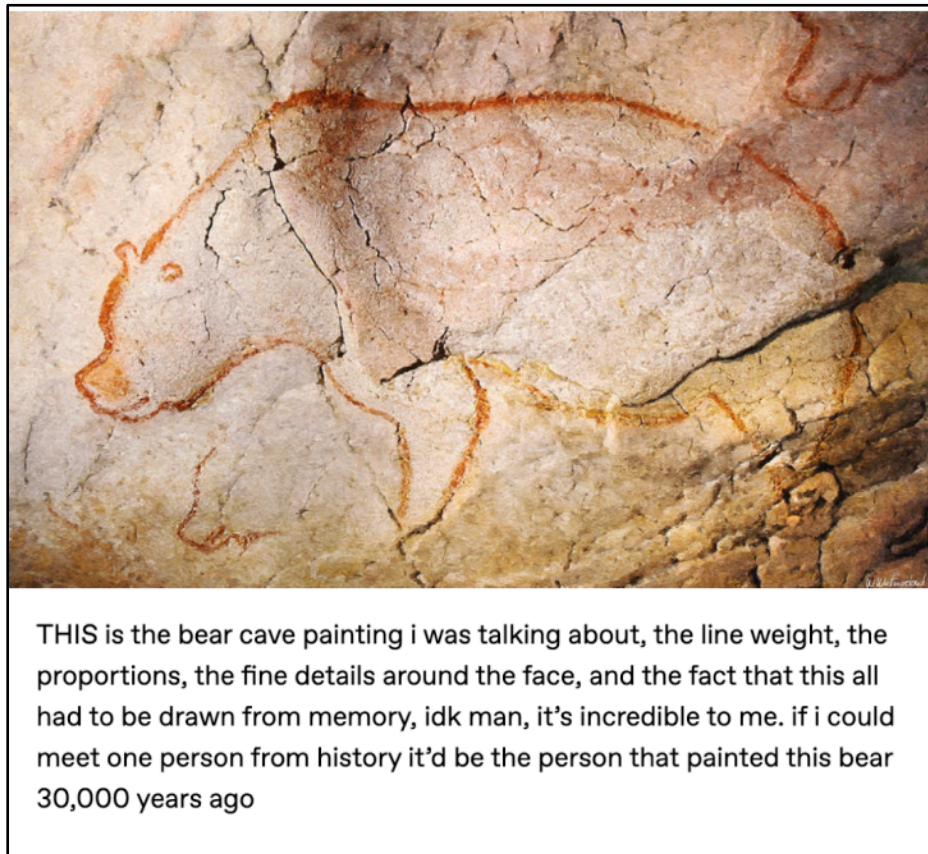


Figure 2: A post by Naomi @spelldealer on Tumblr, referencing the Central Bear Chauvet Cave painting from the Aurignacian period, 2021. (Naomi).

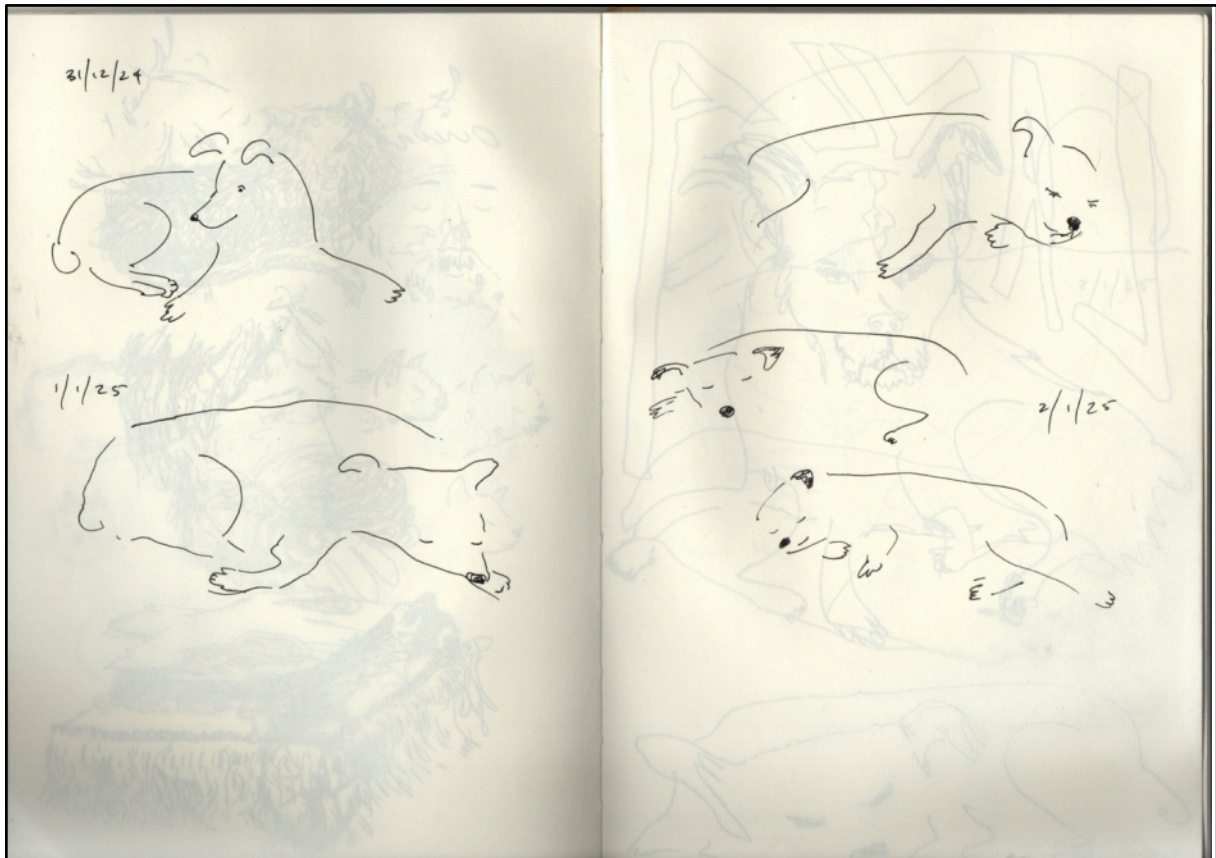


Figure 3: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

So, on New Year's Day this year I decided to start drawing my dog (Layla) every day as a kind of research practice, to think through what it is about cartooning that lends itself to representing our relationship with animals.

In *Bento's Sketchbook*, in which he imagines and recreates the illustrations once contained in Benedict or Bento de Spinoza's long-lost sketchbook, John Berger asks:

What is it that suddenly prompts us to start a drawing of a particular object? We carry a sketchbook wherever we go. For weeks we don't open it; all the while observing things without feeling the compulsion to draw them. And suddenly it happens. We have to draw this.

It seems to me that, when it occurs, the impulse to draw is generated by a similar movement of imagination, whatever the circumstances or the object to be drawn. Of course, every drawing has its own *raison d'être* and hopes to be unique. For every drawing we start, we have a distinct and different hope. And every drawing fails in its own unforeseeable and particular way. Nevertheless every drawing begins with a similar movement of the imagination.

And it is this movement – which is complex and paradoxical, as are many things which touch our hearts – it's this movement that I want to try to define and describe. (2011, pp. 150-151)

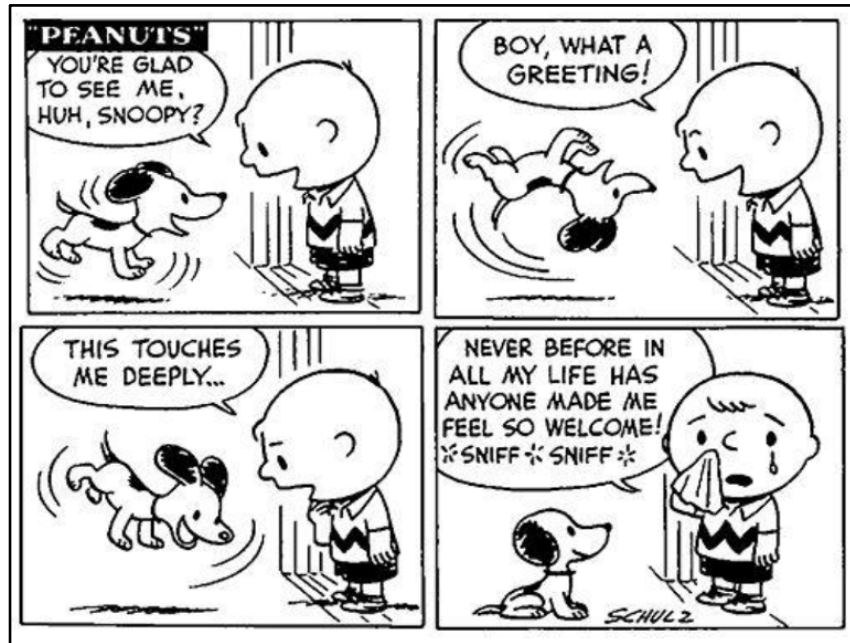


Figure 4: Peanuts strip from April 19, 1951. (Schulz).

