

'L'ombre de ton chien': on dogs and goats and meanwhile

David Williams

They say, if you dream an animal, it means 'the self' – that mess of memory and fear that wants, remembers, understands, denies, and even now we sometimes wake from dreams of moving from room to room, with its scent on our hands and a slickness of musk and fur on our sleep-washed skins, though what I sense in this, and cannot tell is not the continuity we understand as self, but life, beyond the life we live on purpose: one broad presence that proceeds by craft and guesswork, shadowing our love' (John Burnside).

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Devon

Dear S.

It is the evening, that transitional time the French language describes as *entre chien et loup*, between dog and wolf. Your face has made a gift of what it could leave behind of itself, and it is both dog and wolf, and I think to you in your absence and you are here and not-here. There are so many things I want to tell you. So many stories and connections, unfinished and unfinishable.

Did I ever tell you about Laika? I can't remember. Like you, she is in my thoughts right now. In November 1957 when I was 5 months old, Laika became the first living creature to enter space, orbiting around the earth while I orbited my mother in extreme proximity. Found as a stray dog in the streets of Moscow, and chosen for her small size and even temperament, Laika was about 3 years old when she became the first cosmonaut aboard Sputnik 2, and an unwitting instrument of cold war politics: an understudy for man in the complex ideologies and developing technologies of ballistic missiles, satellites, manned-space flight. In Russian, 'laika' means 'barker' and is the generic name for a range of Russian dog breeds. In a Soviet radio broadcast a week before the launch, she barked into the microphone. The American press dubbed her 'Muttnik'. Over a period of weeks, Laika was trained to endure launch and flight conditions. To adapt to the cramped space of the cabin, she was kept in progressively smaller cages for periods of up to three weeks. She was placed in centrifuges that simulated the vibrations and extreme G-forces in the acceleration of a rocket launch, and in simulators that reproduced the volume of noise within a space craft. Just before launch, Laika was sponged in a diluted alcohol solution and carefully groomed. Iodine was painted onto shaved areas where sensors were attached to monitor her bodily functions: blood pressure, breath frequency, heartbeat. She was fitted with a metal chain harness to prevent her turning around, and a rubber bag to collect bodily waste. There was a radio transmitter, and a television camera that doesn't seem to have worked ...

Shortly after the launch on November 3, one of the heat shields fell off, leaving Laika exposed to high temperatures. The early telemetry from the electrodes on her body show she was highly agitated (her pulse rate at three times the normal resting rate) and barking, although still eating some food. In the end, Laika seems to have died from trauma and dehydration after 3-5 hours; she was certainly dead by the completion of the 4th orbit. The dog circled the earth 2,570 times in her space capsule coffin, at a height of about 2,000 miles and at a speed of about 18,000 m.p.h.. The capsule finally burnt up on re-entry five months after launch: 162 days of meanwhile, then dog-star. It's only recently that the real nature and timing of her death have come to light. The cold war Soviet PR machine concealed the reality of her fate and constructed a fantasy version of Laika circling the earth, peering inquisitively out of the window at Earth for more than a week of carefree doggy flight. For 40 years, the official 'history' was that Laika had lived to see the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution, before dying peacefully. It is now clear that in reality she is the only living space passenger to have been launched without any intention of retrieval. There was no life-support system for long-duration flight, and no descent capsule. In fact it was planned for Laika to be euthanased after 10 days with a poisoned serving of food. Meanwhile in Soviet Russia plaques were unveiled, statues erected, commemorative stamps printed. There were brands of chocolates and cigarettes named after her, and now there are novels, band names and songs, films, website memorials with audio samples of Laika's telemetry signals picked up from satellites, including her heartbeat. Laika has entered modern mythology and cultural imaginations as an unwitting hero/victim of our technological age and its political tensions. Four years after Laika's flight, in April 1961 Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space aboard Vostok 1.

Thirteen other Soviet dogs went into space. Five died in flight. A puppy from one of Laika's successors was sent to Kennedy by Krushchev, as a kind of cold war gift/taunt. In this period shortly before the first manned space flight and then throughout the 1960s, countless other animals were also involved in US and Soviet space missions: mice, rats, monkeys, cats, frogs, spiders, fish, crickets, snails, worms. On board the Space Shuttle Columbia's final flight in 2003, in addition to the seven astronauts, there were silkworms, spiders, carpenter bees, harvester ants and Japanese killifish (as well as roses, moss and other plant life). Nothing survived the explosion at re-entry apart from hundreds of tiny worms known as *Caenorhabditis elegans* found alive on the ground in Texas: the humble nematode.

