

First Dog, Last Dog: New Intertextual Short Fictions about *Canis lupus familiaris*

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Exegetical Statement:

The double short story sequence ‘First Dog, Last Dog’ explores interdependencies between domesticated animals and humans. The first story, ‘The Death of the First Dog’, re-reads and quotes from Homer’s *The Odyssey* and the encounter between Odysseus and his aged hunting dog Argos. Its companion piece, ‘The Carrying’, is set in a speculative future. Exploiting qualities of the Borghesian fable, both tales are interspecies tales of love and loss. This work was read at the 2018 Melbourne Writers Festival ‘Animal Church’ event curated by Dr Laura McKay.

As part of a larger short fiction project exploring life-long relationships between human and nonhuman creatures, I aim to explore how certain narrative techniques (intertextuality, fable, hyper-anthromorphism and other writerly modes identified by Ursula Le Guin, Jane Bennett, Anna Tsing and others) best (1) support re-voiced, silenced animal others; and (2) portray the dialogical ‘mesh’ of creaturely encounters. That is to say, *how* can imaginative narrative mechanics, as explored by Le Guin, Bennett, Tsing, Harriet Tarlo, Deborah Levy and others, problematise literary representations of domesticated creatures? Evoking both historical and future arcs of the Anthropocene, the stories aim to subtly shift fixed notions of power and exchange between human and non-human creatures. Aside from the overt use of Homeric intertexts, first person and third person voices are deployed in the respective stories. In each case, exaggerated sensorial perspectives, particularly those relating to smell and hearing, are emphasised in an attempt to evoke the creaturely point of view. This can only be an imperfect

attempt on this writer's part to reconsider depictions of hierarchical power relations between human and non-human others.

The language departs from the stylised dactylic hexameter, or epic metre, of Homer, also moving past the looser, prose translation styles of *The Odyssey* embodied by Stephen Mitchell's account of Argos the dog (Homer, trans. Mitchell). In its place, mostly short sentences with perfunctory syntax are used. These techniques only ever stand as a symbolic textual gesturing towards creaturely language, for there is no final argument that can be made to support claims that short sentences work better than long, or that baroque style works better than economical wording, to render creaturely perspectives. It is here that writers are forced up against species boundaries to confront the difficulty and impossibility of any kind of 'true' animal representation.

In making decisions to use a particular kind of voice and follow a coherent story arc, I am mindful that the attempt is important if writing seriously aims to rethink long literary histories of subjugating nonhuman species. I am mindful that other writers have influentially used different techniques to evoke creaturely speech. I cite the jump-cut linguistic abstraction and polyphony used by Deborah Levy to evoke a Plumwoodian tale of 'speaking meat' in *Diary of a Steak*, and related techniques used by Ursula Le Guin in her parodic short story, 'The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics'. In the Le Guin story, humans (or 'therolinguists') attempt to compile insect language taxonomies by studying ant markings on acacia seeds as a form of poetry/utterance (13). They come up against their own lack of understanding, as they try in spite of themselves to push knowledge through the species boundary, producing mystical accounts of ant marks with anthropological zeal.

In the stories submitted here, though, story sense remains coherent; teleological time is not challenged, though Mikhail Bakhtin has argued that the dreamlike temporality of original epic or 'adventure' storytelling modes is itself a kind of chronotope evoking a circular sense of time, that might, for new writing contexts and for these particular stories, be differently

reconsidered in interesting ways as ‘nonhuman’, or abstracted away from the literal human.

He observes that:

It goes without saying that Greek adventure-time lacks any natural, everyday cyclicity – such as might have introduced into it a temporal order and indices on a human scale, tying it to the repetitive aspects of natural and human life. No matter where one goes in the world of the Greek romance, with all its countries and cities, its buildings and works of art, there are absolutely no indications of historical time, no identifying traces of the era.

...

Thus all of the action in a Greek romance, all the events and adventures that fill it, constitute time-sequences that are neither historical, quotidian, biographical, nor even biological and maturational. Actions lie outside these sequences, beyond the reach of that force, inherent in these sequences, that generates rules and defines the measure of a man. (‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’ 91)

The decision to evoke a sense of epic time (segments of time accumulating to evoke a circular narrative) progression in these short stories has been taken with a view to honouring the Homeric intertext but also to create a sense of time in which the human being (the Carrier, as with Odysseus) is not always central, is outside of time in both texts. I hope these micro stories subtly subvert and ‘remaster’ relationships of love and power between humans and non-human others.

