DOG STORY

ADAM GOPNIK

A year ago, my wife and I bought a dog for our ten-year-old daughter, Olivia. We had tried to fob her off with fish, which died, and with a singing blue parakeet, which she named Skyler, but a Havanese puppy was what she wanted, and all she wanted. With the diligence of a renegade candidate pushing for a political post, she set about organizing a campaign: quietly mustering pro-dog friends as a pressure group; introducing persuasive literature (John Grogan's *Marley & Me*); demonstrating reliability with bird care.

I was so ignorant about dogs that I thought what she wanted must be a Javanese, a little Indonesian dog, not a Havanese, named for the city in Cuba. When we discovered, with a pang, the long Google histories that she left on my wife's computer—*havanese puppies/havanese care/how to find a havanese/havanese, convincing your parints*—I assumed she was misspelling the name. But in fact it was a Havanese she wanted, a small, sturdy breed that, in the past decade, has become a mainstay of New York apartment life. (It was recognized as a breed by the American Kennel Club only in the mid-nineties.) Shrewd enough to know that she would never get us out of the city to an approved breeder, she quietly decided that she could live with a Manhattan pet-store "puppy mill" dog if she could check its eyes for signs of illness and its temperament for symptoms of sweetness. Finally, she backed us into a nice pet store on Lexington Avenue and showed us a tiny bundle of caramel-colored fur with a comical black mask. "That's my dog," she said simply.

My wife and I looked at each other with a wild surmise: the moment parents become parints, creatures beyond convincing who exist to be convinced. When it came to dogs, we shared a distaste that touched the fringe of disgust and flirted with the edge of phobia. I was bitten by a nasty German-shepherd guard dog when I was about eight—not a terrible bite but traumatic all the same—and it led me ever after to cross streets and jump nervously at the sight of any of its kind. My wife's objections were narrowly aesthetic: the smells, the slobber, the shit. We both disliked dog owners in their dog-owning character: the empty laughter as the dog jumped up on you; the relentless apologies for the dog's bad behavior, along with the smiling assurance that it was all actually rather cute. Though I could read, and even blurb, friends' books on dogs, I felt about them as if the same friends had written books on polar exploration: I could grasp it as a subject worthy of extended poetic description, but it was not a thing I had any plans to pursue myself. "Dogs are failed humans," a witty friend said, and I agreed.

We were, however, doomed, and knew it. The constitution of parents and children may, like the British one, be unwritten, but, as the Brits point out, that doesn't make it less enforceable or authoritative. The unwritten compact that governs family life says somewhere that children who have waited long enough for a dog and want one badly enough have a right to have one. I felt as the Queen must at meeting an unpleasant Socialist Prime Minister: it isn't what you wanted, but it's your constitutional duty to welcome, and pretend.

The pet-store people packed up the dog, a female, in a little crate and Olivia excitedly considered names. Willow? Daisy? Or maybe Honey? "Why not call her Butterscotch?" I suggested, prompted by a dim memory of one of those Dan Jenkins football novels from the seventies, where the running-back hero always uses that word when referring to the hair color of his leggy Texas girlfriends. Olivia nodded violently. Yes! That was her name. Butterscotch.

We took her home and put her in the back storage room to sleep. Tiny thing, we thought. Enormous eyes. My wife and I were terrified that it would be a repeat of the first year with a baby, up all night. But she was good. She slept right through the first night, and all subsequent nights, waiting in the morning for you past the point that a dog could decently be expected to wait, greeting you with a worried look, then racing across the apartment to her "papers"—the pads that you put out for a dog to pee and shit on. Her front legs were shorter than her rear ones, putting a distinctive hop in her stride. ("Breed trait," Olivia said, knowingly.)

All the creature wanted was to please. Unlike a child, who pleases in spite of herself, Butterscotch wanted to know what she could do to make you happy, if only you kept her fed and let her play. She had none of the imperiousness of a human infant. A child starts walking away as soon as she starts to walk—on the way out, from the very first day. What makes kids so lovable is the tension between their helplessness and their drive to deny it. Butterscotch, though, was a born courtesan. She learned the tricks Olivia taught her with startling ease: sitting and rolling over and lying down and standing and shaking hands (or paws) and jumping over stacks of unsold books. The terms of the tricks were apparent: she did them for treats. But, if it was a basic bargain, she employed it with an avidity that made it the most touching thing I have seen. When a plate of steak appeared at the end of dinner, she would race through her repertory of stunts and then

offer a paw to shake. Just tell me what you want, and I'll do it!