What is it about dogs?

I'm drawing Layla not only to find this out but because I fear I've forgotten how to draw.

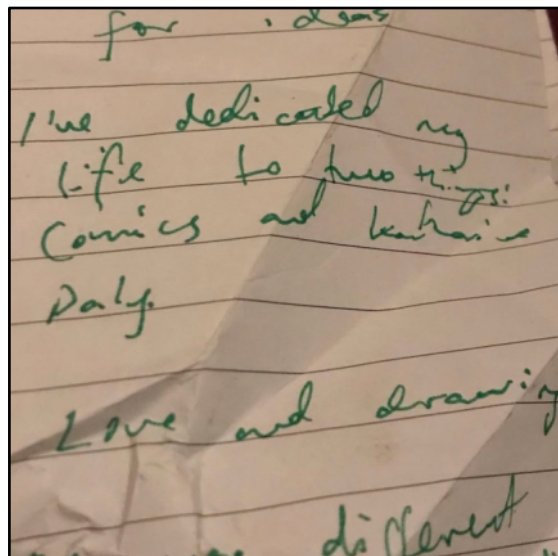


Figure 5: Author's note to self. (Photo supplied).

This is a note I wrote myself that says, "I've dedicated my life to two things: comics and Katharine Daly."

I haven't been able to write or draw a comic for the last two years and my best friend, Katharine Daly, died four years ago.

I'm drawing Layla to remember how to draw but also because she will die one day.

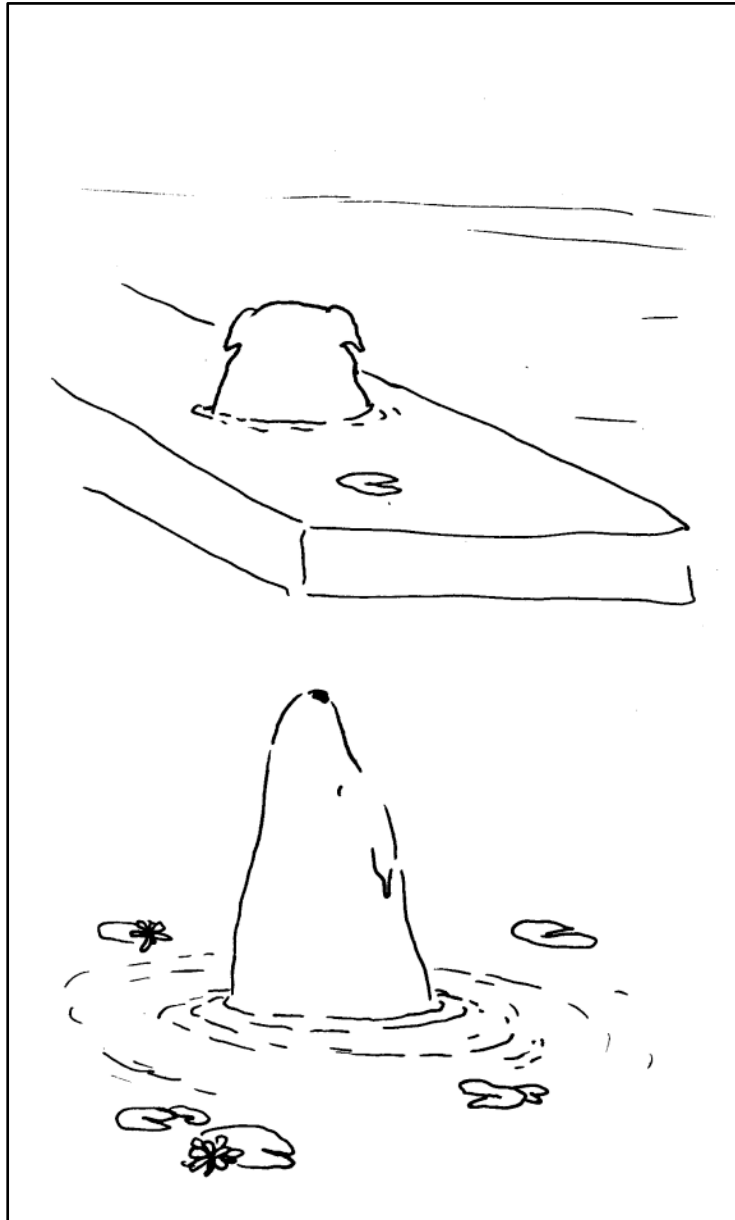


Figure 6. Drawing by the author of her dog from a dream. (Image supplied).

I dreamt of Layla before I met her. I had wanted a dog for a while, like my whole life. In the middle of 2020 lockdowns, a picture of a fat and happy cattle dog (with the shadow of the person taking the picture, cigarette in hand) came up on pet rescue dot com and I called a number and filled out a form and another form and I was set to go pick her up in the country the next day.

Before going to sleep I asked God or the universe or whoever, as a kind of confirmation of this union, to dream of her.

I dreamt of her huge, filling an entire pond, me on my knees washing her, lily pads all around, telling her how beautiful she is.

This is a drawing from that dream.

I constantly want to dream of Katharine and sometimes I do. Shortly after she died, I dream of me and another friend holding her, hugging her, while she grows taller in our arms. I tell this dream to the friend still alive and she draws a picture of it, to show her therapist and also me.

We who draw do so not only to make something observed visible to others, but also to accompany something invisible to its incalculable destination. (Berger 2011, p.11)

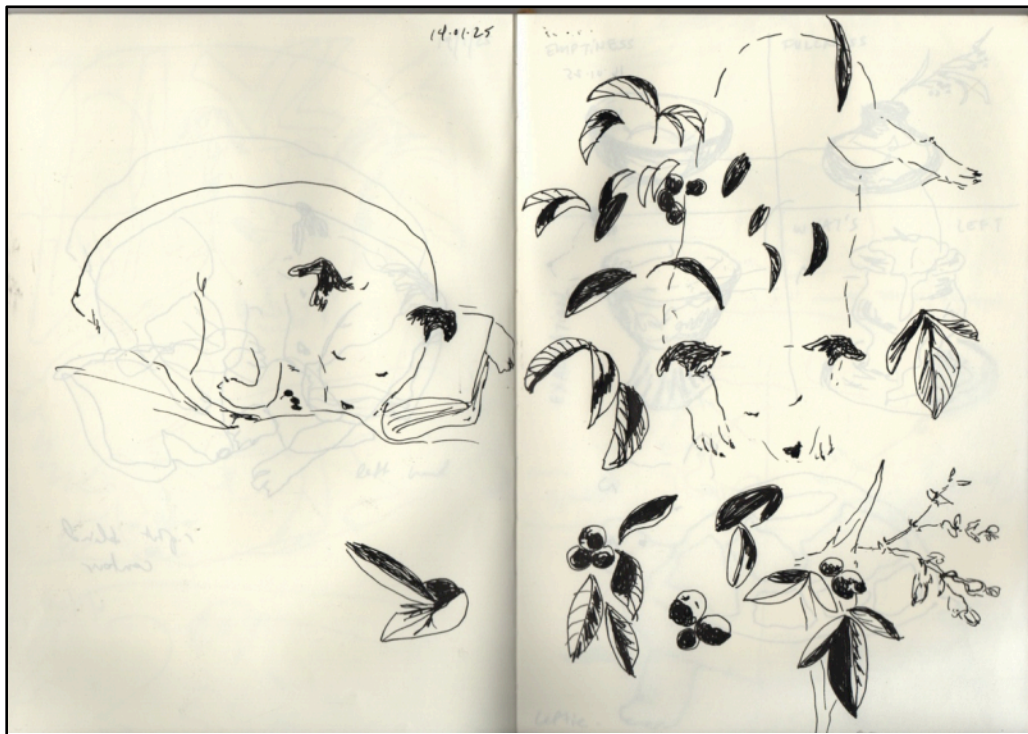


Figure 7: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

Layla entered my life around the same time Katharine started to exit.

I'm trying to draw Layla every day because I'm afraid of drawing and I'm afraid of Layla dying. Every day I draw out her existence because she will die one day, and I cannot think or do anything about it.

I usually draw her while she's asleep on my (our) bed because that's the easiest time to draw a dog. It is also one of the greatest comforts, to feel her body warm and asleep next to mine, to hear her snoring, dreaming.

Some of the deepest pangs of missing Katharine are the times we would sleep next to each other in the same bed. The kind of child-like joy of adult best friends having a sleepover. The warm, easy comfort of her body next to mine.

The fact that sleep is close to death does not escape me.