How dogged we are, the humans, the deterritorialised animal. More than repair everything is in need of mercy.

You remember I told you about my friends in Chicago, the Goats? I told them about you too (did I?): your name and its meanings, your journeys, your gradual blindness, your death, your burial under the slab of slate by the eucalyptus tree. I certainly showed them some video of you during your last summer of life: your left eye missing but still quick there somehow in the shadows, you looking up to meet the camera with the other eye as you lay resting in the dancing dapple of the shadow of a tree. You look peaceful in the video. Let sleeping dogs lie. I wish I had sung Jacques Brel to you: 'Laisse-moi devenir l'ombre de ton ombre / L'ombre de ta main / L'ombre de ton chien / Ne me quittes pas ...'

Well, since you left the Goats have made a performance in which at times they talk of dogs, and at times they become-dog. The performance is ghosted by animal life, there's a diverse menagerie here filtered through a choreographic lens of 'dogness'. Many of the age-old associations of dogs and their cultural roles hover around this work: companionship and fidelity, submissiveness and humility, dependence, tractability, tenacity, behavioural abhorrence, symbiosis, mediation and death. The ways in which they represent animality – and therefore humanity, for humans tend to make of animals the constitutive outside of human-being - are telling. Sometimes they offer playful domesticated impressions. Mark on all fours, snuffing and chewing a stick. Mark travelling through the space leading with his nose, his arm extended from his face along the floor like a trunk; he sniffs the floor as he crosses it, his fingers now nostrils searching and flaring, a sensory field actualised: he sees feelingly. Growls and

bared teeth and barks. ‘The dog grinneth’: grrrr. At other times, it is less to do with imitation and more to do with becoming-other through intensive alliance, contagion or aggregation, in Deleuze’s sense: affinity rather than identity. The circulation of affects in relations of movement and speed. Zones of proximity and indiscernibility in the untimely processes of desire. At one point, someone (Karen I think, as Simone Weill) says: ‘God grant that I may become a dog’. There is a repeated physical score which sequences scratching, jumping, rolling: a stuttering pack choreography. Like Alexis the Trotter the horse imitator who was ‘never as much of a horse as when he played the harmonica’, Matthew is never as much of a dog as when he tells Tommy Cooper jokes or gives Bryan a glass of water wearing an elasticated band over his top lip: muzzle, restraint, torture instrument, facial wound, moustache. And Bryan is never as much of a dog as when he watches Matthew building his precarious cardboard table, then is deterritorialized from his role and *almost* runs to the aid of Matthew as he wrestles with the cardboard table that *almost* topples. Life, beyond the life we live on purpose. At such moments, there is a kind of diffraction of difference and connectivity in an event, and the other remains inappropriate(d).

Somewhere in the performance Bryan explains the mechanics of optics in the eye, and with enthusiastic hesitancy attempts gamely to demonstrate the phenomenon of the blindspot. He holds a finger in front of his face, fixes it with one eye as the other is held shut, then the other Goats move towards him and into his blindspot: ‘Right now the dog has entered my blindspot and I cannot see it anymore and it has disappeared’, he says. I thought of you at this moment. The blindspot as literality and as metaphor. Concealment. Dis-appearance. Now I see you, now I don’t. Doggone. And I thought of that ambiguous photograph of the British sailor Donald Crowhurst, who disappeared during a round-the-world race in 1969. In the grainy image, he gives a thumbs-up gesture to a film camera on board, a pretender’s performance of well-being by the chirpy sea-dog; and his left eye is blotted out by his thumb. A temporary partial blindness as he erases his capacity to see clearly and activates his blindspot. In reality he was far from being alright. He was all at sea, as we now know from the logs he kept on board; they reveal the critical gap between the fictional selves and locations he constructed in his radio messages for the media and his family at home, and the confused unravelling of his sense of both self and location. Ultimately, with no working chronometer to estimate his position and navigate, he became utterly disoriented, going round and round in circles in the South Atlantic and in his mind, a spiralling meanwhile as he suffered the torture of guilt and of a condition called ‘time-madness’. And still he sailed on, ever further into his blindspot and into dis/appearance. Part of his final journal entry before finally jumping overboard about 1800 miles from home reads: ‘It is finished It is finished IT IS THE MERCY’.

