Mongrel Aesthetics

When one dog barks, we others sing our answer.

That is the way of yard dogs:

one says, *Uh-oh, who are you,* or *Hello, who are you,* or *Hooray, you,*

and in concert we turn it to canon & a hymn.

In this manner, almost anything becomes a call to worship.

There are some dogs—better-bred or better-schooled dogs,

we are told—who don't much frequent the yard or come to worship.

They huddle at the master's feet & it's not to us they answer.

Whether, in that, their lives are cosseted or more grim—

both, we suppose, are possible—

"This one yapped like that too, till I beat it out of him,"

we heard a man boast once—we don’t much know,

or nose the contours of. Our world is small. We answer

to our names. (And woof, & wag our tails, & may break into worship!)

We sniff the pungencies, we doze, dig holes—we’re dogs.

Yet when the rapture takes us—whole-heart-howling, leashless—

and our little mutt spirituals rise to the choir lofts of the seraphim,

how may they be heard, ragged as they are, except as prayer?

To breath, earth, smell, the green yards of a life—as hymn?

I've written more poems in this form—maybe 40 or 50 of them—than in any other. There are always five stanzas, in this same arrangement of 5-3-4-4-3, for a total of 19 lines. The pattern of the four refrain words (here they are: *answer, dogs, hymn, worship*) is set—though I permit myself to use variant forms of them. (E.g. "him" in line 11.) The fourth line is also a rhyme word—see lines 9 and 17. The metrics are unpatterned, the line lengths vary, the language can be vernacular or didactic, and the poem should look, and mostly sound, like free verse—but with odd, obsessive repetitions that come at the ear a little unpredictably. I call these poems *fidgets*—they can sound like chant, but they can also come across as an anti-music; like a conversation that can't make up its mind. They suit my aesthetic concerns perfectly.

*This* fidget contains the collection's title phrase. Its mutts are literal mongrels, rather than people of mixed race, but they sing: they are very like me, unless someone beats it out of them. Which, by the way, was a line that was once spoken to me, back when I did some private duty nursing care, by a perfectly pleasant man whose dog never made a sound. Because "I beat it out of him."

In short, there is a reason why this is the book's title poem. Taken together, that is, with the frontispiece poem, which was written as a play on it.