She was a bit like one of Al Capp's Shmoos, in *Li'l Abner,* designed to please people at any cost. (People who don't like Havanese find them too eager to please, and lacking in proper doggie dignity and reserve.) The key to dogginess, I saw, is that, though dogs are pure creatures of sensation, they are also capable of shrewd short-term plans. Dogs don't live, like mystics, in the moment; dogs live in the *minute.* They live in and for the immediate short-term exchange: tricks for food, kisses for a walk. When Butterscotch saw me come home with bags from the grocery store, she would leap with joy as her memory told her that *something* good was about to happen, just as she had learned that a cloud-nexus of making phone calls and getting the leash and taking elevators produced a chance to play with Lily and Cuba, the two Havanese who live upstairs. But she couldn't grasp exactly how these chains of events work: some days when she heard the name "Lily" she rushed to the door, sometimes to her leash, sometimes to the elevator, and sometimes to the door on our floor that corresponds to the door on the eighth floor where Lily lives.

But she had another side, too. At the end of a long walk, or a prance around the block, she would come in with her usual happy hop, and then, let off her leash, she would growl and hiss and make Ewok-like noises that we never otherwise heard from her; it was a little scary at first, like the moment in *Gremlins* when the cute thing becomes a wild, toothy one. Then she would race madly from one end of the hall to the other, bang her head, and turn around and race back, still spitting and snorting and mumbling guttural consonants to herself, like a mad German monarch. Sometimes she would climax this rampage by pulling up hard and showing her canines and directing two sharp angry barks at Olivia, her owner, daring her to do something about it. Then, just as abruptly, Butterscotch would stop, sink to the floor, and once again become a sweet, smiling companion, trotting loyally behind whoever got up first. The wolf was out; and then was tucked away in a heart-drawer of prudence. This behavior, Olivia assured us, is a Havanese breed trait, called "run-like-hell," though "Call of the Wild" might be a better name. (Olivia spent hours on the Havanese forum, a worldwide chat board composed mostly of older women who call themselves the small dogs' "mommies," and share a tone of slightly addled coziness, which Olivia expertly imitated. Being a dog owner pleased her almost more than owning a dog.)

But what could account for that odd double nature, that compelling sweetness and implicit wildness? I began to read as widely as I could about this strange, dear thing that I had so long been frightened of.

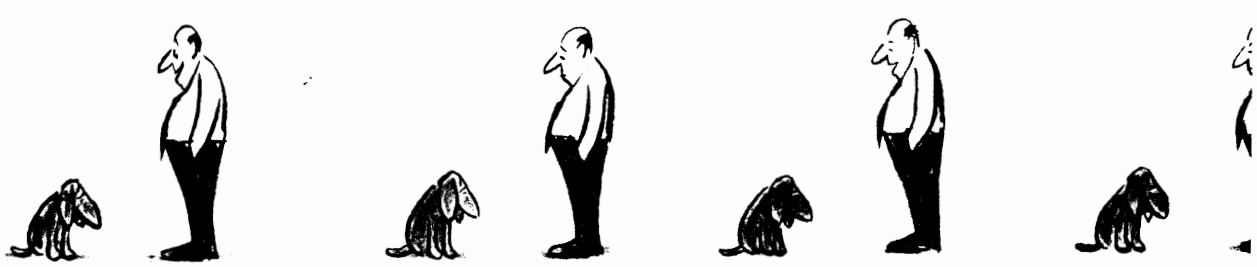
Darwinism begins with dogs. In the opening pages of *On the Origin of Species,* Darwin describes the way breeders can turn big dogs into small ones, through selective breeding, and he insists that all dogs descend from wolves. This was proof of the immense amount of inherited variation, and of the ability of inheritance, blended and directed, to take new directions.

"Who will believe that animals closely resembling the Italian greyhound, the bloodhound, the bull-dog or Blenheim spaniel, etc.—so unlike all wild Canidae—ever existed freely in a state of nature?" Darwin wrote. Out of one, many.

Ever since, what we think Darwinism says has been structured in part by what we think it says about dogs. Darwin's instinct was, as usual, right. Dogs do descend directly from wolves; the two species can still breed with one another (producing many scary-looking new back breeds). The vexed issue is how long ago they parted ways, and why. The biological evidence and the archeological evidence are at war: DNA analysis points to a very remote break between wolves and dogs, certainly no later than a hundred thousand years ago, while the earliest unequivocal archeological evidence for domesticated dogs dates to just fifteen thousand years ago or so.