[PHOTO 1: DONALD CROWHURST]

At one point in the Goat Island performance, Matthew quotes Jean Améry detailing the etymological roots of the word ‘torture’: from the Latin *torquere*, to twist, or torment. ‘What visual instruction in etymology’, he says, before describing the terrible details of an extreme experience of physical torture. In search of instruction, visual or otherwise, I look to the entry for ‘dog’ in the *OED*:

Previous history and origin unknown. 1. A quadruped of the genus *Canis*, numerous races or breeds, varying greatly in size shape and colour ... referred by zoologists to a species *C. familiaris*; but whether they have a common origin is a disputed question ... 3. Applied to a person; a. in reproach, abuse, or contempt: a worthless, despicable, surly, or cowardly fellow. b. Playfully (usually in humorous reproof, congratulation, or commiseration): a gay or jovial man, a gallant: a fellow, ‘chap’. 4. *Astron.* a. The name of two constellations, the Great and Little Dog (*Canis Major* and *Minor*) situated near Orion; also applied to their principal stars Sirius and Procyon: see DOG-STAR. b. *The Hunting Dogs*, a northern constellation (*Canes Venatici*) near the Great Bear. 5. Applied, usually with distinctive prefix, to various animals allied to, or in some respect resembling, the dog: e.g. *burrowing-dog*, the COYOTE or prairie-wolf, *Canis latrans*; *pouched-dog*, a dasyurine marsupial of Tasmania, *Thylacinus cynophelas*, also called *zebra-wolf*; *prairie-dog*, a North American rodent ... 7. A name given to various mechanical devices, usually having or consisting of a tooth or claw, used for gripping or holding ... 9. An early kind of fire-arm. 10. Name given to various atmospheric appearances. a. A luminous appearance near the horizon; also *fog-dog*, *sea-dog*. b. *Sun-dog*, a luminous appearance near the sun, a parhelion. c. *Water-dog*, a small dark floating cloud, indicating rain.

So, definition as proliferation of signification. A word (and a species) of uncertain origin, sometimes applied to people in either derogatory or playful fashion. Astronomical constellations, formerly used in navigation. Other creatures with certain physiological similarities, one of those mentioned now extinct and another on the cusp of disappearance; *Thylacinus cynepholas*, also known as the Tasmanian tiger, was hunted to extinction in the 1930s, although there are still unconfirmed sightings to this day. Then mechanical grips/restraints, weaponry, and weather phenomena. A multiplicity within the singularity ‘dog’, all of these attributes and associations somehow swarming for me in the performance. ‘Every animal is fundamentally a pack’, Deleuze said somewhere. And Kafka once wrote: ‘All knowledge, the totality of all questions and all answers, is contained in the dog’.

A final thought. When the Goats mention Simone Weill’s surname, they pronounce it ‘while’, as if referring to an in-between space-time: a suspension or waiting in the gap, the gap itself the dynamic relational axis between two terms in a binary, making of them a triad. Dogs do an enormous amount of semiotic and performative work for us, and representations of dogs have often been used to figure cultural change and negotiate the borderlands in-between. As a species in part defined by different modes of relationality, the dog is ‘an animal that emerges between others’, and as such ‘presents special challenges to species-centred notions of history’; in myth, they are ‘markers of thresholds, especially those that lead to forbidden territories’. Most notably the contested spaces between nature and culture, and the uncertain transition between life and death. For John Berger, dogs are the ‘natural frontier experts’ of ‘the interstices between different sets of the visible’:

‘Their eyes, whose message often confuses us for it is urgent and mute, are attuned both to the human order and to other visible orders. Perhaps this is why, on so many occasions and for different reasons, we train dogs as guides’.

[PHOTO 2: DOG & BOY]

In French, however, Weill is pronounced ‘veil’, like the concealing fabric employed in an act of modesty, mourning, disguise or revelation (Salome). Or the clouding or obscuring of vision in an imperfect eye:

‘She had been born with the veil in her eye. She had been born with the veil in her soul ... Seeing was a tottering believing. Everything was perhaps ... Do I see what I see? What was not there was perhaps there. To be and not to be were never exclusive’.

Everything is perhaps.

My love to you,
D.

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IMAGES

1. Film still of Donald Crowhurst from his own footage: *Arena*, BBC, 1993
2. 'Guide dog, guard dog: S & J': Alice Ireland, 2001

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Goat Island's *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy* – performances seen: Part 1, Battersea Arts Centre, London, 6 October 2004; Parts 1 & 2, Dartington College of Arts, 10-11 March 2005.

Burnside 2002: 19.

Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 305.

For material about Crowhurst, see Tomalin & Hall 1995, and Dean 1999.

Kafka 1999: 289-90.

McHugh 2004: 12, 39.

Berger 2001: 5.

Hélène Cixous in Cixous & Derrida 2001: 6-7.