

MY DOG MY DAY

By Ian Perlman

In the quiet street of an inner city parish a dog showed me round the back of a church, pointed with is nose to where the choice scraps are found. Watched by no-one, we poked around the in-between spaces, focus inward and downward.

We were not alone. Voices reached from history, hissing like gas from the solid matter of the building. I had been here before.

The past is a book read too closely, and knowledge is weight. Wisely, the dog preferred to remain groping through the present.

He had a story, the old one. Early years of home-bound comfort, then boredom and the acrid dawn of dissatisfaction.

The dog went internal. No more chasing cars. Stopped inviting tummy tickles. Interest in bones: deprogrammed. The gourmand vanquished by the self, no dazzle in fancy ingredients. He even renounced meat, difficult for a dog.

Others reckoned it was age. He says no, he made his own decisions. The renunciations were as important as the actions. Maybe more. Then *that* phase came to an end, and things became interesting. Apparently.

But there the story stopped, right at the point of revelation. He pawed a plastic bag and, in the silence, I understood that it was time to back out, delicately carrying the taint of my own thoughts from his sanctuary.

In the street my vision spiralled outwards, taking in the house facades, the lined the faces of the people, the hope of rain sewn into the unreadable fabric of clouds.

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Painful news about the environment. No water; an end to fish in 50 years. The dog community seemed like good company for a soggy Saturday. They may, after all, survive us as a species.

The next one to cross my path was a mutt that chased my taxi.

I admired his pluck. He wasn't as worldly as my first interlocutor, but he had soul around the eyes and the shape of his head. A trace of the young Travolta,

To my surprise I felt stirrings. He was male. He was also Maltese. Not my usual type on either count, but he had a lilting voice hard to turn away from. It spoke of craggy distant cliffs, nocturnal feasts and the wine-dark sea.

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More news. Baz Luhrman is casting livestock to appear in his new film. There are opportunities for dogs, too. A featured part, with heroic yelping. And who knows how many non-barking roles.

Sounds good, but any dogs out there, I have to warn you about this. I have worked in films, and I know the lure of the glamour, know it well. And I know there is a price.

First of all, there is the down time. You just sit around in the heat, which is very hard to reconcile with being a show business dog.

Then there is the career path.

I knew a dog that had been down that road. Starting with Tropfest he got an agent and landed bit parts in Alibrandi, Water Rats, some TV commercials.

Those of you in the industry can see where this is going.

Two words:

Wolf. Creek.

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We have been talking about one-off dogs, loners, mavericks. Ronin.

For Dog Truth you have to get into the community, to experience all of the manifestations of canine being.

You may remember the bond of brotherhood in the famous poster images: “bad” dogs in the 1930s pool hall, cigarillos and arm bands. Or the police line-up poster, all dogs. Or this one: “Our Friendly Staff is Willing to Help You at Any Time.”

That’s the joke version of a deep truth, that dogs are, as a group, wise. I don’t think I have ever spent time with beings more attuned to the balance between skeletal structure and the limitations of their inner organs.

Not all dogs are the same. There are also outsiders.

Some are quite ill. Mangy, itching, hopping about on paralytic paws.

Therefore there must be healers among them. Administering a sequence of growls, barks and what seemed like stretching instructions the lame seemed to find relief.

At the pound I found a dog choir. What at first seemed like random, asynchronous exclamations revealed itself as music.

But humans spoil it all. Distracting the dogs with their own names (given by humans), stirring the pack into a frenzy that had little to do dogness and everything to do with mob anger and fear.

I wondered about these humans, and thought about switching teams, wandering over the species line when nobody was watching.

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Another dog at the pound changed all that.

Shandy. Female Kelpie aged about 4, according to the sign on her cage. She parsed the world with her tail and her muzzle, made me see I had been projecting human characteristics.

A few minutes with her and it was all too clear: I was in denial of the essence of dogs. And beyond that, the singularity of each dog.

That idea of community – my own concept. Anthropocentric. Illuminating only what I wished for myself.

There was only this dog, this moment, this scent and this urge. And beyond all that, one fragment of a possible billion.

I knew this truth because Shandy sang it. Rocking back on her haunches she howled the verses of an ancient dog poet, lines and refrains that led deeper and further than language itself. It was almost a purr at first, and I could barely distinguish it from the ambient clamour. Reaching into some place invisible to me she worked it up to a heartfelt yodel. And when the song was done I was in a world of different coordinates, different understandings.

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I had not just heard the melody of a new universe. I had a gift to share.

Then, as Siddhartha became Gautama Buddha and took his preaching to a park I went to market, to convince the masses, to expose the money lenders, to render the virgins unto me.

Pathetic, trapped people. They saw me in a cage, but they were the caged ones. But I had a story to tell, and I would lead them out.

(pause)

It was the dogs who did me in. Skeptical dogs, critical dogs. Of course there were people. And both camps had clearly been talking. Nobody there was interested in my truth.

I was angry. There was no turning back to the world I had known. I had a glimpse into the other world, and I could sense the cool light, the radiance.

But I could not get in. It was not my time or my fate.

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A Holy Dog found me weeping, and understood my anger. Offered me the cool water of sacred verses, gave me license to imagine a weapon in my hand.

There was a moment when I could have used that weapon. In the pound, in the market of godless temptation, angry about the abuses of the powerful and seething with righteous indignation, I could have worked

myself into a fit and plunged a knife or thrown a bomb somewhere that hurt, in the world of dogs or people.

And so could some of you.

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In the afternoon, at cocktail hour, all things become momentarily clear. It was not dogs that made me angry, nor did dogs make me wise. These were merely chance encounters.

The rest of the day was spent without them. I remembered them fondly, but they did not obscure the city, the game. There is no Dog, and I am not his prophet.

But tomorrow it begins again. A chance encounter, a whiff of scent, and I will chase another whirling hubcap of my own desire.

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My editor thought the ending was too much of a downer, so I have written a song to fill up the word limit. I need you help me with it. There's a simple chorus – that's your part. It goes like this.

chorus:

The life of a dog is all we need
It's simple and it's pure
Attractions, reactions and wild satisfactions
Fortify our manure

Dog is what we all become
Dog is where we'll be.
All that learning in our heads
Pissed onto a tree

(chorus)

Leave your flesh and brain behind
Prepare yourselves to leap
You can salivate, procrastinate
Just don't you do it in your sleep

(chorus)

Growl if you will, or snarl or howl
Fix your face into a smile.
Whatever you pursue in life as a dog
You're in by a country mile.

(chorus)

Pavlov, Skinner, all those Russkies
Didn't have a clue
Ten savants against one husky
Left drowning in his poo

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