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It's a Dog's Life

by Patricia Reis

The first sentence in Miguel de Cervantes well-known picaresque novel describes Don Quixote, the Man from La Mancha, as a “gentleman who lived not so long ago, one who has a lance and ancient shield on his shelf and keeps a skinny nag and a greyhound for racing.” Cervantes’s lesser-known novella, *The Dialogue of the Dogs*, picks up on the dog theme and is as replete with wit, humor and satire as Don Quixote.

It opens with ensign Campuzano who emerges from Hospital of the Resurrection where he has “spent twenty days sweating out what it had taken him but an hour to acquire”—a bout of syphilis bestowed upon him by his deceitful wife. On the street, he bumps into his old friend, Peralta who, upon hearing his tale of woe, quotes Petrarch: “The liar can’t well feel aggrieved/When he finds himself deceived.” Campuzano replies in all honesty, “Even when the sinner at last empties himself of excuses, the punishment still burns . . . I know better than you that I got a dose of my own medicine. . .” But the sordid details of his wretched marriage are small potatoes to what Campuzano really has to tell, a shaggy dog tale he is sure will stretch his friend’s credulity to the maximum.

Late one night at the Hospital of the Resurrection, a feverish Campuzano overhears the hospital’s guard dogs, Berganza and Scipio, talking as they rest on old matting behind his bed. To his complete astonishment, they are telling each other their life’s story. Peralta is convinced that Campuzano has become unhinged, mired in some hallucinatory Aesop fable. But Campuzano says, no, he was quite alert and attentive, so much so that he wrote everything down word for word, without embellishment, and he pulls out a manuscript to prove it. His curiosity piqued, Peralta invites his friend to his house and while Campuzano is sleeping, he reads *The Dialogue of the Dogs*.

At first, the dogs marvel at the gift of speech, and fearing it may not last, they wonder what to do with such a miraculous endowment. Berganza says, “Ever since I could chase a bone I’ve longed to talk, to say all the things I’ve been saving up in memory for so long that either they were growing murky, or I’d forgotten them completely.” Scipio suggests they divide up their time. The first night Berganza will tell the story of his life, the second night Scipio will tell his. Berganza praises his friend’s generosity and they establish terms: Scipio will listen without butting in unless he feels a need to comment or critique, which he frequently does to hilarious effect.

Unlike the dogs of Spanish gentlemen, these dogs are *lumpen*, working class dogs who by chance or circumstance have served all levels of human society. Living by his wits, moving on when things got tough, Berganza’s life as a dog has given him an intimate look at human nature and its many deplorable failures. From his early start as a slaughterhouse dog, he worked as a sheepdog for shepherds, became a pampered pet for a wealthy merchant’s family, a police dog, a companion to a soldier who teaches him tricks for money, and a sidekick for a troupe of actors. When Berganza takes his owners to task for their innumerable sins, Scipio responds with an admonition: “I’ll let you snipe—a little. But shed light, not blood. What I mean is, just make your point and don’t kill anyone while you’re at it.” And further on, “snipe if you have to, even sting a little, but then move on. Keep your nose clean, even if your mouth gets a little dirty.” Thus the dogs prove that they aspire to a much higher standard of ethics and morality than their human masters.

The dogs in Martin Usborne’s large format book of photographs, *Where Hunting Dogs Rest*, also happen to be from Spain, and they, too, have a story to tell. Like Quixote’s dog, Spanish greyhounds or *galgos* were once owned only by Spanish aristocracy who trained their elegant hounds to course hares across Spain’s

winter landscape for sport. Centuries later in Andalusia, Spain's poorest region, where forty percent of people live at or below the poverty threshold, hunting hares is still popular but now it's for food, not sport. *Galgos* are sight hounds with lean, sculptural bodies. They possess great speed and agility, a flexible back, long legs, a deep chest, an unusually large heart, and efficient lungs. When they are healthy and treated well, they are calm, quiet, gentle, friendly towards other dogs, and very good with children. These are not the subjects of Usborne's formal portraits. His dogs are living in Spanish rescue centers—dog rehab.