One haunting scrap of evidence is a grave site in Israel, twelve thousand years old, where what is undoubtedly a dog is embraced in death by what is undoubtedly a woman. It suggests that the dog, completely doglike—smaller cuspids and shorter muzzle—was already the object of human affection at the dawn of the age of agriculture. The fullness of this early relation suggests the classic story of domestication, that of the master man and the willing dog. The historian of science Edmund Russell summarizes this story in his new book, *Evolutionary History:* "Some brave soul burrowed into a wolf den, captured cubs, brought the cubs back to camp, and trained them to hunt by command." Before long, "people realized that tame wolves (dogs) could perform other tasks too. . . . Breeders manufactured each variety by imagining the traits required, picking males and females with those traits, and mating them." If you needed to rid your camp of badgers, you bred one long, thin dog to another until you had a dachshund, which could go down a badger hole. The problem with this view, Russell explains, is that it implies a level of far-sightedness on the part of the first breeders that defies all evolutionary experience: "Wolves do not obey human commands, and it is hard to imagine that people persisted in raising dangerous animals for uncertain benefits far in the future." To see a Butterscotch in a wolf would have required magical foresight, as if our Paleolithic fathers had started breeding leaping mice in the hope that they would someday fly.

And so countering this view comes a new view of dog history, more in keeping with our own ostentatiously less man-centered world view. Dogs, we are now told, by a sequence of scientists and speculators—beginning with the biologists Raymond and Lorna Coppinger, in their 2001 masterwork, *Dogs*—domesticated themselves. They chose us. A marginally calmer canid came close to the circle of human warmth—and, more important, human refuse—and was tolerated by the humans inside: let him eat the garbage. Then this scavenging wolf mated with another calm



"Speak." *"Roll over."*

wolf, and soon a family of calmer wolves proliferated just outside the firelight. It wasn't cub-snatching on the part of humans, but breaking and entering on the part of wolves, that gave us dogs. "Hey, you be ferocious and eat them when you can catch them," the proto-dogs said, in evolutionary effect, to their wolf siblings. "We'll just do what they like and have them feed us. Dignity? It's a small price to pay for free food. Check with you in ten thousand years and we'll see who's had more kids." (Estimated planetary dog population: one billion. Estimated planetary wild wolf population: three hundred thousand.)

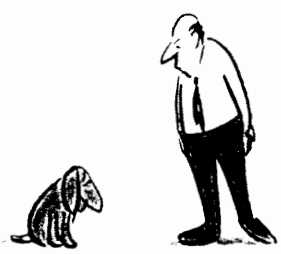
The dog maven Mark Derr, in his forthcoming book *How the Dog Became the Dog,* offers a particularly ambitious and detailed version of how the wandering wolf became the drifting dog. He adds to the Coppingers' story many epics and epicycles, including a central role for Neanderthal dog-lovers. Though Derr's book, given the fragmentary nature of the evidence, is sometimes a little fantastical, his motive, only half-disclosed, is touching: Derr isn't just a dog fancier, one realizes, but a kind of dog nationalist, a dog jingoist. He believes that what was an alliance of equals has, in very recent centuries, been debased to produce Stepin Fetchit dogs, like Butterscotch, conscripted into cuteness. Dogs began as allies, not pets, and friends, not dependents.

At a minimum, the theory of the drifting dog can point to some living proof, though not of a kind likely to bring joy to the dog-dignifiers. As the British anthrozoologist John Bradshaw points out in his new book, *Dog Sense,* even now most dogs drift—not as equals or allies but as waifs. In Third World towns, "village dogs" hang around, ownerless, eating garbage, fending for themselves, and getting beaten off only when they become nuisances. (There's a reason that it's called a dog's life.) The usual condition of a dog is to be a pigeon.

The catch is that, from an evolutionary point of view, these village dogs are already dogs. They illuminate the problem. Since the domestication of the dog predates agriculture, dogs couldn't have wandered into settlements; there were no settlements. They couldn't have wandered with hunter-gatherers, because other wolf packs would have marked and owned the next territory. There just doesn't seem to have been enough time for the slow development from wandering wolf to drifting proto-dog without the single decisive intervention of someone to nudge the wolf toward dogdom. "The scenario of self-domestication is very hard to envision if people were still wandering seminomadically, and the evidence says they were," the anthropologist Pat Shipman says firmly in her book *The Animal Connection: A New Perspective on What Makes Us Human.* Anyway, why didn't hyenas and foxes, which have been around for just as long, discover the same advantage in hanging close to people as wolves did?

One explanation, favored by Bradshaw, supposes a classic Darwinian mutation, a full-fledged

"Heel."



"Stay."

"sport" of nature. At some point, a mutant wolf appeared, by chance, which was not just marginally tamer but far more biddable than any other creature. This sounds odd, but, as Bradshaw points out, dogs *are* odd, essentially unique—the only animal on earth that needs no taming to live with people while still happily breeding with its own. The ability of dogs to make a life with us isn't a product of their being man-bred; it was the change that let men breed them.