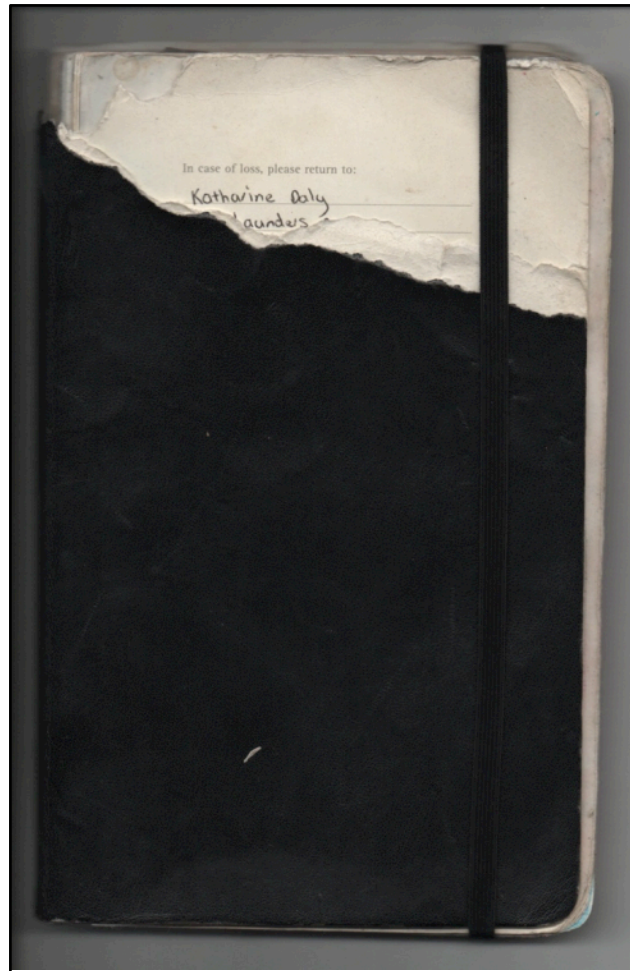


Figure 8: Katharine Daly's Sketchbook. (Daly)

This is Katharine's sketchbook and one of the few things of hers that I have, along with her tiny Casio keyboard. Most of the sketchbook is from 2019, filled while working at a call centre (where we both worked), but there are a few drawings or additions to drawings that would have been added later.

She carried this full sketchbook around with her until her death, even as she got rid of or lost many things.

In one of our last correspondences, she is telling me how many notes, photographs, and drawings she still has from me, carrying them around like talismans.

Simone de Beauvoir, in *A Very Easy Death*, wrote, "Everyone knows the power of things: life is solidified in them, more immediately present than in any one of its instants." (1985, p. 98)



Figure 9: Pages from Katharine Daly's sketchbook, 2019a. (Daly).

Katharine's sketchbook is full of these creatures. Sad, weird, funny, half human, something beyond. I have a photocopy of this mournful cow on the wall in my room.

I like the ghost of the drawing underneath showing through. The trace of her hand pressing hard with the pen, the soft pencil covering it over.

Katharine had a kind of natural talent for drawing in this way that feels completely free and truly weird. Like, I wish I could draw like this.

In *Bento's Sketchbook*, John Berger writes:

Drawing is anyway an exercise in orientation and as such may be compared with other processes of orientation which take place in nature.

When I'm drawing, I feel a little closer to the way birds navigate when flying, or to hares finding shelter if pursued, or to fish knowing where to spawn, or a tree finding a way to the light, or bees constructing their cells. (2011, p. 149)



Figure 10: Pages from Katharine Daly's sketchbook, 2019-2021. (Daly).

There are also these funny little cartoons.

The tenderness of these small moments – remembered, recorded, commemorated – touches me deeply. The pathos of the headache. The incongruent poetry of the crop top and cup of tea. The disturbing hairdryer like a gun pointed at the friend's head amid this loving, intimate moment.

There is something about cartooning that distils an image to an essence. A line drawn straight (or wiggly) to the heart.

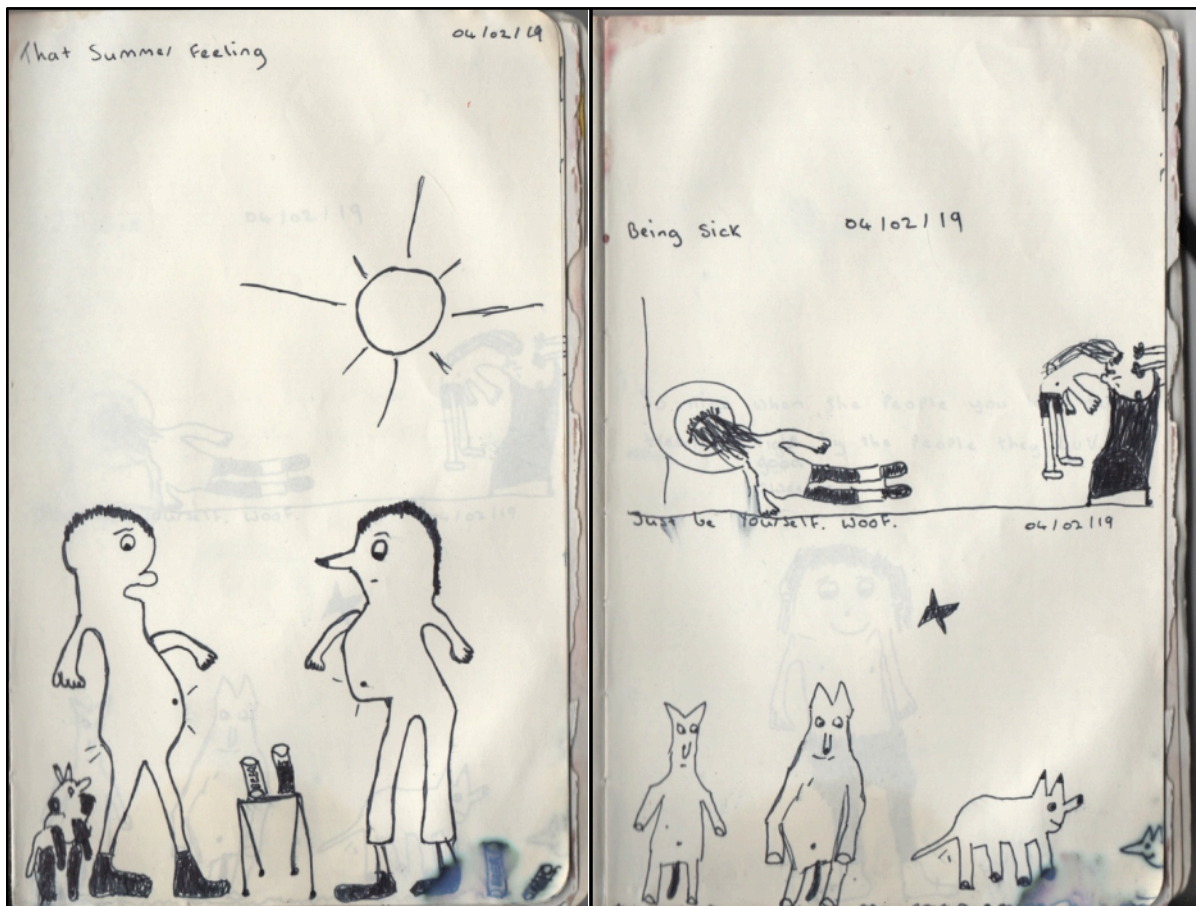


Figure 11: Pages from Katharine Daly's sketchbook, 2019a. (Daly).

These little moments, all drawn on the 4th of February 2019: “being sick”, “just be yourself. woof”, and “that summer feeling”, all somehow capture essential truths and moments of our existence on earth, especially Katharine’s.

I like how awkwardly she’s drawn the dogs here, yet they are still recognisable as dogs. I feel they capture something I am also trying to capture: what is it about dogs? What comfort and mystery do they hold, that here Katharine is so earnestly struggling to articulate with the line, that my constant drawing of my own dog over and over is also trying to discover?

There’s something in “that summer feeling”: both this drawing, and the song by Jonathan Richman that I know Katharine was referencing. In the drawing, the look of somewhat dismay or sadness on one character’s face, the movement lines around their stomachs and bum (farting? Dancing or in pain?), the sun in the sky maybe setting, the drinks on the table, the dog attentive. The true meaning of nostalgia: the pain of a past no longer present.