Every year at the end of the Spanish hunting season, when dogs are deemed too old or slow or too expensive to feed, anywhere up to 150,000 *galgos* are abandoned or killed. In his Introduction, Usborne tells us, "The animals you see here are the lucky ones. Each dog has been housed by a charity rescue centre, which provides a small enclosure where a dog may rest but will often wait for years to be adopted. Some of the animals are weak, many are fearful, but most possess a classical elegance that remains intact despite their trauma." He pairs his formal portraits of these disposable dogs with photographs of the landscapes where they are typically abandoned.

For this work, Usborne has purposely adopted the palette of the 17th century Spanish painter Velazquez. The rich brown umbers, grey greens, sepia, saturated reds and golden ochres reference the Golden Age of Spain and lend an aura of artistic and historic nobility to his photographs. Velazquez (who was seventeen when Cervantes died) frequently included dogs in his paintings of royalty. His famous portraits were done when *galgos*, as Cervantes noted, were an integral part of Spanish nobility, a time when these dogs were esteemed as a sign of wealth, and when it was considered a punishable crime to harm or injure them. Usborne's somber portraits reinstate the dog's inherent dignity, their noble lineage and remind us of the deep history embedded in their partnership with aristocracy.

Usborne ponders the dogs' centuries-long fall from grace. There are no easy answers, except, I would say, the fall from grace seems to be more accurately human than canine. One wishes that, like Berganza and Scipio, these dogs could speak. But it's possible that what they would have to say is beyond our capacity to hear, or to bear. Instead of speaking, they have allowed Martin Usborne to photograph them.

In her famous book-long essay, *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf answers an unnamed interlocutor who asks, "How in your opinion are we to prevent war?" She surmises he is a King's Counsel, a lawyer, and acknowledges that they are both from the "highly educated class." Woolf asks her lawyer to consider his question through the medium of photographs from the fascist insurrection in Spain which was occurring at the time—not images of soldiers, but war's innocent, anonymous, and generic victims, photos that Spain was sending out on a regular basis, in part Woolf suspected, as propaganda. She says, "Those photographs are not an argument; they are simply a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye. But the eye is connected with the brain, the brain with the nervous system. That system sends its messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling . . . some fusion takes place within us; however different the education, the traditions behind us, our sensations are the same, and they are violent."

What Woolf describes is the reason I reflexively flinch when presented with images of cruelty to animals. Even when these images are meant to persuade me toward a compassionate response, they are violating and do not convince me of anything—I shut my eyes, turn away, leave the movie, close the book. It takes me days before I can open Usborne's book, a gift from a friend. It sits on my table. I look at the photograph on the cover but am hesitant to go further. Then I recall Rilke's poem:

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.



The photograph on the cover is of a pearly grey *galgo* regally posed against a warm graphite backdrop; the two oranges at his feet and a gracefully draped silvery-grey curtain seem lifted from a 17th century still life. The dog's body is barely fleshed, the ribcage articulated, the leg muscles sharply defined, the elegant head set on a strong neck, the eyes dark and soulful, a slight scar on the hindquarters, and a telling gesture, the long whip of a tail curved between hind legs—a silent fusion of beauty and violence.

Martin Usborne is based in London; the Foreword and Introduction are in English, and one would assume his English-speaking readers are members of Woolf's "highly educated class," and have probably seldom had reason to visit these poor landscapes in Southern Spain where Usborne has gone to photograph the dogs. Susan Sontag says photography allows us to view other's pain "at a distance." By measures of geography, culture and class, most viewers of *Where Hunting Dogs Rest* will be placed just there—at a distance. This is where I begin, too. I worry that I will be ambushed by images of cruelty that are hard to bear. I brace myself. As Woolf reminds us, the eye is connected to the brain and the nervous system, and distance does not prevent the viewer of Usborne's book from being thoroughly pierced by the imminent presence of the *galgos*, or the haunting rural landscapes where they have hunted hares, and later abandoned or worse. Rilke's poem ends with this line: "Give me your hand." Reluctantly, I accept the invitation.