More is at stake here than a speculation about the history of one pet species. If the new story is more or less right, and dogs chose to become dogs (meaning only that the tamer, man-friendly wolves produced more cubs than their wilder, man-hating cousins), then the line between artificial and natural selection seems far less solid, and the role of man at the center less fixed. Indeed, Russell suggests that even our distinct breeds may be more drifts than decisions: "Unconscious selection probably played a more important role than methodical selection because it was simpler and brought benefits in the present. . . . Keeping the dogs best at a certain task in each generation would have steadily enhanced the desired traits." There may be a providence in the fall of a sparrow; but there is Darwinian contingency even in the hop of the Havanese.

What a dog owner, with the full authority of fourteen months of dog, suggests might be missing from these accounts is something simple: people love pets. Bradshaw, though he likes the drifting dog theory, observes that we needn't justify the existence of pet dogs in our early history by arguments about their value as food or tools. The norm even in the most "primitive" hunter-gatherer societies is to take a pet even though—as with the dingo pups that the Aborigines take in Australia—it always goes "bad" as an adult, and is of no help in any task at all. (The dingoes are feral descendants of domesticated Asian dogs, with their social genes somehow wrenched awry.) For that matter people do live with modern wolves—presumably made more paranoid by millennia of persecution—even now. As Bradshaw writes, "Humans will keep puppies purely for their cuteness." The most useful role a pet may play is to be there for the petting. The way dogs are used now might be the way we use dogs.

Another strange and haunting scrap of evidence about early dog and man is in the Chauvet cave, in southern France: a set of twinned footprints, twenty-six thousand years old, of an eight-year-old child walking side by side, deep into the cave, with what is evidently some kind of hound—a small wolf or a large dog. It may turn out that the tracks come from different times (though their paired strides seem well matched). But for the moment the evidence seems to show that the first dog in all the record was there as the companion of a small boy.

Or girl? Olivias have always wanted Butterscotches. The willing wolf may have wandered into the circle beyond the firelight, but the dog may well have first emerged on the safer side of the fire as the dream companion of a child.

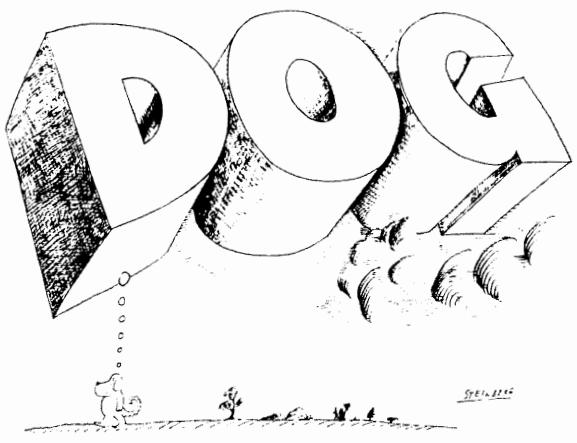
CIVILIZED

An acquaintance of ours was hailing a taxi at the corner of Park and Sixtieth one recent afternoon when a large English bulldog, promenading in the custody of a chauffeur, and a French poodle, held in check by a uniformed maid, suddenly went for each other, tugging at their leashes and raising an unearthly racket of barks and snarls. According to our man, an apartment-house doorman hurried up to them and called out, "Gentlemen, please!," whereupon the two dogs fell silent and went off in opposite directions without so much as a backward glance. | 1947 |

The range of evolutionary just-so stories and speculations is itself proof of the way dogs have burrowed into our imaginations. Half the pleasure of having a dog, I could see, was storytelling *about* the dog: she was a screen on which we could all project a private preoccupation. In addition to the real dog, each child had a pretend version, a daemon dog, to speak to and about. Luke, our sixteen-year-old, imagined Butterscotch as an elderly, wise woman from the Deep South. "Lez not point the finger, childun," he would have her say when she did something naughty. Olivia had her as a hyper-intense three-year-old, full of beans and naïveté. "Oh, and then they took me to the Park, and then we had little scraps of steak, and, oh, Skyler—it was the best day ever," she would report the dog saying to the bird, with the breathlessness of a small child. Even the grownups had a fictive dog who lived alongside the real one: my wife's dog was a year-old baby she had loved and missed (she especially loved the early-morning off-leash hours in Central Park, when the dawn belongs to charging dogs and coffee-sipping owners); mine was a genial companion who enjoyed long walks and listening to extended stretches of tentatively composed prose. Once, I was playing recordings of Erroll Garner on piano, that bright, bouncing, syncopated plaintive jazz sound, and Olivia said, "That's the music Butterscotch hears in her head all day."