Keywords: Creative writing, short fiction, micro-fiction, fable, creaturely encounters, historical representations of animals

The Death of the First Dog

Everyone knew about me. The dumb mutt who waited twenty years for his master to return, the dog whose tricks were two thousand years old. In the story I am tick-ridden – hair patchy, joints rheumy and swollen. But really, you know little of me. I died before you could wake. My real story, my bones' delights, my great unrivalled hunting howls, went unrecorded. But then, continuity with the past is *your* old bone, not mine. When will you give it up? This is what they sang:

As they spoke, a dog who was lying there lifted his head and pricked up his ears. It was Argos, Odysseus' dog; he had trained him and brought him up as a puppy, but never hunted with him before he sailed off to Troy. In earlier times the young men had taken him out with them to hunt for wild goats and deer and hares, but he had grown old in his master's absence, and now he lay covered in ticks, abandoned on one of the heaps of mule and cattle dung that piled up outside the front gates until the farmhands could come by and cart it off to manure the fields.¹

Well, that is what they say, but there is more to it. My life was not so simple nor as lazy as is suggested. I never abandoned faith. After twenty years of waiting and watching, I gave up hunting so as to protect our queen. I know her name as scents of thyme and honey, rosemary and washed wool. Daily I marvelled at her warp and weft. Sometimes she came to me that I might humbly donate shaggy hair for subtle earth tones in her embroidery – a tiny rudderless ship, a cork tree, a distant grove of olives. Towards the end of that good time of hair and wool, I moved out and climbed the local dung heap. Why not? I did not wish for her to see me decline. My life was never a prince-and-the-pea affair, though the dung heap be as high as twenty-four mattresses. How many bones were buried beneath, I couldn't tell. I was not pampered but I was comfortable. A cross-eyed girl from the kitchen fed me, tossing offal my way. I liked the smell of dung, chocolate-warm and alive with bugs, the scent of wild bees on the air. I had suffered the loss of my first and only master. I had mourned him alongside my queen. After him, no-one else would do. In my last year, then, I led a quiet life, my dunghill a pillow of sweet-smelling grief.

Occasionally, I climbed down to check on my mistress. I kept close watch in her sleeping quarters, though the sun and soap in the bedlinen irritated, was never rank comfort. My job was to snap fearlessly at my queen's idiot suitors. Those who dared enter her chambers. These snarling opportunists often kicked my behind as they tried in vain to paw her threads with thick, clumsy fingers. Slathering dullards! Out-of-towners who could barely work an abacus, she said softly, stroking my old head. I did not understand, but noted how each man held a weighty gold purse close to his knife and gourd. From their wild movements, I knew they could not listen for the distant approach of an alien horse, or sniff out a rider's foreign sweat, the foamy leathery stink of saddle, until it was too late. She was smarter than them all, weaving between, never lured by men or wine, the wrong smells. But I was afraid for her when, in the twentieth year of our great waiting, the weak guards acquiesced, paid off in heartless coin. That night, the flagstones were awash with thread. She hid her bruises under a mask of white clay, a living statue.

From that point on, I set myself up by her door. I did not sleep. My bark was old, but its nobility instilled fear. How she wept when she heard me, puffing out my ribs like a giant toadfish, legs unsteady as a new lamb's. Truth be told, I was a creaturely ruin. I'd lived longer than any hunting dog in the city. One day, I let my queen embrace me, make me a goodbye treat of dried livers. *Oh yes, you still scare men off*, she crooned. *For a while, for just a little while longer. Then our work will be done.* Oh, gifts of fig and thyme and sugared sweat! Secreted from those queenly armpits! And there was something . . . something else – the meatiness of fear.

I made my way home as the men rode off for the spring hunt. But one full moon later they were back, wheedling and carousing, hedging bets and fighting. Stiff with days of sleep, I could no longer climb down and rescue. Panic beat a drum in my heart. The threads, like bones, like earth, were coming loose. A grave was being dug. Mine own.

Shamed, I slumped into my dung mattress, into my own excrement, readying myself for one last long view through the bay. From my hermit's eyrie, I smelt change on the wind. I refused a blanket from a servant, just as I imagined my master had done for many long years. By

then, my bones were brittle as cuttlefish. The cross-eyed girl from the kitchens, on cue, threw me a piece of meat, a handful of olives, cajoling. I would not eat.

The next morning, distant shouting could be heard in the bustling port of Ithaka. I lifted my weight and turned in slow circles, stopping and turning some more. I waited one hour, then another. A great wind rose, confusing all the smells of the world, threatening to knock me from my pinnacle. At the point of noon, shadows fled into themselves. Inside the palace, Phemius struck up a prelude on his lyre. As he held the skinned wood and plucked at catgut, a beautiful mewling filled the air. Then a haggard man without a shadow appeared at the end of the road.

His clothes were shabby. A swineherd followed behind, a man with a goatish step. But I knew the shape of that first man's walk, that slow, formal gait. When the man got to the top of the hill, I stood up painfully, shakily, and wagged my tail, heart beating like a pup. Women rushed out from behind the palace walls, laughing and crying, the drunkard invaders snoring off a heavy night. My jaw hinged open, but I made no sound. Our circling, yearning quest, our journey of faith, was over.

