Animal Acts
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Hughes, Holly and Una Chaudhuri.

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Holly threatens Esther with goats; I threaten Rusten with miniature donkeys. The donkeys remain a fantasy, or at best a few research interviews with miniature donkey people and a stolen moment of eye and hand touch with a silky sorrel jennet or a brown and white spotted wooly jack at the county fair in Sonoma County each summer for the last decade. Maybe these particular brushes of Homo sapiens skin and Equus asinus coat are mutually companionate, but I doubt it. These diminutive donkeys, whose ancestors hail from Sicily or Sardinia, have no relationship with me, no work in common, no patterns of play, no routines as individuals responsive to me. The donkeys at the county fair are working for a living; they are laborers in the weekend affection-providing and entertainment industry. I respect them and their people for this service, but we do not know each other.

Holly doesn’t tell us anything more about the goats. Maybe she has made good on her threats, and goats with dubious dietary habits are capering through her life, munching with her gratitude on that unnecessarily ugly “This is what a feminist looks like” t-shirt. Certainly, I have to agree with her that “a horse is so much more demanding than Jesus,”¹ and goats would do even more to smash the American conventional delusion that sacred and secular are easy to tell apart—or should be teased apart.²

But the things Holly and I and our human lovers know in the flesh are the crescent curves of dogs on the couch that fit beings in the household to each other, the flash of dogs running well on an agility course, the pungent smell of dogs splashing in muddy water, the queer pull of dogs into big demanding worlds contained by no home and no family, and the keening agony of loss for dogs dying too soon. It is all of this and more that lands me with Holly in
the Dog and Pony Show—the show called by its citizens “a life in dogs.” The naturalcultural edges and ecotones we live in are called dogland. “We’re not pet people. We’re dog people. Gradually the people without animals have faded into the background. . . . Dogs made us.” Or, as a bumper sticker at one of Cayenne Dog’s and my agility trials read, “Back Sunday; feed the kids.”

Wanting dogs not children, I kept all my human eggs carefully haploid; but still, that is some joke! Holly and Esther would understand; they left reproduction to the eleventh hour, and Presto the Poodle could have performed with dignity and gusto only if the teaser bitch and vet tech had retired and the hand of a good dog woman held out an inviting cup at a Christmas party. Then, Presto’s ejaculate would have been equal to that magic canine fluid sought for his dog Queenie by J. K. Ackerley, the gay British writer who dedicated himself for years to the dog-defined satisfaction of his bitchy Alsatian.\(^3\)

Holly writes like Joanna Russ, and The Female Man is one of my favorite books. The four Js in Russ’s story could have lived a life in dogs. For example, Russ’s delegate to the present from future perfect Whileaway showed up like dogs do in our lives; “Janet Evason appeared on Broadway at two o’clock in the afternoon in her underwear. She didn’t lose her head.”\(^4\) The world will never be the same again. As Holly wrote, “I also come from another place and time. . . . I come from the place and time where vaginas roamed the earth.” This is SF—speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction. In Holly’s tale, the clitoris even gets to play the role of a good herding dog, playing “the eyes and ears of the vagina.” Holly tells us that “I come from the place where what I just said makes sense.” SF readers in dogland recognize that fact, and my Australian shepherd Cayenne perked up as soon as she heard me read from Holly’s text that vaginas are sheep. If that were the case, then I had her permission to read and write rather than go for a good run. In the real-time lavender multispecies Whileaway, “we all lay down under the tattered pink canopy.”