What music *does* a dog hear in her head all day? Our dog was so much part of the family that we took human feelings and thoughts for granted and then would suddenly be reminded that she experienced the world very differently. Once, we saw her standing at the top of the steps leading to the sunken living room of our apartment. She began to whine and, as she rarely did, to bark—stepping forward to intimidate some creature we couldn't see, then fearfully stepping back. We were sure from the intensity of her barking that there must be a rodent down by the baseboard that the brave little dog had spotted. Finally, one of us noticed that I had thrown a dark shirt over the back of the white sofa; I picked it up and came toward her with it. She whimpered and then began to staunchly defy her fear by barking again. That was it! She was terrified of a piece of empty brown material. When we tried the experiment again, she reacted again—not so strongly, but still.

So, what music? There is a new literature of dog psychology, to go along with and complement that on dog history. There are accounts of bad dogs cured, like *Bad Dog: A Love Story,* by Martin Kihn; of good dogs loved, as in Jill Abramson's *The Puppy Diaries;* of strange dogs made whole and wild dogs made docile; of love lives altered by loving dogs, as in Justine van der Leun's *Marcus of Umbria: What an Italian Dog Taught an American Girl About Love.* The most scientific-minded of the new crop is Alexandra Horowitz's well-received *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell and Know.* (The title comes, winningly, from a fine Groucho joke.) Horowitz, a former fact checker in these halls, has gone on to become a professor of psychology at Barnard, and she's written a terrifically intelligent and readable book, a study of the cognition of those who don't quite have it. She details the dog's sensorium. Dogs have a wildly fine nose for scent: we can detect molecules in parts in the million, dogs in parts in the billion. She explains why they sniff each other's rear—there's an anal gland peculiar to dogs, its secretions as different each from each as a voice—and why that behavior remains mysterious: dogs don't seem to recognize the distinct smell of other dogs and always return to sniff again; yet no dog likes having it done to him.



On either side of the scientific dog writer, Horowitz or Bradshaw, one senses the phantoms of two alpha writers: Cesar Millan, television's "dog whisperer," and John Grogan, the *Marley & Me* memoirist—the pseudo-science of the dog as pack animal, on the one hand, and the sentimental fiction of the all-sympathetic dog, on the other. Horowitz tries to disabuse us dog owners of the Millanesque notion that dogs are really pack creatures looking for an alpha hound to submit to. Dogs, she explains, are domesticated animals, and to treat them as though they were still in a pack rather than long adapted to a subservient role in a human family is as absurd as treating a child as though it were "really" still a primate living in a tree.

Above all, Horowitz details the dog's special kind of intelligence. When other intelligent animals are presented with a deduction or "object permanence" problem—a ball vanishes into one of two boxes; which box did it go into?—most of them solve the problem by watching where the ball goes. The dog solves the problem by watching where his owner looks. Dogs are hypersensitive to even the slightest favoring actions of the owner, and will cheerily search for the treat in the box the owner seems to favor, even if they have seen the treat go into the other. This was the ancestral bet that dogs made thousands of years ago: give up trying to prey on the prey; try pleasing the people and let them get the prey. Dogs are the only creatures that have learned to gaze directly at people as people gaze at one another, and their connection with us is an essential and enduring one.

Yet Horowitz recognizes, too, the threat of the overly humanized view of the dog. She loves dogs in general—and her own mongrel hound, Finnegan, in particular—but throughout the book are rueful hints, perhaps partly inadvertent, that what the science shows is that the entire dog-man relation is essentially a scam, run by the dogs. Certainly, the qualities inherent in breeds—nobility, haughtiness, solidity, even the smiling happiness of the Havanese—are tricks of our mind, where we project primate expressions of inner mood into canine masks. The Havanese isn't happy and the Shih Tzu isn't angry and the bulldog isn't especially stolid or stubborn; they are just stuck with the faces, smiling or snarling, we've pinned on them through breeding. And the virtues we credit them with—whether the big ones of bravery, loyalty, and love or the smaller ones of happiness, honesty, and guilt—are just as illusory. "Maxie looked so guilty when I found her chewing the treat box that it was just hilarious," a "mom" will write on the Havanese forum—but these are illusions, projected onto creatures whose repertory of consciousness is very much smaller. Loyalty, longing, and even grief are, the evidence suggests, mere mimic emotions projected into two far simpler ones that dogs actually possess: adherence to the food-giver and anxiety about the unfamiliar.