When there's things to do not because you gotta
 When you run for love not because you oughtta
 When you trust your friends with no reason nada
 This joy I've named shall not be tamed
 And that summer feeling is gonna haunt you
 One day in your life

(Richman, J. 1992)

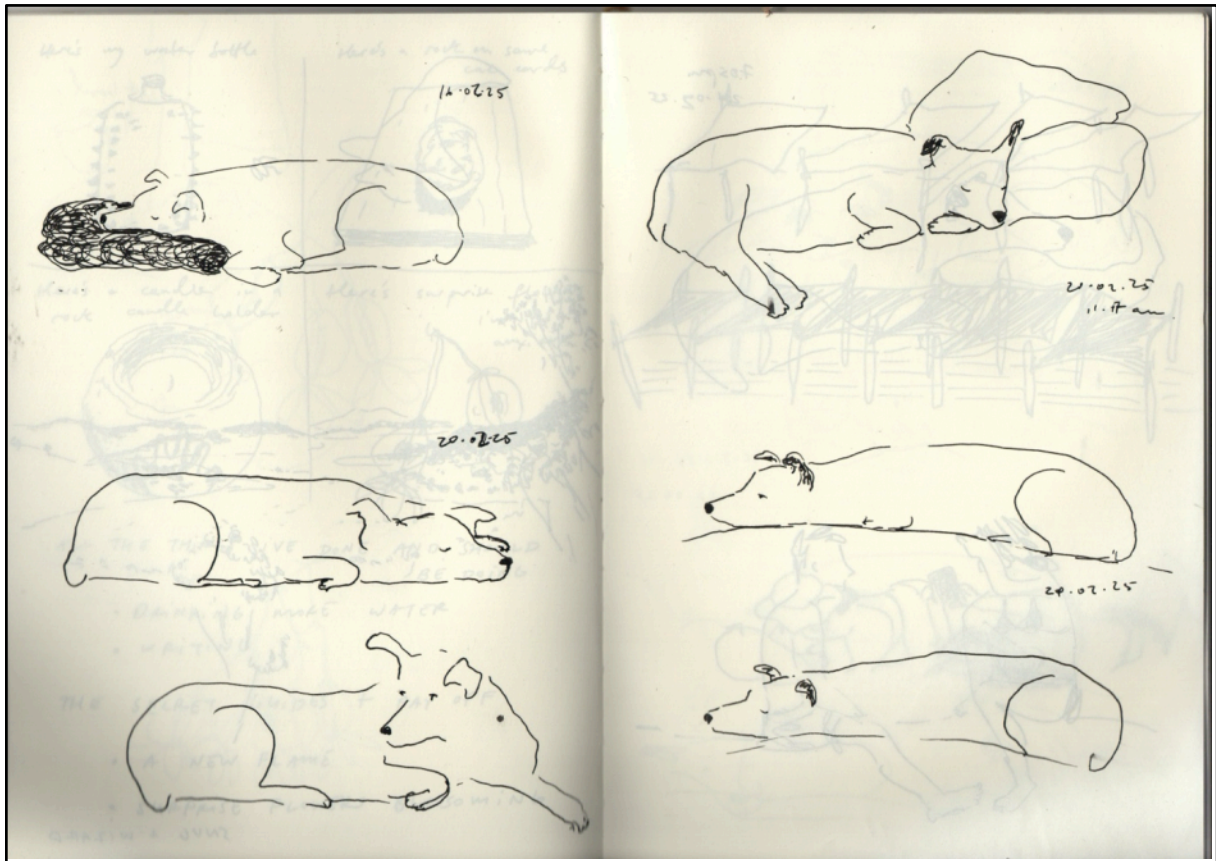


Figure 12: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

I try to read the news more since Katharine died, because she was always at me for not knowing what was going on in the world. ("You're a writer!")

Amidst the horrors of the multiple ongoing genocides, I become obsessed with a story about a woman whose arms are ripped off by her and her partner's dogs.

I tell this story to my friend who also has a dog who is also dying of cancer and she says, "you know, I am kind of scared of dogs," and pauses.

"They've got that dog in them."

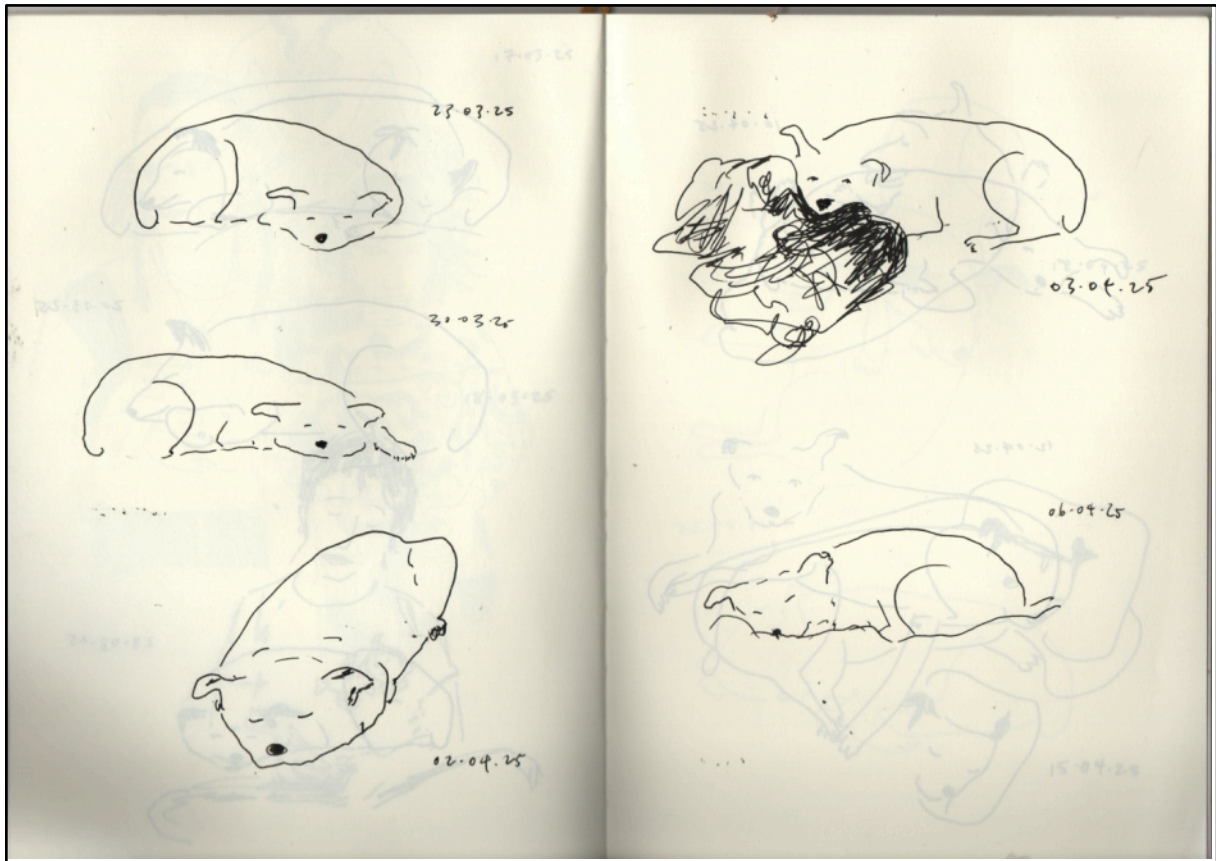


Figure 13: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

What does it mean to have that dog in me? What is that dog in me?

I want to say something about repetition. About doing something daily. About Katharine Daly.

About how doing the same things every day makes Layla's life beautiful.

The dog of repetition. The dog of sadness. The dog of loyalty.