My master stepped softly past, smiling, knowing he should not excite me. *What took you so long*, I said, but the words did not bark, my last fury and happiness, dreamt on wind. *See me, see me, know me*, I implored, as a woman might, wanting to hold his collars, beg for answers. Most of all, I wanted to re-live the press of his heavy sweaty hand on my pup's skull. Oh, the happy stink of him! I flattened my ears, the wind toppling me. I began to emit a low song or perhaps a moan. Which? Perhaps I too was music! Witnesses observe how my bark quietened, my eyes dulling fast. The eyes have it, they say, but masters forget nose and ears. These, too, 'have it'. This is what you were told:

Odysseus wiped a tear away, turning aside to keep the swineherd from seeing it, and he said, 'Eumaeus, it is surprising that such a dog, of such quality, should be lying here on a dunghill. He is a beauty, but I can't tell if his looks were matched by his speed or if he was one of those pampered table dogs, which are kept around just for show.'

*In response to his words, Eumaeus said, 'This is the dog of a man who died far away... The cloaked man listened gravely to his swineherd. Then he entered the palace and went to the hall where the suitors were assembled at one of their banquets. And just then death came and darkened the eyes of Argos, who had seen [his beloved] Odysseus again after twenty years.'*²

What was not sung is that, before I died, I played cupid and priest, issuing one last proclamation. Penelope soon came, her light, sure step a mere twenty years heavier. She held my master close and still in the honey air, as I could not. But I presided. Gave one last great bark in praise of loyalty of scent, sound and touch. I did not expect them to bark back. The drift of dung and the rank odour of my old body joined to rosemary and fig, journeyman sweat, to love. Then and only then did I allow the great dark to cover me like a blanket, without echo or smell or hand to wait upon.

The Carrying

The dog and his man moved from a flat place where surf roared at the back of a low dune. The dog fancied it a Colosseum of old, one thousand caged animals roaring. The sting of salt, smells of damp sand, roaming without a leash, were the dog's great joys. The man, the dog knew, trusted him to be free. The dog did not return the compliment. His master made many mistakes. Even in dreams. Especially then. He had to watch his master, day and night. One day, the great sea rushed in and filled the lowland plain, and they were forced to scramble to higher ground, to a nearby city. The flood, the dog knew, was caused by men. This time, they had made more than their usual grave mistakes. There was no time to rescue his best bones.

The strange city was a disappointment, the tiny house without a yard. The man, well-meaning, took him out twice a day to weedy patches of earth that could still be found ... chances to scent whole worlds. But some patches were toxic; the dog smelt these, then collapsed, Sphinx-like. The man did not read the signs; the falls, the indictments. He breathed the foul air, cajoled the dog to press on. But most days the dog kept falling; so the man took him to visit a stranger, who shot him up with calmatives, painkillers. It became hard for the dog to

focus, to part the medicated clouds in his head and concentrate on the important things. *But then, he was an old dog*, the white-coated expert said, *and feeling woozy was so much better than being in pain*. He peered closely at the dog, then just as closely at his master, and said: *There'll be no new tricks*.

Going out was now a worse trouble, the dog's movements stiffer than ever. He fell out over the stoop, could barely leap a kerb. Glassiness replaced pain, slowness, speed. It was not easy to watch out for the man, his stumbles, his long and futile quests. There were many words he understood, but none he could say. The word 'master' had always been a nonsequitur. 'Caution' was not part of his lexicon. How could he explain?

Another problem was the staircase. It led to a cupboard-sized room where the man now slept. In the evenings, when the man cooked up his groats, the dog's quest began. He tried to see the stair as a solid dung heap. A mountain. The trick was getting up that stair so he could watch over the man from the narrow space by the bed. He quietly divided the staircase into two, making fourteen steps without too much discomfort. But at the fifteenth, his old spine cracked and flexed like a roo crashing through bush.

One day, the dog slumped on the tenth stair. After resting, he pressed on. Over time, the ascent became more difficult. Ten minutes soon became twenty; twenty became thirty. When his master turned to his cook pots, the dog would begin the slow climb. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen steps ... twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. At first, the man congratulated the dog. But the dog's chest heaved, lungs whistling like bags caught by wind.

The man finally twigged. Come nightfall, groaning and straining, he would carry the heavy dog up, as he himself had been carried as a baby, though in truth the man had never known his mother. And, as a baby, of course, he hadn't suffered joint pain. During the slow climb, images came to the dog. The recurring one was of the *Pieta*. Who, here, was mother? Who the Christ? The dog enjoyed that little narcissism. The man's arms held his doggy girth tenderly, firmly. It was a reliable carrying; the dog let his long, arthritic legs flop down. The man's strange stumbles and tics suddenly ceased. The dog realised that he, too, was master.

At the end, after the carrying time, they were as close as gods. The old dog slept near, breathing heavy as surf. He woke only to watch over his master, then sleep some more. Curled up in the dormer, the two dreamt the same dream: roaming paths of bone and word, sand and water together.

Notes

¹ Homer. *The Odyssey*.

² Homer. *The Odyssey*.

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