We've all heard the accounts of dogs leaping to the rescue, pulling children from the water

when the ice cracks, and so on, but Horowitz points out that, in staged situations of crisis, dogs don't leap to the rescue or even try to get help. If a bookcase is made to fall (harmlessly, but they don't know that) on their owner, they mostly just stand there, helpless and confused. The dog may bark when it sees its owner in distress, and the barking may summon help; the dog stays near its family, even when frightened, and that may be useful. But the dog has no particular plan or purpose, much less resolution or courage. This doesn't mean that the recorded rescues haven't happened; it's just that the many more moments when the dog watches its owner slip beneath the ice don't get recorded. The dog will bark at a burglar; but the dog will also bark at a shirt.

Maybe, though, Horowitz and Bradshaw are too quick to accept the notion that the dog is merely a creature of limited appetite and reinforced instinct. Not so many years ago, after all, people in white lab coats were saying exactly the same things about human babies—that they were half blind, creatures of mere reflex and associative training, on whom their dottle-brained moms were projecting all kinds of cognition that they couldn't actually process. Now psychologists tell us that babies are intellectually rich and curious and hypothesis-forming and goal-directed. One wonders if something similar isn't about to happen with pets. The experts, Bradshaw especially, tell us that Butterscotch sits by the door all afternoon because she has been unconsciously trained to associate Olivia's after-school homecoming with the delivery of treats: But what would be so different if we said that she sits by the door because she is waiting patiently for Olivia, has a keen inner sense of what time she'll be home, and misses her because they play together and enjoy each other's company, which, of course, includes the pleasures of good food? This is the same description, covering exactly the same behavior, only the first account puts the act in terms of mechanical reflexes and the other in terms of desires and hopes and affections. Our preference for the former kind of language may look as strange to our descendants, and to Butterscotch's, as it would if we applied it to a child. (The language of behaviorism and instinct can be applied to anything, after all: we're not really falling in love; we're just anticipating sexual pleasure leading to a prudent genetic mix.)

But, if the reductive argument seems to cheat dogs of their true feelings, the opposite tendency, which credits dogs with feelings almost identical to those of humans and with making the same claims on our moral conscience, is equally unconvincing. In the forthcoming *Loving Animals: Toward a New Animal Advocacy*, Kathy Rudy, who teaches ethics at Duke, makes the case for dog equality just as strongly as Derr does in his more narrowly evolution-minded book. Rudy believes that dogs have been as oppressed and colonized as Third World peoples have, and that what they need is not empathy but liberation. She has a confused notion of something that she calls "capitalism," and which is somehow held uniquely responsible for the oppression of animals, including dogs. Of course, only advanced capitalist societies have started movements for animal rights; precapitalist societies were far crueller to animals, as are non-capitalist modern ones. (Consider the state of zoos and animals in the Eastern bloc or in China.) But her love for dogs is evident throughout. She tells us that "it would not be an overstatement to say that most of the important and successful relationships I've had in my life have been with nonhuman animals," and she makes a passionate case for treating animals as equals in rights, not as commodities to be cynically ex-

ploited for research or even, I suppose, for family bonding.

The trouble with arguments for treating animals as equals is that the language of rights and responsibility implies, above all, reciprocity. We believe it to be wrong for whites to take blacks as slaves, and wrong for blacks to enslave whites. Yet animals themselves are generally far crueller to other animals in the wild than we are to them in civilization; though we may believe it to be unethical for us to torment a lion, few would say it is unethical for the lion to torment the gazelle. To use the language of oppression on behalf of creatures that in their natures must be free to oppress others is surely to be using the wrong moral language. A language of compassion is the right one: we should not be cruel to lions because they suffer pain. We don't prevent the lion from eating the gazelle because we recognize that he is, in the fine old-fashioned term, a dumb animal—not one capable of reasoning about effects, or really altering his behavior on ethical grounds, and therefore not rightly covered by the language of rights. Dogs, similarly, deserve protection from sadists, but not deference to their need for, say, sex. We can neuter them with a clear conscience, because abstinence is not one of their options.

This is why we feel uneasy with too much single-minded love directed toward dogs—with going canine, like Rudy in her dog-centered love life. It isn't the misdirection so much as the inequality, the disequilibrium between the complex intensity of human love and the pragmatism of animal acceptance. Love is a two-way street. The woman who strokes and coos and holds her dog too much unnerves us, not on her behalf but on the dog's. He's just not that into you.

The deepest problem that dogs pose is what it would be like if all our virtues and emotions were experienced as instincts. The questions about what a dog is capable of doing—how it sees, smells, pees, explores—are, in principle, answerable. The question of what goes on in the mind of a dog—what it feels like to be a dog—is not. In this context, Horowitz cites a classic article by the philosopher Thomas Nagel, "What Does It Feel Like to Be a Bat?" Nagel's point was that the only way to know what it is like to be a bat is to be one. He writes:

> It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task.