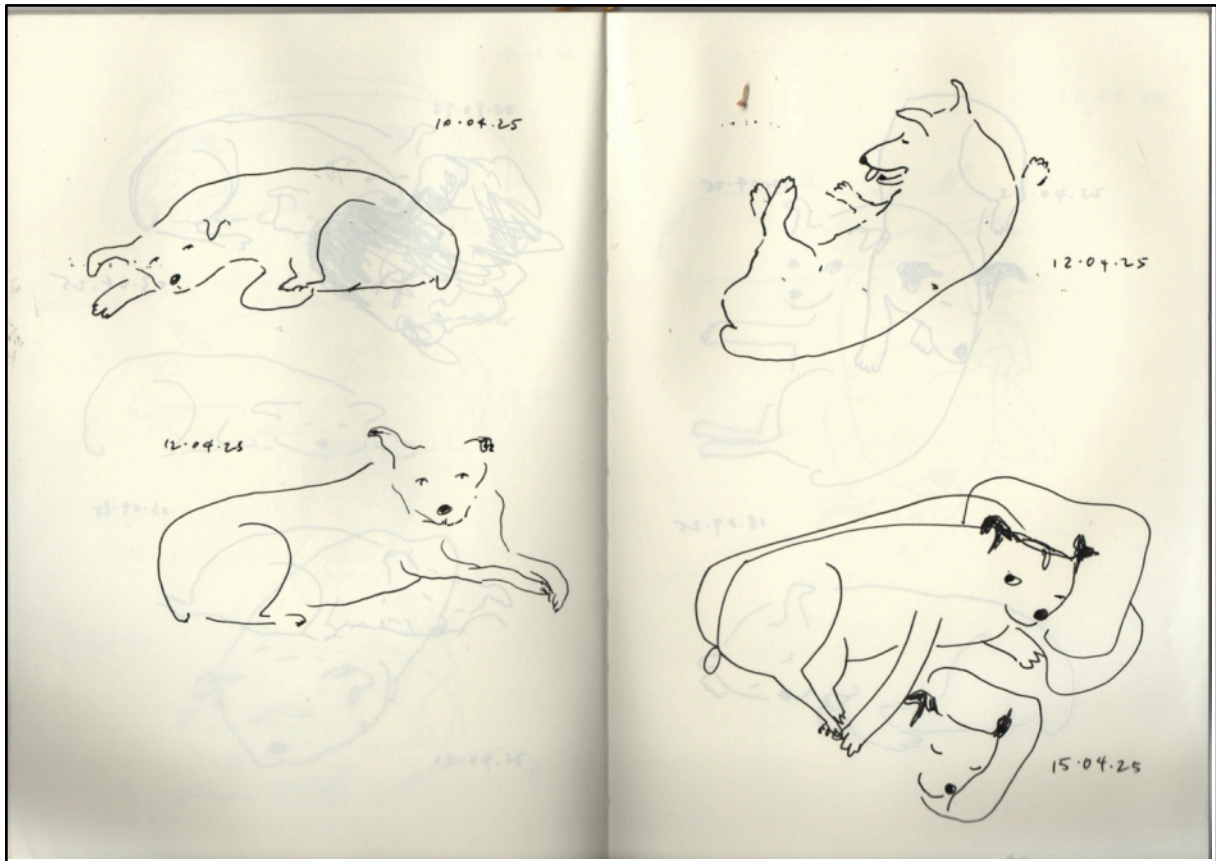


Figure 14: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

Something happens when a drawing goes from being a sketch to being a cartoon. Some secret liveliness just sings out suddenly.

Katharine and I had a shared obsession with repetition. It was how she wrote songs, by repeating them over and over and over again.

She never wrote anything down. Well, there are some fragments: there are some chords written here and there in her sketchbook, but rarely lyrics.

Her songs exist in the act of singing them over and over and over again.

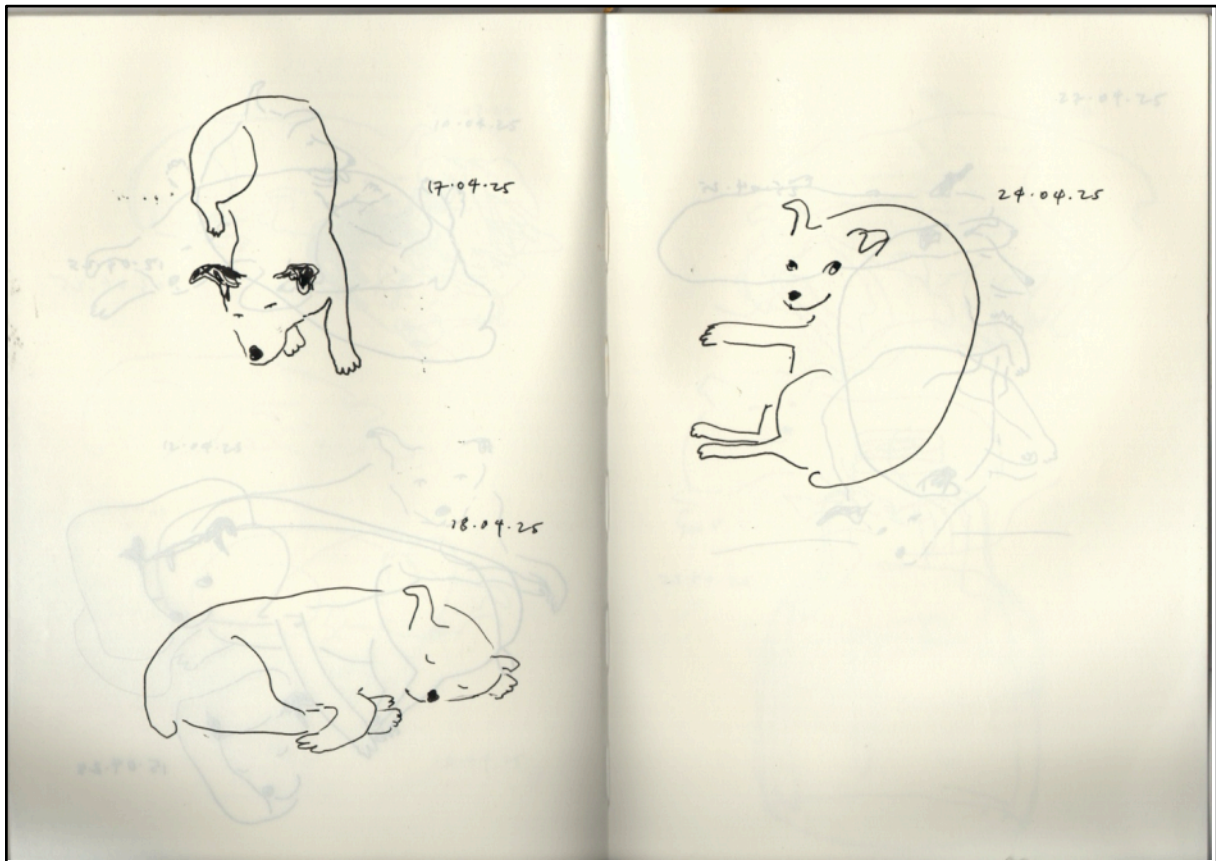


Figure 15: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

Songwriting and cartooning are arts of repetition. The more you repeat something, the more the meaning changes, it goes from being funny to devastating, to absurd, to something beyond.

It is impossible to repeat a drawing, a moment, but that's what cartooning is, or aims at.

Repeating a drawing so many times it goes from being silly to being spiritual.

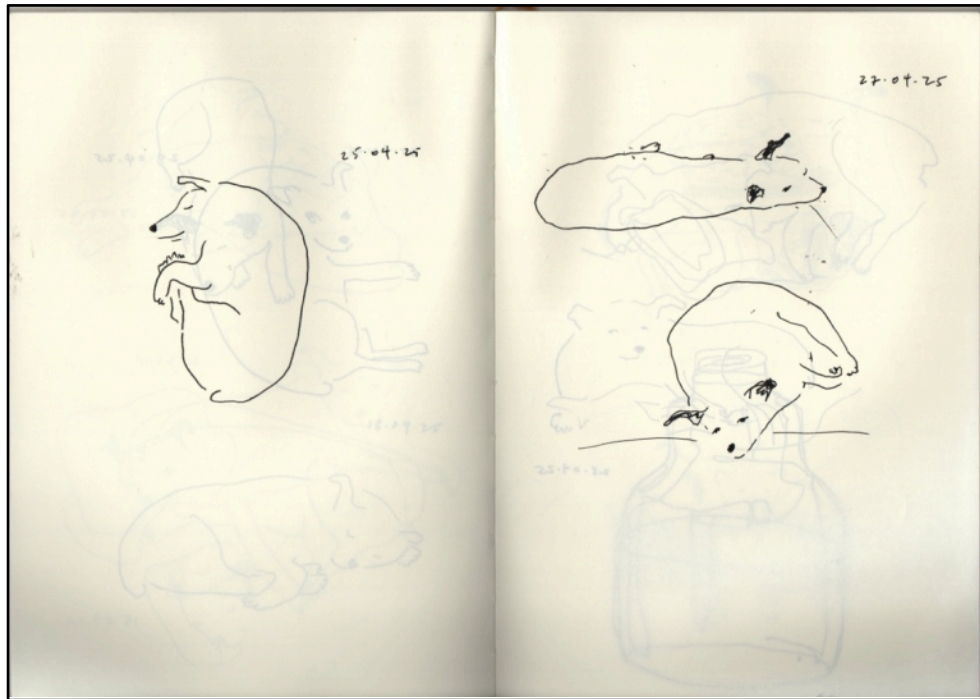


Figure 16: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

I think maybe I have writer's and drawer's block because

Well, the only thing I have been writing or working on has been transcribing Katharine's lyrics and scanning her drawings.

I haven't been able to write anything else because I feel like I can't write anything else until I finish or at least am consistently working on this book of Katharine's songs and drawings, but I haven't been working on that either.

Her lyrics are so funny and clever and about her pain and obsessions and she is a songwriter who really knows what a song is and is for. For love and for anger and for repeating over and over again.

I'm lucky she wrote so many songs about death and what to do with guilt and shame.

I am trying to record them before I start forgetting them, so I won't forget them, and so I have a way of holding them, of holding her.

Her falling asleep or waking beside me, us in the shed, with cups of tea or whiskey, joint after joint, song after song, question after question. Our loving repetitions.

And my best friend's asleep
In my bed in my shed
And my other best friend's asleep
In the house in her own bed
And they're all in my reach lucky me
And they're all dead asleep lucky me

(Daly. K, 2020)



Figure 17: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

There seems to be a thing where I can only write about things by also writing about Katharine, to Katharine. My love for her seems to direct this.

