



**Background** Mark Brazaitis was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1966. He is the author of five books, including *The Incurables: Stories*. Brazaitis has said, "... the place I learned to write was Guatemala, where I was a Peace Corps Volunteer from 1990 to 1993. To step out of one's culture and one's language is to see oneself and one's country and everything one has ever believed in in fresh and even startling ways."

# Blackheart

Short Story by Mark Brazaitis



CLOSE READ  
Notes

1. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 1–32, begin to collect and cite text evidence.
  - Circle text describing the setting.
  - Underline things Emily's mother tells her.
  - In the margin, explain why Emily could not stay with her father (lines 5–15) and why she is in Argentina (lines 16–32).

The moon is full, the sky cloudless. It is summer in Argentina—"All your friends in Ohio are shivering in the snow," her mother told her the other day—but the nights are cool. She walks across the garden's lawn toward the door on the other end. It is the door to the vineyard. Black Heart is behind it.

Her mother and Ed are eating dinner in Mendoza. It is late, but dinner always starts late in Argentina. The restaurants open at eight at night. Emily has eaten dinner at a restaurant in Argentina only once, and she fell asleep before dessert. Waking her, her mother said, "You'll never be mistaken for an Argentine." Ed had said the same in relation to her red hair and blue-green eyes, inherited from her father. Emily wanted to stay with her father in Sherman instead of coming here, but he has a new girlfriend and Emily's presence, he said, would be inconvenient now. There was a time between her parents' separation and divorce when her father wanted her to spend all her time with him. Her mother said this was only because he wanted to look good in the eyes of the divorce judge. After the divorce, he became busy.

So did her mother, who met Ed in an adventure writing class he'd taught in Cleveland. Older than her mother by sixteen years, he has a balloon belly and

waddles rather than walks. He is a travel writer, a food writer, a wine writer. He has rented this house outside of Mendoza so he can write about Mendoza's foods and wines. Her mother is supposed to be home-schooling her—Emily's fifth-grade teacher gave her mother a packet to cover January and February, the months they would be gone—but most days, her mother and Ed drive off into the Uco valley, and Emily leaves her schoolwork and wanders around the vineyard singing songs she knows and songs she makes up. Beyond the last row of grapevines, there is an elevated spot, a grass altar where she likes to lie on her back and stare at the Andes Mountains, off to the west, snow-capped and shimmering like a picture in a storybook. Sometimes Maria, the wife of the man who looks after the property, finds her and asks if she's all right. Maria's Spanish is only a little better than Emily's. Maria and her husband, Daniel, who live in the two-room cottage next to the house where she is staying, are from Bolivia. Her mother says their first language is . . . Emily can't remember. It starts with a q, like question.

Daniel is in charge of keeping the robbers and the killers and the rapists out of the vineyard and out of the garden and out of the house. One night, she overheard her mother and Ed discussing what happened to a Canadian woman who owns a hotel in Mendoza. When her mother discovered her hiding behind the kitchen door, she said, "You don't have to worry, sweetheart. We have Daniel and the dogs."

Their house sits in the north end of the garden, and the garden is surrounded by a black iron fence topped with barbed wire. On three sides of the black fence, separated from it by a ten-foot-wide corridor, is a chain-link fence, also topped with barbed wire. On the fourth side of the garden, on the south end, is the vineyard, which is surrounded by only a five-foot-tall wooden picket fence without barbed wire. Before Daniel goes to bed, he releases three bullmastiffs into the corridors between the black fence and the chain-link fence. Into the vineyard Daniel sends a fourth dog, some combination of pit bull, Rottweiler, German shepherd, and wolf, an animal as cruel and vicious as any animal on earth, or so Daniel told her. Daniel has given several names to

2. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 10–32. In the margin, explain why you think Maria asks Emily if she's "all right."
3. **▶ READ** As you read lines 33–69, continue to cite textual evidence.
  - Underline text describing Black Heart.
  - In the margin, make an inference about why Emily is so interested in the dogs (lines 49–57).

this dog in his language, but in Spanish he calls him Black Heart. Black Heart was the topic of her mother's sternest lecture: *At night, don't ever open the door to the vineyard. Black Heart is on guard, and he's trained to kill whomever he finds.* "Even me?" *Anyone. Please, darling.* "Why would he kill me?" *Please. Never open the door.*

When they arrived in Argentina, Ed thought she should be curious about wine and empanadas and tango dancing. But Emily was curious about the guard dogs. How old were they? Were the three bullmastiffs brothers? Had the three bullmastiffs ever met Black Heart? Had Black Heart ever killed anyone?