Though we can know that dogs live by smells, not by words, we can't really imagine what it would feel like to be a creature for which thoughts are smells. We, creatures of language who organize our experience in abstract concepts, can't imagine what it's like to be in the head of a being that has no language. To have the experiences while retaining our memory of humanness would make us a human in a dog suit, not a dog. We would have to become a dog, for real; then, reborn as a human, we couldn't explain to our-

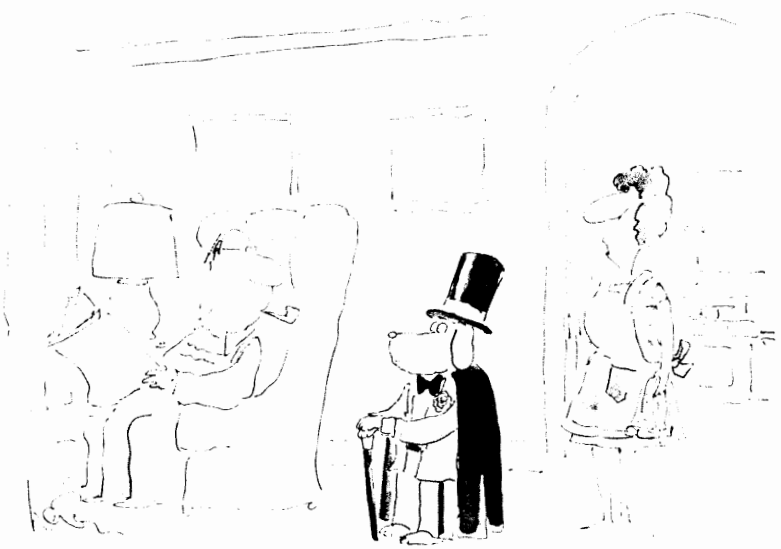
selves, let alone someone else, what it's like to be a dog, since the language of being-like isn't part of what being a dog is like.

Yet, for all the seemingly unbridgeable distance between us and them, dogs have found a shortcut into our minds. They live, as Horowitz and Bradshaw and Rudy, too, all see, within our circle without belonging to it: they speak our language without actually speaking any, and share our concerns without really being able to understand them. The verbs tell some of the story: the dog shares, feels, engages, without being able to speak, plan, or (in some human sense) think. We may not be able to know what it's like to be a dog; but, over all those thousands of years, Butterscotch has figured out, in some instrumental way, what it's like to be a person. Without language, concepts, long-term causal thinking, she can still enter into the large part of our mind made up of appetites, longings, and loyalties. She does a better impersonation of a person than we do an approximation of a dog. That it is, from the evolutionary and philosophical point of view, an impersonation, produced and improved on by generations of dogs, because it pays, doesn't alter its power. Dogs have little imagination about us and our inner lives but limitless intuition about them; we have false intuitions about their inner lives but limitless imagination about them. Our relationship meets in the middle.

One day, around Christmas, I got a mixed box of chocolates—milk for Olivia, darks for me—and noticed, in the evening, that some were missing, and that Butterscotch had brown around her muzzle. "She's eaten chocolate!" Olivia cried. Chocolate is very bad for dogs. She went at once to the forum. "My hand trembles as I write this," she typed, "but my baby has eaten chocolate!" Blessedly, we got an avalanche of counsel from Havanese-lovers all over the world: check her, watch her, weigh a chocolate, weigh the dog, keep an eye on her all night. Finally, I put her to bed in her back room, and promised Olivia I would monitor her. Olivia chewed her lip and went to bed, too.

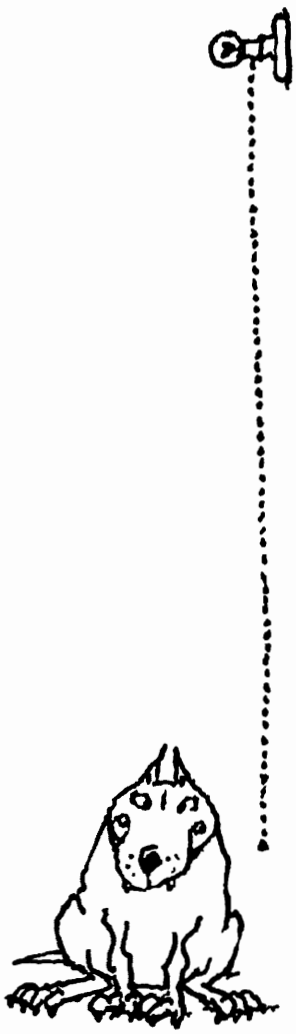
It can't really be dangerous, I thought; I mean, these creatures eat out of garbage cans. At four in the morning, I went in to check on her. She stirred at once, and we looked at each other, shared that automatic enigmatic gaze that is the glue of the man-dog relation. I stayed with her until the light came, annoyed beyond words at the hold she had put on our unwilling hearts. She made it through the night a lot better than I did.