Russ would have understood lesbian Tourette syndrome; she practically invented it, probably with Whileaway’s genetic technology, and the four Js communicated this unruly speech pattern to my community and its companion species. Holly is raucously infectious. No wonder The Dog and Pony Show is actually, relentlessly about dogs and definitely not about nature or culture or alibis or lessons or something else. No one will show up except the “new canine exchange student.” Live and die with that. Yes! “Dogs are what happened when we stopped / When we stayed in one place / A space opened up beside us / And dogs are what happened.”
But this is not easy living. A space opening up grinds and cracks everybody who falls into it. A human woman’s learning to perform, learning to run, with a flesh-and-blood canine partner in the mundane sport of agility makes that clear. Space opening up is not about control or command, but about something harder—response—and perhaps something I’d call obedience to each other if the word “obedience” were not so corrupted. In addition to everybody’s getting up before dawn to get to the trial site, a good run requires stopping, tuning, emptying, receiving, offering. Becoming-with each other across species-defining difference, partners do not preexist the run. Cartoonist James Liddle, who trains for agility with shelties, got it right. In one of his cartoons, faced with the breakdowns and failures that agility players of both species know all too well, a frustrated inelegant human and a puzzled dog stare at each other across a rule book, while the human intones, “See? Right here! . . . ‘The dog and handler form a team.’ A TEAM!!!” In your dreams. And then, somehow, in waking reality, just for a moment. Just for time-out-of-time in the space we call open.

Heedlessly, Holly and I both started in the sport of agility for fun; but something else happened to us and to our dogs, something life-changing, something for which dogs and their people train for thousands of hours but cannot make happen, something for which there is no t-shirt, no brand, no formula, no teleology. But there is art, performance art, running not for the cure, not for the goal, but for each other, with each other, dog and human, with skill natural to neither, but skill performed in the flesh, on the course, here, now, inventing these coupled partners, in this run, in this ordinary SF time and place. In a good run, Cayenne shone with what can only be called joy, and so did I. I see Holly and her Norfolk terriers shining that way. I see it when I Google them, running with each other, on YouTube. Joy is not fun; joy knows suffering, bearing, action and passion, failing and risking, pleasure and terror, foolishness and skill, holding and receiving, injury and daring. Holly knows: “It was just for fun. I stayed after it got hard. . . . These women are like most of the artists I know. Working hard at something that most other people will ignore.” But that they—we—need.

Holly notices that agility players’ bodies and clothes tell anyone who looks that “these are the women who were horses, when their friends were becoming girls.” Agility invites transspecies investment, literally. I have lots of t-shirts and sweat shirts that I’ve worn at agility trails and classes, but I’d hide only two of them from Holly’s and Esther’s soon-to-arrive hungry goats and my miniature donkeys. Maybe these shirts are political, but the polis is dogland.

The first is a sweatshirt worn by Cayenne’s and my team in the US Dog
Agility Association trial at Santa Rosa, California, in late December of 2009. The sweatshirt is emblazoned with a red and black contemporary Danish anarcho-syndicalist flag, rooted in a late nineteenth-century Italian anarchist banner. A sketch of Emma Goldman looks out on the agility trial from inside a red star. The words “Anarcha Aussies” pulsate in large block print. Our team is six critters of the female persuasion, three canine and three hominid. The dogs, Australian shepherds with a heritage of noninnocent multispecies labor on ranches and in rodeos, are black and white (Ariel), red merle (Cayenne), and red and white (Rubi Rocket); together, they are red and black. With the humans all named some variant of Mary—Mary Schultz, Donna Highstreet, and Donna Haraway—we needed a counter to suffocating signs of Christian virginity, especially in December. Who better than Jewish atheist Emma Goldman to carry our red and black banner to calm our souls with her call for free love, free expression, community, birth control, women’s rights, antiwar activism, an end to prisons, and labor solidarity? The banner on our shirt proclaims Emma’s credo: “Everyone’s right to beautiful, radiant things.” Red Emma did not speak lesbian or dog, but she would have learned how from *The Dog and Pony Show*. She needed a tattered pink canopy to set up her crates and treats for the ongoing freedom struggles.

Our Red and Black Emma runs with dogs. In that spirit, Anarcha Aussies run today with contemporary Chilean artist-activists in the working-class area called la Pintana on the edge of Santiago, who have occupied the former town killing-ground for dogs, creating La Perrera Center for Experimental Art. The artists mount an annual festival called Pintacanes for and with street dogs and street people. On streets and on agility fields, dogs are so much more demanding than Jesus.