Ed didn't know anything about them. "Ask Daniel," he said. So Emily did, in her bad Spanish. The next time they saw each other, Daniel pulled a tattered paperback Spanish-English dictionary from his back pocket. The print was so small even Emily had trouble reading it. The dictionary became a game between them, a game to see who could find the right word, who could speak it well enough so the other person understood. Daniel is only an inch or two taller than her five feet (she is the tallest girl in her class), and he has the blackest, straightest hair she's ever seen. His nose is large, and his nostrils seem, in proportion, even larger. Her mother and Ed call him Evo, because he supposedly looks like the president of Bolivia. Saturday is his night off. Sometimes on Saturday nights he stays home with Maria and sometimes he meets up with his Bolivian friends in Mendoza.

Often when Daniel returns late at night, she hears him singing, and this reminds her of her father, who loves to sing. Daniel's voice is light and sweet; her father's is low like a rumble or a growl. When her parents were married, the three of them would go camping every summer in southern Ohio, and every night around the fire, her mother would play her guitar and her father would

4. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 58–69. How does Emily forge a relationship with Daniel and his dogs? What might this relationship have to do with the theme of the story?

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5. **▶ READ** As you read lines 70–117, continue to cite textual evidence.
- Underline text that mentions Emily's father.
  - Make notes in the margin about the appearance and behavior of Black Heart.

enchancing:

sing, his voice booming above the crackling flames. On the last couple of trips, Emily sang with him. Although her voice was as thin as air, it was beautiful, her father said, beautiful and **enchancing**. “You could sing a fish out of the water,” he said. “You could sing a dog away from a bone.”

80 In the week before she left for Argentina, Emily called her father every day, always when she thought his girlfriend wouldn’t be with him. Even when she wasn’t, their conversations were short. One time Emily called him and his girlfriend interrupted to ask him, “What do you think of this ring?” The last time she spoke to him, he was at a party and there was music in the background. “Remember this song?” he said, and she sang to show him she did. But she realized he had been speaking to someone else. Embarrassed, she hung up. The next day, she was on a plane to Argentina.

cascades:

90 Emily hears a sound in the bougainvillea that covers the black iron fence on her left. Her heart springs into her throat. But it is only the stray tiger cat who visits some nights. Daniel calls him Romeo because he supposedly fathered all the recent litters in the neighborhood. He paws his way from the top of the fence, **cascades** down the purple flowers, and tumbles onto the grass. He is the thinnest cat she has ever seen, but her mother assured her he isn’t starving.

Romeo rubs himself against her leg, and she crouches down to pet him. His fur is like none she has touched before. It is thick and prickly like she imagines a groundhog’s would be. “Do you know what I’m doing tonight?” she asks Romeo. “I’m going to visit Black Heart.” He looks up at her, responding to her voice. “Don’t worry. He’s my friend. I’ve been visiting him in his cage. I sing to him.” She pretends he says something. “He’s not my boyfriend! He’s a dog!”  
100 She laughs and shakes her head.

In her first week in Argentina, after they had become friends, Daniel brought her to see the dogs in their cages, located in the corridor between the

6. ◀ **REREAD** Reread lines 70–86. Describe how Emily’s relationship with her father has changed. Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

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two fences at the front of the property. They were like cages at the zoo, except they were no taller than her chest. The three bullmastiffs, who shared a cage, barked at her, but when Daniel scolded them, they whimpered like doves. When they reached Black Heart's cage, he attacked the bars, barking like no dog she'd ever known, like some creature from mythology. Surprised and frightened, she backpedaled and tripped. Daniel alternately spoke sympathetically to her and harshly to Black Heart. From where she'd fallen, she gazed, trembling, at Black Heart, who never ceased barking. She wondered how strong the bars of his cage were. She imagined them snapping and Black Heart pouncing on her and enclosing her neck in his mouth.

Black Heart looked less like a dog and more like a mammal from the period after the dinosaurs died. He was husky and broad-shouldered like a gorilla and his square face and dark, marble eyes seemed bison-like. He had scars everywhere—on his forehead, on his chest, in several places on his back—and she wondered what violent encounter each scar represented.

Thereafter whenever Daniel fed the dogs she accompanied him—except when her mother was around. Her mother didn't want her near the dogs. "They are not your friends," she said. "Okay, Emily? Okay?"

When she was with Daniel, she stood by his side, so close she could smell him. He wore cologne, but this didn't disguise his other smells, which she thought her mother would find repulsive but which she grew used to and found reassuring. As soon as Daniel fed the three bullmastiffs, which he did by sliding their bowls into a space on the bottom of their cage, they stopped being interested in anything but the food. But Black Heart wouldn't eat his food until Daniel and Emily retreated behind the garden wall. If they craned their heads around the wall to stare at Black Heart, he would start barking like he smelled blood. To watch him eat, Daniel taped a hand-held mirror to a long stick and held it at such an angle that they could gaze into it and see him. He ate the brown nuggets with slow pleasure. She remembered the last time she ate dinner with her father, how he picked at the rotisserie chicken, finishing everything on the bones.