Dogs aren't the Uncle Toms of the animal world, I thought as dawn came; they're the dignified dual citizens who plead the case for all of



"Howard, I think the dog wants to go out."

mute creation with their human owners. We are born trapped in our own selfish skins, and we open our eyes to the rings of existence around us. The ring right around us, of lovers and spouses and then kids, is easy to encircle, but that is a form of selfishness, too, since the lovers give us love and the kids extend our lives. A handful of saints "love out to the horizon," circle after circle—but at the cost, almost always, of seeing past the circle near at hand, not really being able to love their intimates. Most of the time, we collapse the circles of compassion, don't look at the ones beyond, in order to give the people we love their proper due; we open our eyes to see the wider circles only when new creatures come in, when we realize that we really sit at the center of a Saturn's worth of circles, stretching out from our little campfire to the wolves who wait outside; and ever outward to the unknowable—toward, I don't know, deep-sea fish that live on lava and then beyond toward all existence, where each parrot and every mosquito is, if we could only see it, an individual. What's terrifying is the number of bad stories to which I was once inured, and which now claim my attention. A friend's dog had leaped from a window in a thunderstorm and only now could I feel the horror of it: the poor terrified thing's leap. Another friend's dog had been paralyzed, and instead of a limping animal I saw a fouled friend, a small Hector. My circles of compassion have been pried open.



We can't enter a dog's mind, but, as on that dark-chocolate night, I saw that it isn't that hard to enter a dog's feelings: feelings of pain, fear, worry, need. And so the dog sits right at the edge of our circle, looking out toward all the others. She is ours, but she is other, too. A dog belongs to the world of wolves she comes from and to the circle of people she has joined. Another circle of existence, toward which we are capable of being compassionate, lies just beyond her, and her paw points toward it, even as her eyes scan ours for dinner. Cats and birds are wonderful, but they keep their own counsel and their own identity. They sit within their own circles, even in the house, and let us spy, occasionally, on what it's like out there. Only the dog sits right at the edge of the first circle of caring, and points to the great unending circles of Otherness that we can barely begin to contemplate.

The deal that the dog has made to get here, as all the dog scientists point out, is brutal. *I'll act all, you know, like, loving and loyal, if you feea me.* Yet don't we make the same deal—courtship and gentle promises of devotion in exchange for sex, sex in exchange for status? Creatures of appetites and desires, who need to eat, and have not been spayed, we run the same scam on each other that Butterscotch runs on us. And a scam that goes on long enough, and works more or less to everyone's benefit, is simply called a culture. What makes the dog deal moving is that you two, you and your dog, are less the willing renewers of it than just the living witnesses to a contract signed between man and wolf thirty

thousand years ago. What's in the fine print that you don't read is that if you accept the terms it no longer feels like a deal.

Butterscotch, meanwhile, seems happy. She's here, she's there, a domestic ornament; she takes a place at the table, or under it, anyway, and remains an animal, with an animal's mute confusions and narrow routines and appetites. She jumps up on visitors, sniffs friends, chews shoes, and, even as we laughingly apologize for her misbehavior and order her "Off!," we secretly think her misbehavior is sweet. After all, where we are creatures of past and future, she lives in the minute's joy: a little wolf, racing and snorting and scaring; and the small ingratiating spirit, doing anything to please. At times, I think that I can see her turn her head and look back at the ghost of the wolf mother she parted from long ago, saying, "See, it was a good bet after all; they're nice to me, mostly." Then she waits by the door for the next member of the circle she has insinuated herself into to come back to the hearth and seal the basic social contract common to all things that breathe and feel and gaze: love given for promises kept. How does anyone live without a dog? I can't imagine.

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FOR A GOOD DOG

My little dog ten years ago
Was arrogant and spry.
Her backbone was a bended bow
For arrows in her eye.
Her step was proud, her bark was loud,
Her nose was in the sky,
But she was ten years younger then,
And so, by God, was I.

Small birds on stilts along the beach
Rose up with piping cry,
And as they flashed beyond her reach,
I thought to see her fly.
If natural law refused her wings,
That law she would defy,
For she could hear unheard-of things,
And so, at times, could I.

Ten years ago she split the air
To seize what she could spy;
Tonight she bumps against a chair,
Betrayed by milky eye.
She seems to pant: Time up, time up!
My little dog must die,
And lie in dust with Hector's pup;
So, presently, must I.

—Ogden Nash | 1949 |