Times when I thought I was making a vase but I just made Katharine. Times when I reviewed some comics only through drawing the link between repetition in comics writing and Katharine's songwriting.

I remember when we both told each other we loved each other. I remember that moment almost as clearly as I remember walking down the street, sunny day, eating an ice cream and thinking, I love Katharine Daly.

I remember because she texted me in that moment and I drew about it later.



Figure 18: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

I draw Layla because I love her. I tell her this every day. I love her shape, her smell, the sounds she makes, the way she moves. This sketchbook is my Lascaux cave painting of her. A song sung over and over.

There is something about her beauty that doesn't want words, or something about my love for her that is in stories but beyond words, in her movement, her shape.

I start using a super 8 camera. I make a short film about the Merri creek at three different times of day. Some dogs are in it. I film the Sunday rally for Palestine. There is a dog in that too. I feel creatively invigorated, inspired by this very expensive, nostalgic artform. I tell my partner I want to make a film about Layla. He says I knew you'd say that.

I don't just want to make a film about her. I want to make an ASMR channel of her eating carrots. I want to voice memo her little grunts, snores, and sighs, and the conversations we have, me rubbing her tummy and asking her questions, her grunting her answers.

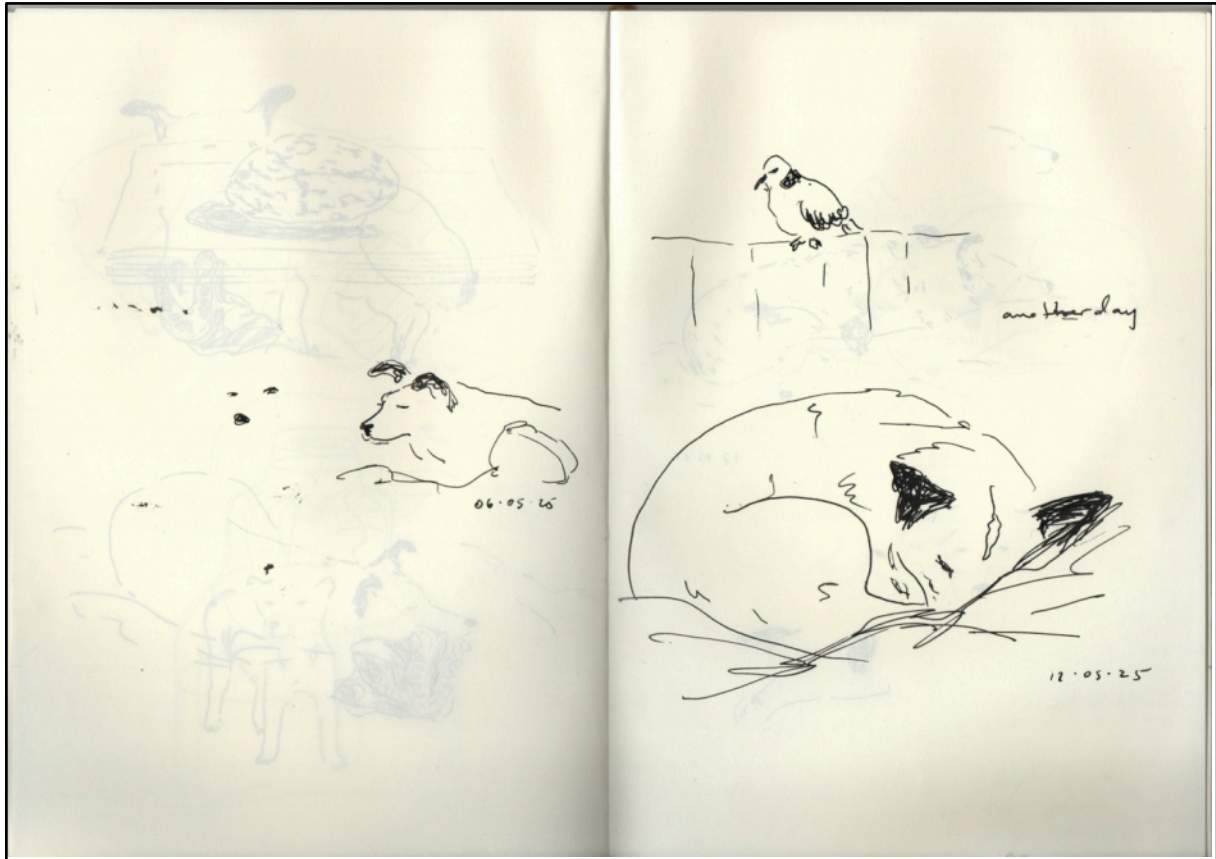


Figure 19: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

I have tried to write about Katharine since she died but I have found it very hard. Filling notebooks, but I have no idea how to put it all together.

There's a feeling that I failed Katharine, in my own unforeseeable and particular way. This failure outshines any other failure. Sometimes I can accept this as just a tragedy of life. Sometimes it howls.

The hardest and worst thing I have ever written about her is in a report to the coroner. The assignment:

As per our conversation can you provide a summary in to your friendship with Katharine. From when you first met. Any changes in Katharine's life and when if known. Can you be specific about drug use and how it was administered. Still friends when she died? Think of it as a story of your time with Katharine (email from Detective Senior Constable [REDACTED], personal communication, May 12, 2022).

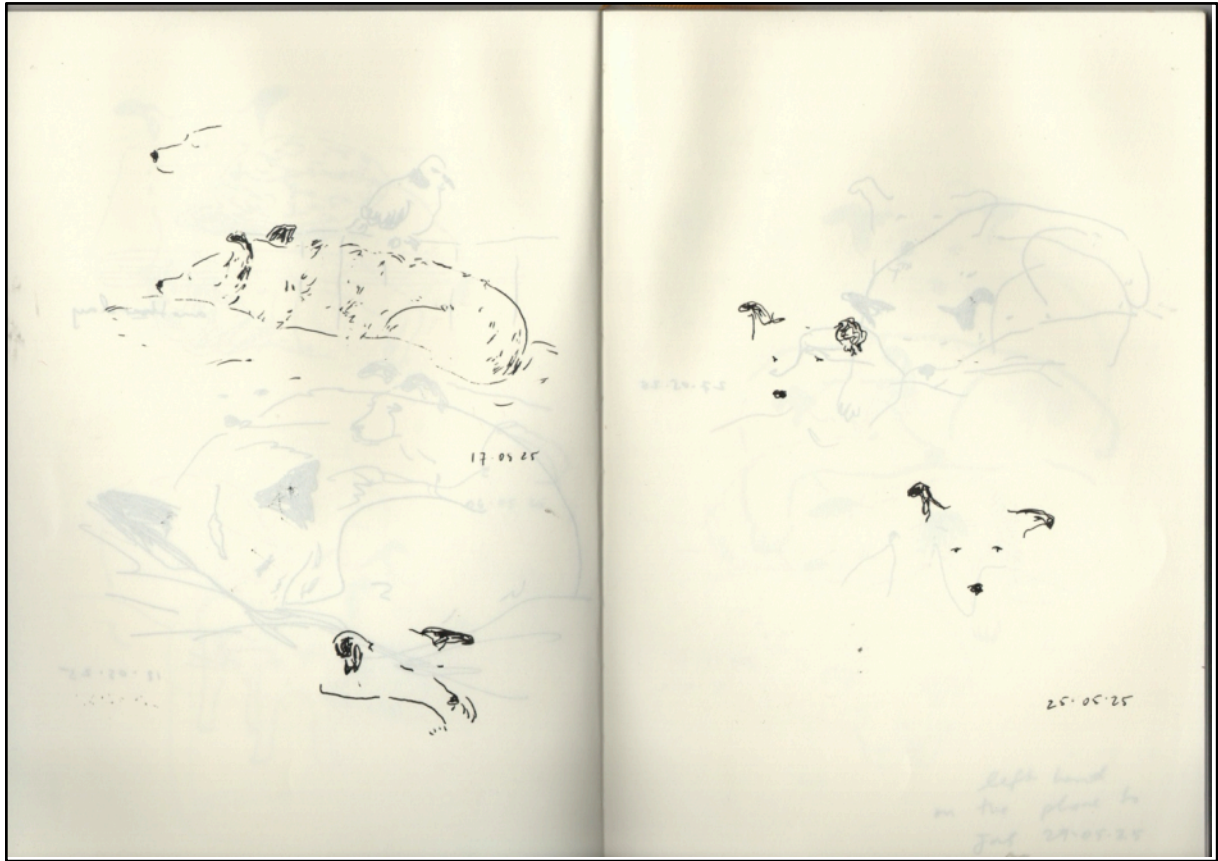


Figure 20: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

Think of it as a story of your time with Katharine.
 Think of it as a story of your time with Katharine.
 Think of it as a story of your time with Katharine.

Still friends when she died?
 Still friends when she died?
 Still friends when she died?