When Daniel lets Black Heart into the vineyard every night, he carries a bullwhip. The whip looks like a snake—*una culebra*—and Black Heart is scared

7. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 118–172, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Make notes in the margin about Emily's relationship with Black Heart.
- Underline the reference to Emily's father.
- Circle the sentence that describes the danger Black Heart might present.

of nothing in the world except the whip. Even so, he growls at it as if to say, Keep your distance or I will attack you. A week ago, as she leaned out of her open bedroom window, she saw Daniel leading Black Heart into the vineyard. Under his breath, he said, “One night he won’t be afraid of the whip. And then what?” He looked up at her, surprised to see her. She smiled like she did when she didn’t understand his Spanish.

“All right, Romeo,” she says, “you be good. Be good to all your girlfriends.” He darts off to the other side of the garden and disappears beneath the weeping willow tree, which in the night looks like a hunched giant with a thousand thin arms. She resumes her walk toward the door, but is stopped by a sound of “Who? Who? Who?” It is Boy, the white-faced owl, in his nook in the palm tree twenty feet above her. She always thought of owls as old, but this owl looks like a teenager—thus the name she gave him.

“It’s only me, Boy,” she says. If he could speak in a language she understood, she wonders if he would tease her like a brother would. Or would he say something like the man at the mall said to her cousin, who is fourteen but, with her European haircut, looks twenty?

“I’m going to visit Black Heart,” she tells the owl. “It’s all right. You’ll see.”

Some days when Daniel is out in the vineyard and Maria is at the market in Luján de Cuyo and her mother and Ed are napping under the thin-bladed ceiling fan in their bedroom or sampling wines in Chacras de Coria, she visits Black Heart in his cage. She used to bring him pieces of steak and chicken she slipped into her palm at dinner and saved in a paper bag beneath her bed. The first time, she tossed the pieces of meat between the bars of his cage and retreated behind the fence so he could eat them in private. When, on subsequent visits, she lingered, he snarled, growled, and barked at her but eventually, between his hostile sounds, devoured her offering.

One day, she sang to him after giving him his meat, and his vicious sounds ceased. Even with his gigantic, square head and his razor-blade teeth and his terrible scars, he looked familiar and approachable, like a misunderstood monster. The song she’d sung was one she’d heard often on Maria’s radio. She didn’t understand all of the Spanish words, but she could enunciate them clearly, and Black Heart cocked his head as if to hear better. As soon as she stopped, his face again became strange and hideous, and his barking shocked her ears until she fled, terrified.

The next day, she returned with only her voice. As long as she sang, he was silent, docile, calm. Content, even. Perhaps even happy.

Boy flutters his white and brown wings and swoops down toward her, his mouth open, his talons spread and pointed like daggers. As she ducks and

subsequent:

enunciate:



covers her eyes, she feels the wind from his wings fill her hair. She shivers from fear and a strange pleasure before she hears a squeal, high-pitched and hopeless. She turns to see Boy pluck a mouse from the grass and retreat with his feast to the palm tree.

180 “You scared me, Boy. Maybe you wanted to? In fun, I mean. Like a brother would?”

The day she touched Black Heart, the air was a white mist. She couldn’t see her feet. But she knew the path to his cage as if it were illuminated. When she stood before it, she couldn’t see him; she could only hear his terrible bark. When she sang, his barking stopped instantly, as if she’d cast a spell. Piercing the bars of his cage, she held out her hand to him, palm open. She felt his mouth engulf it. She felt his teeth touch her skin. She thought he was going to bite down. But his mouth held steady. Carefully, she slipped her left hand into the cage so she could stroke his head and neck and back. His fur was like the leather of her father’s jacket.

190 A moment later, she felt his tongue sweep the underside of her fingers and his teeth nibble, soft as a kiss, her fingertips. She felt her heart fly. She felt adored. For hours afterward, she didn’t wash either hand.

During her last visit before tonight, as she sang a song she’d invented about a girl and a dog and the iron between them, he looked at her with what she swore was a plea. *I want to know you without bars between us.*

8. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 163–172. How does Emily’s singing affect Black Heart? What might singing have to do with the theme of the story?

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9. **▶ READ** As you read lines 173–209, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline text describing Emily’s reactions to Boy and Black Heart.
- Circle the words that Emily imagines Black Heart speaks.
- In the margin, explain how Emily is testing the limits of her power.