Where Hunting Dogs Rest opens with a single photograph of the men who hunt hares for food. The photograph is a candid shot—the men, surrounded by their dogs, are either finished for the day or taking a break. The men do not use guns, the dogs are the ones who chase and catch the hares. One man in the foreground is emblematic. A paunchy, middle-aged man wearing jeans looks away, a cigarette in his mouth, while in his right hand he casually grips the hind feet of a hare whose body stretches until its ears almost touch the ground. When Usborne goes out with the men one morning, he observes that they seem kind to the dogs and good-natured with each other. Knowing what he does, he is surprised he does not despise them; he is patient in his understanding of why dogs can't be kept after hunting season, how providing for them during the rest of the year is expensive. But he is unsparing about the cruelty, the broken sacred contract between man and dog. The dogs give silent testimony. We don't know what the hunters feel or experience. They are background. The dogs are the foreground.

A photograph, as Susan Sontag has noted, is constructed whether or not we realize it. Reality is compressed into a comprehensible narrative we tell ourselves, or are told by others. Usborne's portraits are purposely constructed, reminiscent of how an artist stages his model. One dog stands on a mat dressed in a startling vermilion blanket cape meant, I imagine, to indicate royalty. Another dog is enveloped inside a rich brown blanket, a surround I register as comfort, while another's frail body reclines on a pale buttery beige coverlet that matches the dog's coloration. Other "props"—inelegant backdrops, stained canvas, the small stage, the shriveled oranges, take nothing away from the animals' nobility; they hardly makes the dogs less "real," only more so. Despite the layers of artistic and historic reference, these portraits are not aesthetic in the

sense that art can be used to transform what is terrible into something beautiful. The dogs' bodies and their gaze create a tension—beauty and terror are revealed in equal measure leaving the viewer transfixed. The dogs' reality lies in the details of their exquisitely rendered bodies where muscle and bone is articulated as if an anatomy lesson, and in their expressions as they look or turn away from the photographer, and by extension at or away from us. The body language of a turned-away dog, a gesture I recognize as shame, does not necessarily indicate shame for themselves and their circumstances, but rather that which must certainly belong to the two-leggeds who have forsaken them. The less “posed” portraits are welcomed because they lend veracity to the fear and vigilant suspicion that comes with betrayal and abandonment. With the exception of several small pictures in the Introduction, the absence of images of direct violence serves to convey violence that much more acutely because as viewers we have to fill it in with our imagination.

The dogs are unnamed. Names are a human imposition we place on our animal companions. Being unnamed does not mean the photographed dogs possess no individuality. On the contrary, these portraits are not examples of a generic breed, they are not simply representatives of a cruel practice. They are profoundly themselves. Blessedly unnamed, blessedly complete in their blameless eloquent and often skeletal bodies, there are no captions to inform, only eyes and body give testimony to their history, their intelligence, their loyalty and their terror. Susan Sontag says, “Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: They haunt us.”

The portraits of the dogs are often paired with the landscapes in which they have been discarded, a landscape not necessarily beautiful or even distinctive. If I didn't know where these images were taken I would have no clue as to their whereabouts—a side of the road is just that, a cement wall enclosing an industrial site, an open field, a ravine, a rain-spattered stream, are completely generic.



In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes' short inquiry into photography, the French literary theorist and philosopher identifies two elements in a photograph: the first he names *studium* which is derived from a conventional cultural perspective. Suffused with shadows and reflective winter light, Osborne's landscapes are readable in that ordinary respect. Why do they become so deeply compelling and moving to the viewer? They possess what Barthes calls the second element in a photograph, the *punctum*, an element that pierces, wounds, bruises or pricks as with a sharp instrument. This is Osborne's gift. One can read these landscapes where the dogs were abandoned, as portraits of absence. They lack a focal point. In the context of Osborne's vision, the punctum is not the piercing detail that opens the tear duct (another definition of punctum), but what is missing. The landscapes feel like they could be the last place a dying dog might see. It is up to the viewer to see from the dog's perspective by way of her sympathetic imagination.

Usborne is not a propagandist. Only in his Introduction does he give an indication of what happens. Beside the small clips of Velazquez, a dog “housed” in a wooden box, or a steep ravine where a dog was dropped, there is a photograph of a practice that stretches the imagination, even in the annals of torture so familiar today. Usborne explains: “Those (dogs) that have performed badly may also suffer ‘punishments’, the most notorious being ‘playing the piano’, where dogs are hung from a tree so that their feet tap out a silent tune to accompany a gradual death. Thankfully this is becoming more rare.” No stranger to human’s capacity for atrocity, I found this image devastating. The photograph is not Usborne’s, but he has included it and it is an important one, shot at a distance, blurry, hard to know what we are actually looking at, but not sparing us. In fact, I had to squint, to get closer, to make it out.

