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Tracey Ullman

– Introduction –

I have always been mad about dogs. They make me happy. I've had a great variety of dogs in my life – funny dogs, kind dogs, crazy dogs, dopey dogs. A Bichon Frise ate my baby daughter's umbilical cord. It wasn't attached to her at the time, but was carefully stuck inside my baby book along with her hospital ID. I left the book open on the floor to answer the phone and heard a chewing noise. Dogs do awfully odd things and we think nothing of it and carry on feeding them and letting them sleep on pillows beside our heads.

The smartest dog I ever owned was a small mixed breed called Bianca, saved from an infamous high-kill shelter in downtown LA. She was emaciated, bald, and had a bullet lodged between her lung and liver. For one so hard done by she never bore a grudge to humanity or seemed to suffer from PTSD. As soon as I brought her home her behaviour was exemplary. She didn't chew, bark, or pee indoors. Bianca was so poised that you felt that when you had finished reading *The New York Times* you should pass it on to her. And then, oh joy, we discovered she could sing. A soulful vibrato we would coax out

of her by playing a didgeridoo I had picked up in Australia. There was a bit of coyote in her, I think. Bianca lived to sixteen and has a special place in my heart. I cried into her fur when I was going through the hardest of times and got such comfort. She was my friend. It is not a lesser love we feel for these animals. Our connection with them is extraordinary.

Serendipity has sometimes brought me the dogs in my life. I went out to buy a chicken one Sunday and saw Millie outside a dog rescue centre. She was the most adorable thing I had ever seen: coal drop eyes, bristly terrier hair that you could mould into a mohawk, a tail that wagged on an angle like a broken coat hanger. She was as desirable to me as a Fabergé egg. I *had* to take her home immediately. On my return, everyone gasped at Millie's cuteness. My husband, who I had feared would reprimand me, lay her on his chest where she promptly fell asleep. He had found his 'spirit animal'.

But who was Millie? Why was she found wandering in downtown Los Angeles? Why was there not a 'Lost' poster on every lamp post? We soon found out. When Millie awoke, she walked woozily into the hallway and started to whimper. The whimpering became louder and increasingly hysterical. Higher and higher it went, until it became a full-throated glass-shattering screech that reverberated through the hallway and the neighbourhood.

'Millie!' I cried, 'What on earth is the matter?'

She turned, and suddenly the spell was broken. Her coat hanger tail wagged and she was an amiable companion again. And that was Millie, I have never seen such distinct moods in such a small animal. One minute joyful, balancing on her back legs and covering you in kisses, the next launching herself into full attack mode at the gardener, and always returning to the hallway where her role as a master tragedian was played out.

I think mongrels must have an innate ability to attract kind-hearted humans to look after them. Vita Sackville-West wrote about many different dog breeds, but considered the mongrel to be the luckiest. 'He must speak for himself, with those great wistful eyes, as appealing as a lost child. Fortunately for him he is well able to do so. I have been owned by several mongrels in my time, and never have known dogs more capable of falling on their feet.'

A lot of people are adopting dogs from foreign countries nowadays. An online description of a rescue dog in Egypt reads 'Soraya is a street dog whose ten puppies were taken from her and drowned. She has been kicked, beaten, strangled, gassed, and poisoned, and lives near an open sewer scrounging scraps.' A photo shows a hardened canine balancing on three legs amongst rubble. My daughter pointed out that if Soraya were a human, she would be hard as nails, and not someone you would fly over to share your life.

Why are we so soft-hearted when it comes to dogs? I think the reason is quite simple: dogs can't speak. They don't tell you you're ugly, dressed inappropriately, or have bad breath (their own is usually quite terrible). And they offer unconditional love and loyalty, no matter how badly we behave.

I am aware at times that dogs are very dependent on me, and I feel that I should allow them to be dogs rather than furry humans. Several writers in this collection argue that our love for our pets is a selfish one. Charlotte Perkins Gilman writes 'Our love for dogs is often of the basest . . . No live thing can be happy unless it is free to do what it is built for.'

Why should I decide how my dogs should live their life so it is convenient to me? How blithely we drive them to the vet to be neutered and pick them up all woozy and sterile. 'There there, I'll look after you darling, the vet says you'll be calmer now, have no sex drive, and won't run away.' They stare back at you with shaved tummies and cones around their heads to stop them nibbling at their stitches.

