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HEAVY PETTING: LISAN JUTRAS ON OUR FURRY/SCALY/FEATHERED FRIENDS



Remembering Rover, one skein of pet hair at a time

LISAN JUTRAS

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'I have to keep it together,' Carol Edwards said last week from her office at the British Columbia Institute of Technology in Vancouver. 'I'm a teacher and I have 100 students.'

The previous night, her 10½-year-old Great Pyrenees dog, Cisco, had collapsed, and she knew it was time to call the vet. But as upset as she was about her pet's euthanasia, it was the first week of school. 'I couldn't go in [to class] and say, 'Look, my dog is being put down.' "

The Canadian pet industry takes in an estimated \$4.5-billion a year, and people are increasingly shameless in the purchases they make on their pets' behalf.

Still, strangely, it is less embarrassing in the public eye to treat a dog to a "spaw" visit or buy it a jewel-studded collar than it is to show how much the loss of a fuzzy-muzzled friend cuts us to the quick.

"I'm in shock ... but it would be inappropriate to be in front of 100 people, snivelling," Ms. Edwards said.

"The death of a pet can be more devastating than the death of a family member," noted Ralph Plumley, a bereavement co-ordinator at a funeral home in Wilmington, Del.

A pet owner himself, he began offering counselling for pet loss after noticing a demand for the service in the calls he was getting. "I realized that it's an aspect of bereavement that isn't emphasized very much ... that's really disenfranchised," he said. "Disenfranchised grief," a concept articulated by Kenneth Doka in his book of the same name, refers to "hidden grief that is not socially accepted," Mr. Plumley said.

"People come in almost sheepishly - 'Am I normal? Am I crazy? People are telling me I should just get over this; they're telling me just get another cat, get another dog,' " said Bronwyn Dickson, a Toronto-based psychotherapist who branched out into pet-loss therapy after studying with Shiri Joshua, founder of the [Canadian Centre for Pet Loss Bereavement](#).

"People spend so much time invalidating their own feelings and grieving in isolation that they can't actually pass through the normal grieving process," she explained. Without a formalized ritual such as a funeral to turn to, she said, "a lot of my clients find memorial services on the Internet because they're alone at home and don't know what to do."

And the grief-stricken will find no shortage of products and services online, ranging from sensible to just plain weird. (People who don't own pets may not pass judgment on the following list of items; even a hard-headed gal such as I was swayed by the thought of having - ahem - a diamond made from my pet's ashes.)

Besides seeking emotional help in support-group chat rooms or booking a cremation or burial, you can buy customized headstones and collages; lockets and pendants that hold "cremains;" musical tribute DVDs; hand-painted gourds to hold the dead pet's belongings.

But devotion to the dearly departed doesn't stop there.

"About half the people want yarn. The others want mementoes: hats, teddy bears, pillows," said Christine Dalziel, who spins yarn from pet fur (and will knit it on request) in her Greenwood, B.C., home.

She estimates that two-thirds of her pet-hair-yarn requests are from people with deceased pets. Before Cisco passed away, she knitted a number of items for Ms. Edwards from the dog's fur.

"You get very, very fond of these animals," Ms. Edwards said, "and it's so nice when they're gone to have something other than a photograph. I have a beautiful winter hat that was knitted for me, and literally, when I put it on next winter I'll get a warm, fuzzy feeling."

Still don't get it?

"Animals can serve functions that are often rare in human relationships," Ms. Dickson said. People "can tell them anything and they're not going to be judged and they're not going to be criticized. They're going to be completely listened to and accepted and that is a basic human need."

Lisan Jutras is a Toronto-based writer and editor. She has two cats, a Puerto Rican street dog and many garments covered in pet hair.