My mind immediately goes to the exhibition of lynching photographs I saw in New York City in 2000, and to Eula Biss’s essay in *Notes from No Man’s Land* in which she traces the parallel stories of progress and connectivity by way of the telephone and telephone poles, and in particular, the way the poles were put to use as perfect structures for a hanging.

But Usborne’s purpose is not to shock: “The images I have taken do not focus directly on the agony. They move around the edge of the action in the hope that your imagination and heart might move center stage.” He is wise in that choice for numbness happens quickly and, like the dogs, we want to look away. He gives a homeopathic dose, but not so much that we foreclose on all feeling, just enough to let us stay with it, stay with ourselves, inside ourselves and our own stories of unwarranted abandonment and injury.

Entanglements abound. The *galgos* are the heart and soul of Usborne’s work, but they exist within a web of human history and art, the age of aristocracy and the desperation of poverty, the clash of class and culture—including class hostilities manifested in the worst punishments meted out to these dogs, shelter charities and the disenfranchised, the long evolutionary bond forged between hunters and dogs, dogs and their prey: the web is dense and the layers are many, implicit and explicit.

Usborne is trustworthy in what he shows and how; he is the opposite of a sensationalist, nor is he a romanticist—we are neither degraded nor elevated, become neither voyeurs nor cowards. Like the dogs, we can safely occupy the rehabilitating space Usborne has created without recoiling from what we see and feel. When I allow the separation between myself and the dogs to disappear, when we enter each other’s reality through the portal of our sameness instead of our irreducible differences, I can stand outside the usual terms for what it means to be human. Indeed, the very definition of human expands to the ineffable—and I take the dogs along with me. With each portrait, I found myself petting the page and talking to the dog the way I might speak to a traumatized child.

Photography is a potent medium as Woolf, Sontag, Barthes and others have noted. It is the photographer and his or her intention that drives the image. One thinks of Diane Arbus and her fascination, if not obsession, with her “freaks” as she called them, making her viewers feel a bit shabby, implicated as if they are voyeurs. Usborne, however, is a photographer of conscience—his portraits are dignified, a deeply felt act of witnessing: one feels this about him and his intent. Susan Sontag has said about war photography: “For photographs to accuse, and possibly alter conduct, they must shock.” But Usborne does not exploit our voyeuristic tendencies or our human sympathies. He is deeply committed to showing all aspects of the hunting dogs’ lives, including the very last plate of a dead hare stretched full length on stubbled grass, its fur obviously mouthed by the dog who has brought it to his master. In this way, Usborne gives the viewer an opportunity to become fair witnesses, to crack open our defended and divided hearts, to enter the animal story with our own animal bodies and thereby widen our scope of compassion, of what it means to be alive. A dog’s life. A human life. Something the contemporary photographer Sally Mann seems to articulate best.

As for me, I see both beauty and the dark side of the things; the loveliness of cornfields and full sails, but the ruin as well. And I see them at the same time, and chary of that ecstasy. The Japanese have a phrase for this dual perception: mono no aware. It means "beauty tinged with sadness," for there cannot be any real beauty without the indolic whiff of decay. For me, living is the same thing as dying, and loving is the same thing as losing, and this does not make me a madwoman; I believe it can make me better at living, and better at loving, and, just possibly, better at seeing.

In *Where Hunting Dogs Rest*, Martin Usborne offers this way of seeing—“beauty tinged with sadness.” What we chose to do with such a gift is up to us. What happens to the dogs? May they find the rest and rehabilitation they deserve, and may they also find what Cervantes’ dogs, Berganza and Scipio, eventually found—contentment, just employment, the boon of comradeship, and someone to share in the vicissitudes of a dogs’ life.

Patricia Reis divides her time between Portland, Maine and Kingsport, Nova Scotia. Her recent memoir, Motherlines: Love, Longing, and Liberation (October, 2016) won a gold medal for memoir from Independent Press Publishers. Along with numerous essays and reviews, she has published four other books of non-fiction. www.patriciareis.net.