When I was in my twenties, I had a Yorkshire terrier named Binky Beaumont, who I treated like a practice baby. A friend of mine made him outfits. He had a 'Hotel Beaumont' bell hop uniform, with gold tasselled epaulettes, and an Elvis cape with jewels and small silk scarves to hand to fans. He repaid me by peeing on me during a photo shoot with the famous photographer Harry Benson. I was

doing the splits on a Hollywood hillside – as you do – and he cocked his leg on me. Harry said ‘That’s the perfect shot!’

Currently I have a dog called Oscar. He is an older mixed breed terrier I adopted when he was about eight. The adoption agency said he had lived with an old man who died and that his daughter had new-born twins and no time for dogs. I liked him immediately and took him to meet my daughter during her lunch hour. He travelled on the tube and hopped on and off escalators with ease. We sat in a coffee shop and he stared for a long time at a businessman eating a muffin. Eventually Oscar reached out and tapped him on the arm with his bristly white paw. It killed me. The man gave him the rest of his muffin.

Oscar and I had things in common: we were both recently bereaved, and we both liked roast chicken and toast – a good starting point.

Oscar is not crazy or funny or dopey and sadly doesn’t sing. He carries himself with great dignity and is calm and wise, but if he spots a squirrel he becomes a complete asshole. I would never make him clothes like I did for Binky. I have bought him a coat for colder days and he looks like a nerdy train spotter in it. He flew with me to Italy last summer and behaved impeccably. We walked round Florence in one hundred-degree heat and he had his photo taken with Japanese tourists on the Ponte



Oscar

Vecchio. I'm not sure that Oscar was aware he had left the country, he just knew there was a lot more prosciutto around.

Sometimes I give him a back story. I imagine he was an air raid warden during the London Blitz. He likes to smoke a pipe, wear tartan slippers and listen to the shipping forecast on Radio 4. I think he has conservative views and is a confirmed bachelor.

I will never know what he was like as a puppy and who else he cared for before me and that makes me sad. Does he remember the old man? Does he grieve? Oscar watches the TV and growls when white dogs come on during Crufts Dog Show – he is racist.

At Battersea Dog's Home, I came across this poem engraved on a plaque and it's stayed with me ever since. A dog is not a 'house-dog' or a 'watch-dog' but a friend.

ONE BROWN DOG

The office door closed, dulling the din from the kennels,
'What do you want this dog for?' I was asked austerely,
'House-dog, watch-dog?' I looked at him, gaunt and
Quivering,
Amber eyes searching mine. 'I want him,' I answered,
'To be my friend.' They were satisfied then.
They wrote on the paper,
One brown dog.

[...]

Joyous, fleet creature, graceful and ardent and golden,
Look at him now, as he skims the green like a swallow,
Or lies relaxed with a loving head on my instep.
'To be my friend,' did I say?
Well, I know what riches of friendship were pledged by the
Three brief words on the Battersea docket –
One brown dog.

by Dorothy Margaret Stuart

There is a profound connection between humankind and dogs that has existed for thousands of years. What began as a mutually beneficial hunting partnership has developed into a deeper emotional attachment. The writers collected within these pages get to the heart of what makes dogs such fantastic companions, despite the occasional mayhem they may cause. This anthology traces the canine's extraordinary journey from working animal to pampered pet.

To be asked to write a foreword for a book about my favourite creature was extremely daunting. Who am I to be the opening act for James Thurber, Virginia Woolf, Will Self and Shakespeare? But then I realised I know as much about dogs as they do. In the eyes of dogs we are all equal, and I know wholeheartedly that no dog would judge me.

I have a few more dogs left in my life. My dream is to die an old lady surrounded by my family, covered in cashmere blankets and lots and lots of

dogs. Crispy terriers with coal drop eyes, silky spaniels whose ears I can clasp in my gnarled hands, puppies with warm pink tummies and sweet breath nestling in my neck. At my feet an Irish wolfhound and a portly Labrador who would alert everyone when I am about to breathe my last. I will be, as I have spent most of my life, covered in dog hair, and I will be happy.