

SENTIMENTALITY (Risks & Pleasures)

You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog as large as myself that my father bought me. They are better than human beings, because they know but do not tell.

Emily Dickinson, in a letter
to Thomas Higginson

Where two or three thousand words are insufficient for what we see, there are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell. The human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush lived. Love was chiefly smell; form and color were smell; music and architecture, law, politics and science were smell. For him religion itself was smell. To describe his simplest experience with the daily chop or biscuit is beyond our power. Not even Mr. Swinburne could have said what the smell of Walpole Street meant to Flush on a hot afternoon in June... Perhaps Shakespeare, had he paused in the middle of writing *Antony and Cleopatra* --

But Shakespeare did not pause.

Virginia Woolf, *Flush*

The House Dog's Grave

I've changed my ways a little; I cannot now
Run with you in the evenings along the shore,
Except in a kind of dream; and you, if you dream a moment,
You see me there.

So leave awhile the paw-marks on the front door
Where I used to scratch to go out or in,
And you'd soon open; leave on the kitchen floor
The marks of my drinking pan.

I cannot lie by your fire as I used to do
On the warm stone,
Nor at the foot of your bed; no, all the night through
I lie alone.

But your kind thought has laid me less than six feet
Outside your window where firelight so often plays,
And where you sit to read—and I fear often grieving for me—
Every night your lamplight lies on my place.

You, man and woman, live so long, it is hard
To think of you ever dying
A little dog would get tired, living so long.
I hope than when you are lying

Under the ground like me your lives will appear
As good and joyful as mine.
No, dear, that's too much hope: you are not so well cared for
As I have been.

And never have known the passionate undivided
Fidelities that I knew.
Your minds are perhaps too active, too many-sided. . . .
But to me you were true.

You were never masters, but friends. I was your friend.
I loved you well, and was loved. Deep love endures
To the end and far past the end. If this is my end,

I am not lonely. I am not afraid. I am still yours.

Robinson Jeffers, 1941

On the Skeleton of a Hound

Nightfall, that saw the morning-glories float
 Tendril and string against the crumbling wall,
 Nurses him now, his skeleton for grief,
 His locks for comfort curled among the leaf.
 Shuttles of moonlight weave his shadow tall,
 Milkweed and dew flow upward to his throat.
 Now catbird feathers plume the apple mound,
 And starlings drowse to winter up the ground.
 thickened away from speech by fear, I move
 Around the body. Over his forepaws, steep
 Declivities darken down the moonlight now,
 And the long throat that bayed a year ago
 Declines from summer. Flies would love to leap
 Between his eyes and hum away the space
 Between the ears, the hollow where a hare
 Could hide; another jealous dog would tumble
 The bones apart, angry, the shining crumble
 Of a great body gleaming in the air;
 Quivering pigeons foul his broken face.
 I can imagine men who search the earth
 For handy resurrections, overturn
 The body of a beetle in its grave;
 Whispering men digging for gods might delve
 A pocket for these bones, then slowly burn
 Twigs in the leaves, pray for another birth.
 But I will turn my face away from this
 Ruin of summer, collapse of fur and bone.
 For once a white hare huddled up the grass,
 The sparrows flocked away to see the race.
 I stood on darkness, clinging to a stone,
 I saw the two leaping alive on ice,
 On earth, on leaf, humus and withered vine:
 The rabbit splendid in a shroud of shade,
 The dog carved on the sunlight, on the air,
 Fierce and magnificent his rippled hair,
 The cockleburs shaking around his head.
 Then, suddenly, the hare leaped beyond pain
 Out of the open meadow, and the hound
 Followed the voiceless dancer to the moon,
 To dark, to death, to other meadows where
 Singing young women dance around a fire,
 Where love reveres the living.

I alone
Scatter this hulk about the dampened ground;
And while the moon rises beyond me, throw
The ribs and spine out of their perfect shape.
For a last charm to the dead, I lift the skull
And toss it over the maples like a ball.
Strewn to the woods, now may that spirit sleep
That flamed over the ground a year ago.
I know the mole will heave a shinbone over,
The earthworm snuggle for a nap on paws,
The honest bees build honey in the head;
The earth knows how to handle the great dead
Who lived the body out, and broke its laws,
Knocked down a fence, tore up a field of clover.

James Wright

The Victor Dog

for Elizabeth Bishop

Bix to Buxtehude to Boulez.
The little white dog on the Victor label
Listens long and hard as he is able.
It's all in a day's work, whatever plays.

From judgment, it would seem, he has refrained.
He even listens earnestly to Bloch,
Then builds a church upon our acid rock.
He's man's—no—he's the Leiermann's best friend,

Or would be if hearing and listening were the same.
Does he hear? I fancy he rather smells
Those lemon-gold arpeggios in Ravel's
“Les jets d'eau du palais de ceux qui s'aiment.”