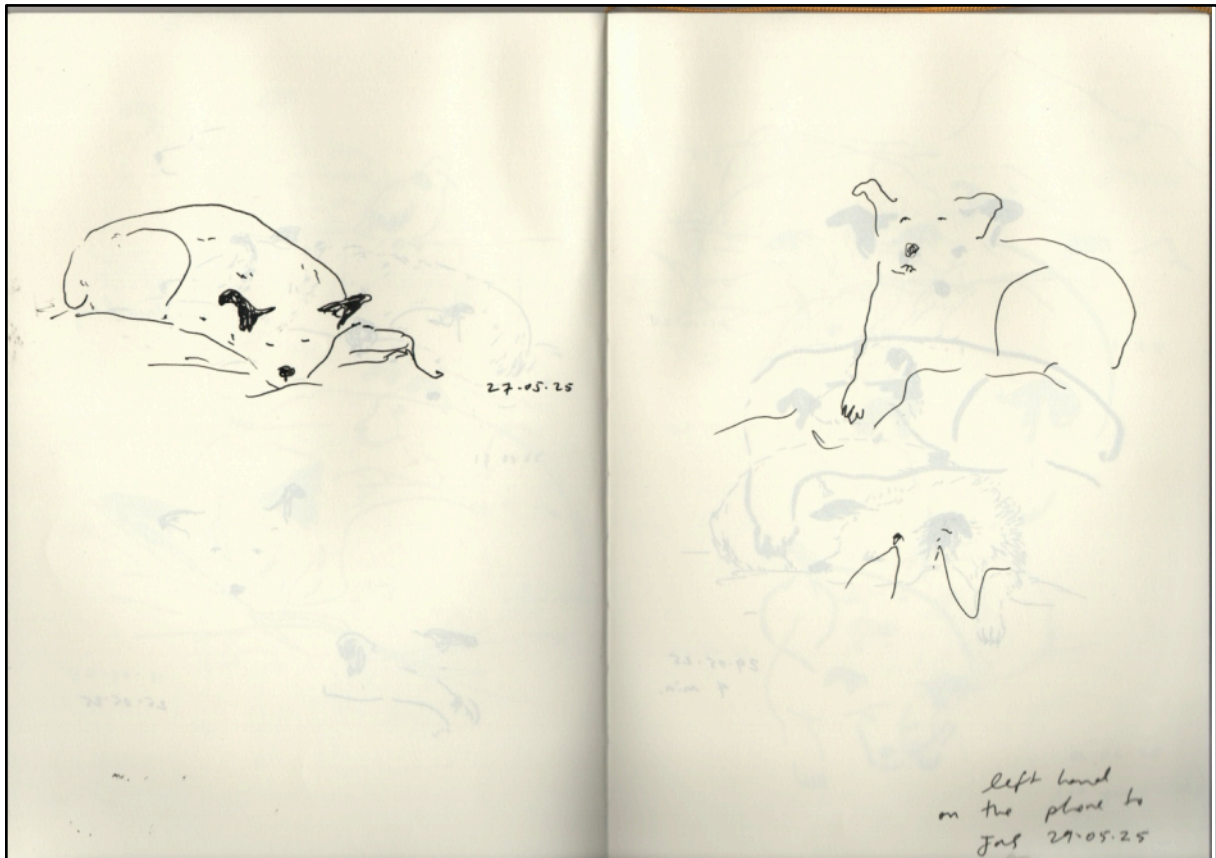


Figure 21: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

We weren't. I was angry at her. She was angry at me. I was being a bitch, she was being a bitch, we were both being bitches.

Remembering a text she sent me in a fight: "enjoy your fog". A typo, but me misreading it, annoyed. Was she being poetic? My fog? I was probably stoned. MY fog? What about your fog!

She meant dog.

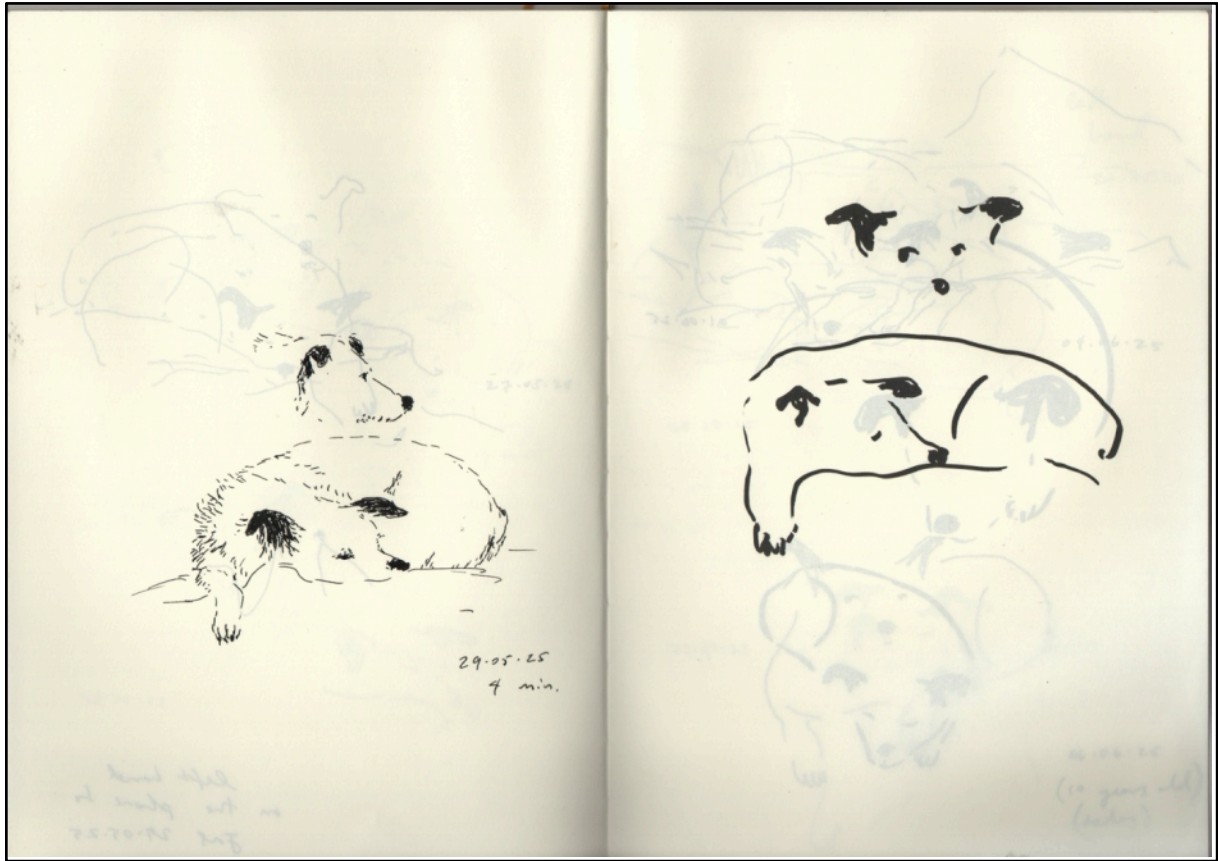


Figure 22: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

The last photo of Katharine and me is of us and our dogs in the hallway of a friend's house. Our dogs are a kind of inverse us. My dog (Layla) is medium sized, nuggety, a ginger blonde stumpy tail cattle dog. Katharine's dog (Brae) is a tall, sweet, and dark-haired greyhound. I am medium sized and dark-haired. Katharine is tall and at this point golden bleach blonde. We are on our knees with our hands around each other's dogs.

Oh I'm so happy to be with you here now love
On my knees
My love
I'm on my knees

(Daly. K, 2019b)

Layla
You got me on my knees
Layla
I'm begging, darling, please

(Clapton. E and Gordon. J, 1970)



Figure 23: "Katharine's favourite position," by the author, 2016. (Brialey)

This is my favourite drawing of Katharine. Drawn in the bootmaker's cottage she lived in for a time in lutruwita/ Tasmania, where she would walk for an hour with her dog (Babette) to the nearest town once a week with her backpack empty and return with her backpack full of food for porridge and stew.

In this cottage we recorded an album together. Her songs, her guitar, her tiny Casio keyboard, my drums. She released the album under her own name, named the album after her nickname for me (Luggs).

Here, she is standing over the pot belly fire, despairing, but now, in hindsight, this despair was small, almost joyful, compared to the despair that came later. I remember at the time we were joking about this being her favourite position (liked how it sounded kind of sexual but was so far from sexual), how it felt so good to slump with a forearm on the mantelpiece over a warm fire in the depths of winter.

She used this image for the cover of the album.

In *Bento's Sketchbook*, John Berger reflects:

There is a symbiotic desire to get closer and closer, to enter the self of what is being drawn, and simultaneously, there is the foreknowledge of immanent distance. Such drawings aspire to be both a secret rendezvous and an au revoir! Alternately and ad infinitum (2011, p.156).