I got my other goat-proscribed t-shirt from a sociological gerontology association conference, and it has a bold black bar-graph design with the label “broken down by age and sex.” The shirt is mouse-eaten, with holes gnawed by a doe who made a nest for her pups in my drawer. Holy and not, this t-shirt has (barely) covered me many times as Cayenne flames over jumps and into weaves. The shirt is a joke, just like “back Sunday, feed the kids.” And just like that other quip, the gerontologists’ joke appropriated for a good run ricochets into the kind of truth told in dogland. We are indeed broken down by age and sex, full of mouse holes, chewed soft to make a nest for those of whatever species yet to come. They will not be us; we do not reproduce; if we are very lucky, we live and die in humanimal grace.

Cayenne is now almost thirteen years old, and I am sixty-seven, recently equipped by the surgeon with a snazzy new hip. By the time I heal, even if
the surgeon says I can run again (Question Obedience!), Cayenne will be nearly fourteen. With a murmuring heart, she has mitral valve disease. The canine cardiologist says the MVD is not progressing, but time is murmuring and mice are gnawing. Can miniature donkeys replace a good run? No, joy is not about replacement; joy is about presence, and so it is about that cracking space that multispecies worlds open up. We fall in.

Because “dogs made us,” we get to become-with them under multihued tattered canopies. Finite, vulnerable, opportunistic, vivid—terra is full of critters who are not (only) us. This is the only land worthy of love and passion; requiring response-ability, this is the only land where humanimals can have a good run. Holly artfully performed this truth: “Don’t the dogs teach us this? Dogs bring death into the house . . . ‘Look what I got for you! Look! Why are you not looking! I saved you the best parts!’”

Companion species, with bread, at table together, messmates: “A dog sees our stopped, naked lives / sees the mess we are making / and chooses us.” “yes I said yes I will Yes.”8 Presto!

NOTES

1. Quoted passages without endnotes are all from Holly Hughes, The Dog and Pony Show (bring your own pony).

2. Suzy McKee Charnas wrote the feminist science fiction that ecstatically and reproductively coupled the freedom-inventing Riding Women of the Grasslands and horses in ways Jesus (and horses) might have found alarming, but Holly and I might both have taught. I did. Divisions in feministland break down on humanimal lines. My feminist theory graduate seminars in the early1980s divided into factions over women-horse loves, even literary ones. See Suzy McKee Charnas, Motherlines (New York: Berkeley Books, 1979).

3. J. R. Ackerley, My Dog Tulip (1956; New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 1999) is one of the funniest stories of sex and reproduction in English literature. It is also very moving, as is Presto’s adventure in late-life assisted sex. Sixteen-year companionships are like that.


7. See http://perrerarte.blogspot.com/2008/06/pintacanes.html (accessed June 11, 2012). Artist and scholar Lissette Olivares introduced me to Pintacanes and the Mapuche indigenous word “quiltro” for a mixed breed of small furry dogs. Connoting racial and species mongrel hybridity, the term “kiltro” is applied today disparag-
ingly to street dogs, street people, and mixed-race or indigenous people. In response, in la Pintana’s world of Pintacanes, kiltros of both species and all genders now work with feminists, anarchists, and artists for a good run at freedom and reinvented kinship. See Lissette Olivares and Cheto Castellano, Kiltr@, DVD, 25 min., for dOCUMENTA (13) (Sin Kabeza Productions, 2012).

8. With barking thanks to James Joyce for Molly Bloom’s soliloquy in Ulysses (New York: Egoist Press, 1922). Molly’s “Yes” is the last word in this incomparable novel. Except for the period at the end of Molly/Penelope’s enormous sentence, there is no punctuation in Molly’s rhythmic embrace of life and death. Presto earned an exclamation point, but only at midnight at a lesbian Christmas party.
Stacy Makishi in *Stay!*.  
Photo by Vicky Ryder.