He ponders the Schumann Concerto's tall willow hit
By lightning, and stays put. When he surmises
Through one of Bach's eternal boxwood mazes
The oboe pungent as a bitch in heat,

Or when the calypso decants its raw bay rum
Or the moon in *Wozzeck* reddens ripe for murder,
He doesn't sneeze or howl; just listens harder.
Adamant needles bear down on him from

Whirling of outer space, too black, too near—
But he was taught as a puppy not to flinch,
Much less to imitate his *bête noire* Blanche
Who barked, fat foolish creature, at King Lear.

Still others fought in the road's filth over Jezebel,
Slavered on hearths of horned and pelted barons.
His forebears lacked, to say the least, forbearance.
Can nature change in him? Nothing's impossible.

The last chord fades. The night is cold and fine.
His master's voice rasps through the grooves' bare groves.
Obediently, in silence like the grave's
He sleeps there on the still-warm gramophone

Only to dream he is at the première of a Handel
Opera long thought lost—*Il Cane Minore*.
Its allegorical subject is his story!
A little dog revolving round a spindle

Gives rise to harmonies beyond belief,
'A cast of stars' . . . Is there in Victor's heart
No honey for the vanquished? Art is art.
The life it asks of us is a dog's life.

SONG

Some claim the origin of song
 was a war cry
 some say it was a rhyme
 telling the farmers when to plant and reap
 don't they know the first song was a lullaby
 pulled from a mother's sleep
 said the old woman

A significant
 factor generating my delight in being
 alive this springtime
 is the birdsong
 that like a sweeping mesh has captured me
 like diamond rain I can't
 hear it enough said the tulip

lifetime after lifetime
 we surged up the hill
 I and my dear brothers
 thirsty for blood

uttering our beautiful songs
 said the dog

Alicia Ostriker

Notes

Title: The logo for the Victor Talking Machine Company and (later) RCA Victor featured a white dog listening to a gramophone, based on an 1899 painting (*His Master's Voice*) by the English artist Francis Barraud (1856-1924).

Manuscript 6 has the title, "DOGGEREL <for Mme. Verdurin>." Merrill may be comparing the Victor Dog's listening skills to Mme. Verdurin's in Marcel Proust's *The Captive*: "I looked at the Mistress, whose sullen immobility seemed to be protesting against the noddings—in time with the music—of the empty heads of the ladies of the Faubourg. She did not say: "You understand that I know something about this music, and more than a little! If I had to express all that I feel, you would never hear the end of it!" She did not say this. But her upright, motionless body, her expressionless eyes, her straying locks said it for her. They spoke also of her courage, said that the musicians might go on, need not spare her nerves, that she would not flinch at the andante, would not cry out at the allegro." (*The Captive* 2.3)

Dedication: Elizabeth Bishop, American poet (1911-1979) and Merrill's friend.

Bix: Leon Bismark "Bix" Biederbecke, American jazz musician (1903-1931).

Buxtehude: Dietrich Buxtehude, Danish-born German Baroque composer (1637-1707).

Boulez: Pierre Boulez, French composer and conductor (1925-2016).

earnestly to Bloch: Ernest Bloch, Swiss-born American composer (1880-1959).

builds a church: "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Acid rock: rock music associated with psychedelic experiences.

Leiermann: "Der Leiermann" ("The Organ-Grinder"), the final song in the *Winterreise* cycle of songs by Austrian composer Franz Schubert (1797-1828).

Ravel's "Les jets d'eau du palais de ceux qui s'aiment": "Jeux d'eaux" ("Water Games") by Maurice Ravel, French composer (1875-1937). The French, which appears to be my Merrill himself, translates as: "the fountains of the palace of those who love each other."

Schumann: Robert Schumann, German composer (1810-1856). Perhaps Merrill refers to the striking opening of the Piano Concerto, in A minor, Op. 54.

Bach's eternal boxwood mazes: German Baroque composer (1685-1750).

oboe pungent as a bitch in heat: Bach wrote: *Concerto for Oboe d'amore* in A Major, BWV 1055, *Oboe Concerto in G Minor*, BWV 1056, and *Oboe Concerto in D Minor*, BWV 1059. View these performances to decide just how pungent the oboes sound.

Wozzeck: 1925 opera by Austrian composer Alban Berg (1885-1935), which uses atonal techniques and *Sprechgesang* ("spoken singing") to tell of the story of Wozzeck's murder of his wife and his death by drowning. Metropolitan Opera Synopsis.

Blanche . . . King Lear: Shakespeare's *King Lear* "The little dogs and all, / Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me" (3.6).

Jezebel: In 1 and 2 Kings, the pagan wife of Ahab, king of Israel; she was thrown from a window and her body was devoured by dogs (2 Kings 9:30-37).

His master's voice: Title of Francis Barraud's painting of Nipper, the Victor dog, which The Gramophone Company acquired in 1899 and then adopted as a trademark by the Victor Talking Machine Company.

Handel . . . Il Cane Minore: German composer Georg Friedrich Handel (1685-1759). "The Smaller Dog" is a fictional title.

No honey for the vanquished: Variation of "Vae victis" ("Woe to the vanquished") from the Roman historian Livy (64 or 59 BC – AD 17).

With thanks to Amada Watson and the editors of Merrill's *Selected Poems* for help with these notes.

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