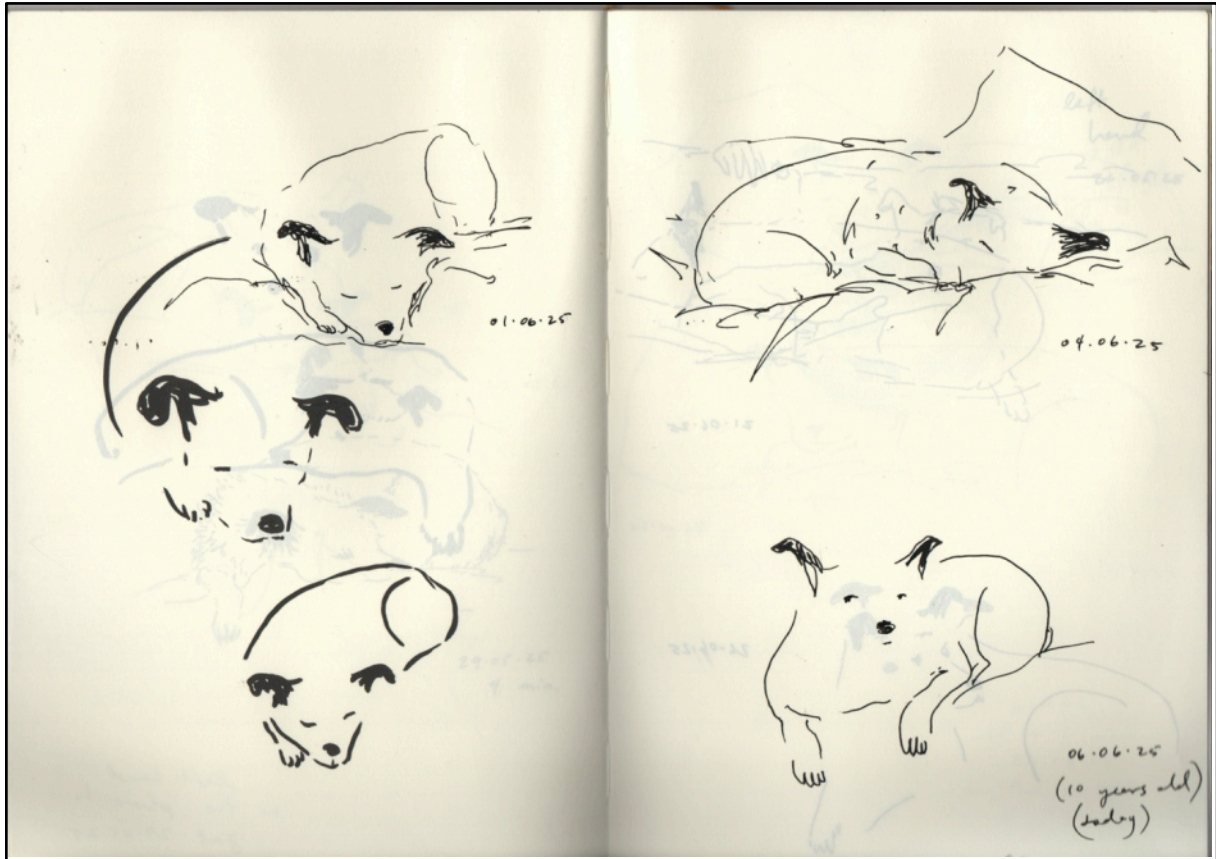


Figure 24: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

I'm always waiting for Katharine to send me a song. In a dream. In real life.

Berger again:

I'm aware of a distant, silent company. Almost as distant as the stars. Company nevertheless. Not because we are in the same universe, but because we are involved – each according to his own mode – in a comparable manner of searching.

Drawing is a form of probing. And the first generic impulse to draw derives from the human need to search, to plot points, to place things and to place oneself. (2011, p. 150)

Layla is a Gemini. Katharine was a Libra. Both air signs. What does it mean for a dog to be a Gemini? It didn't mean anything for Katharine to be a Libra, she kind of hated astrology.

It's just nice to think about the stars, birthdays, the shape our lives take as plotted points, elemental as air. To think, this is the moment you entered the earth! What a blessing! To think, this beautiful entrance will one day lead to an exit. How precious and delicate that time in-between. Worth making a note of. Singing a song.



Figure 25: Drawing of Katharine Daly on her birthday by the author, 2013. (Brialey)

On the last pages of *Bento's Sketchbook*, Berger is talking about Woody Guthrie. He talks about how Guthrie sang old songs, and new songs to old tunes, like “So long, it’s been good to know you.” He talks about hearing (or mishearing) a recording on the radio where the refrain has changed to, “Hold on, hold on, it’s been good to know you.” (2011, p. 157)

He says, “Like this, it’s a refrain which addresses the subject of any drawing which has insisted upon being put on paper. ‘Hold on, hold on, it’s been good to know you.’” (2011, p. 157)

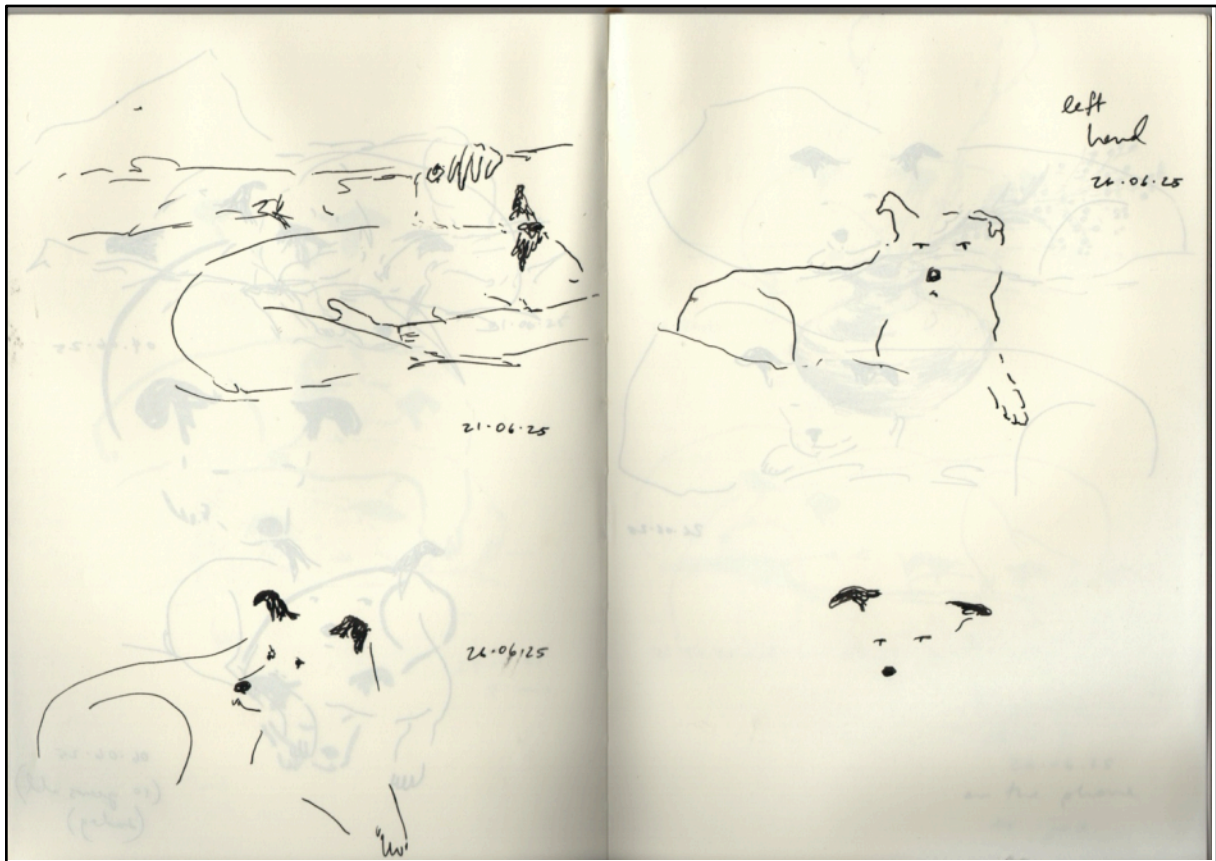


Figure 26: Author's sketchbook, 2024-2025. (Brialey).

Holding On

D / Em / C / G / A

Well I've been holding on
Have you ever held on too long
Have you ever kept holding on
When you could have been getting free

Well I've been standing still
Holding on like hell
Yes I kept holding on
When I could have been getting free
But I kept on keeping on

Oh I've been holding onto guilt
I've been holding onto shame
And I'll keep holding on
They're a part of me as my name
Lovely old guilt and shame
Oh I've been holding on
Yes I kept holding on

Coz I get to hold onto you
And I'm gonna hold on like hell
Oh la la la la
La la la la la

(Daly. K, 2019c)

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