Ten feet from the door separating her and Black Heart, she stops. She can sense his presence. She hears a growl so soft it might be a purr. If she moves any closer, he will erupt and wake Maria, asleep in her tiny house. If this happens, her plan will come to nothing, and she will never again have the chance to visit him. Ed and her mother will keep her with them, even if they'd rather not. Besides, their time in Argentina is coming to an end.

Another week, and they will be heading home.

She sings, softly at first, a sound like small waves hitting sand. He stops growling. She reaches the door. There are three deadbolt locks, the highest an inch beyond her reach. But she jumps and slaps it open. In jumping, her singing stops, and Black Heart growls. She slaps the second lock open, her singing coming jagged, and Black Heart continues to growl, his voice climbing in register the way it does before he attacks the bars of his cage. She tries to make her singing calm, but this is difficult because of her pounding heart.

She has one deadbolt left to open before she can turn the doorknob and release him into the garden. She gives herself a moment to doubt. The wisest part of her says she should go back to the house, go to bed. But her hand, which she can barely feel as her heart thunders, acts otherwise. It snaps the deadbolt to the side.

Stop, she tells herself. Think. If Black Heart were to attack her, Maria could do nothing. Daniel is in Mendoza with his friends. He might come home in five minutes. He might come home in three hours. And Ed and her mother? Even if they were to come, what could they do?

10. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 196–202. What is Emily's plan? Why is her relationship with Black Heart important to her? Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

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11. **▶ READ** As you read lines 210–264, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline text that describes Emily's excitement and fear.
- Circle verbs and verb phrases that show Black Heart's movements.





220 These reservations register the way the deepest fear does, like fingers squeezing her heart, but they cannot overcome her desire. She pulls open the door. Boy cries as if he's been wounded, leaps from his cave in the palm tree, and flies over her, his wings filling her hair with a warning wind.

Too late. Black Heart is at her side, so close she can feel heat coming from him. She thinks, I'm going to die. At the same time, **exhilaration** fills her. She feels like she owns the night. She turns, singing, and walks to the middle of the garden. Black Heart circles her, a slow loop on the grass, his eyes never leaving her. He might be dancing with her. Or he might be a lion circling its prey.

230 The moon blazes above her, and she feels powerful and magical and adored. Every so often, she touches Black Heart's back, at once smooth and rough. *I can sing all night.* But after a minute or five or ten—she has no watch, the night tells no time—her exhilaration fades into worry. She doesn't know how long she can stand here and sing. Perhaps she can make her way back to the house, open the door, slip in. It is only fifty feet from where she's standing. But when she steps toward it, Black Heart quickly moves in front of her and issues a clear, low sound, less a growl than a warning a human might give.

When Black Heart is at the farthest point in his circle away from the house, she again moves toward it. Again, he moves swiftly to block her. This time, his warning is louder and more insistent. She backs up to her original spot. She hears nothing but her voice against the inside of her ears and the swish of Black 240 Heart moving in the grass. *My God*, she thinks, *I'll have to sing all night.*

She wonders if she should run toward the house. She wonders if she should shout Maria's name. But she fears—she knows—that if she broke off her song even for a second, Black Heart would attack her, devour her.

As she sings, she prays Daniel will come home. She prays Ed and her mother will become bored at the dinner and will drive the car into the middle of the garden to save her. She prays Maria will step outside and Black Heart will charge her, and this will give her the chance to flee. But the night radiates with brilliant indifference and fatigue weighs on her like something living, something growing. Her song has lost words.

250 *When they find me, they won't know he loved me. They'll think I was a stupid girl who thought she could play with a mean dog.*

She feels her eyes flutter from fatigue; she feels herself stagger. As in a dream, she feels Black Heart at her side, his head butting her thigh, insistent and strong. He prods her toward the vineyard's open door. A moment later, she is surrounded by grapes, silver-blue in the moonlight. Her **arid** mouth craves their delicious juice, but Black Heart jabs her and she keeps moving. She hears Maria calling her. She hears Ed's car limp up the gravel drive. She even hears, or thinks she hears, Daniel, or perhaps it's her father, singing in the distance.

exhilaration:

arid:

260 The sounds fade. She wants to scream, but, so deep in the vineyard, she knows no one would hear her.

*I'll find my way back*, she vows, but stumbles, collapses. On her back on the grass altar, she sees, as if on a different planet, the snow-capped Andes. She discovers that, remarkably, she is still singing, in a voice charged with emotion. *I'm safe*. But—no—it is Black Heart, mouth at her ear, who is singing.

12. **REREAD** Reread lines 250–264. What do you think happens to Emily at the end of the story? Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

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## SHORT RESPONSE

**Cite Text Evidence** Identify the central theme of the story. What is the author saying about relationships? Review your reading notes, and be sure to **cite text evidence** in your response.

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