

The Listening Circle

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When the ceiling fan tocked and tocked, I felt myself perspire behind my ears and across the vicinity of my rump. I told myself, "you are pitifully depressed; feign the preternatural ease with which animals guide their lives." So I shimmied myself in the corner of the couch. Perfectly upright, I dropped my arms down the length of all my nipples. Slowly, I tucked my nails and the edges of my pads underneath the nubbin of my cropped tail. I kept my mouth closed; when I show my eye-teeth, I give false cues about how I feel.

Bruno began to speak. The extra skin around his mouth shook. He said, "I cannot feel. That's not true. I have felt anger once or twice, but then I turned it on myself." He had a teeny pinch of hairlessness on his broad ruff. He pushed his flat snout toward the center of our listening circle. Immediately, I knew his type; he was a fat and gentle soul. Yet, underneath his bullish look, his ruefulness gave him a libidinal rush. I told myself, "you are pitifully depressed; feign the gestures of canine fellowship. Commemorate the theories of pack behavior you are expected to demonstrate." I prayed the trimmed hairs between the pads of my little black paws had absorbed my tang.

King stood rigidly on all four legs on the yellow reading chair. He stared daringly into blank space. It was as if he waited for a maimed cat to have the audacity to mew as it died. His brown, cropped ears pointed with authority at the tenacious ceiling fan. "Several days ago, my long-time bitch, Cocoa, told me I was 'withholding'; how it angers me that she was right." He growled and snapped his gray teeth on a gnat. "Otherwise, I cannot say how I feel either." Suddenly, I realized my privilege. I wanted to snatch Cocoa from her chain in the middle of the night. I wanted to take her to the animal shelter. I swung my long ears as if to loose a small lock of fur from the corner of my lips. I told myself, "you are pitifully depressed; refrain from projecting a gentile demeanor to all she-dogs. All bitches are not the same. You are here to help yourself."

Puffin, a toy poodle, had been waiting to speak since our session began. Sadly, she peered from the center of a therapeutic cone. She nodded to each of us. With each nod the inner rim of the cone smarted her neck as she reclined on the love seat. She said, "a friend of mine

attacked me this week. I bit the tip of her tail after she made me so doggone angry." Puffin stank of mercurochrome but had no visible wound. With all four paws she adjusted the cone and sighed. "She tried to roll me on my back!" she whined. "She TRIED to roll me on my back!" she shrieked. Her gray curls trembled, as her eyes pleaded. No one wanted to intervene. Clearly, she suffered from inbreeding. "Do not rescue her," I told myself. "If you do, she will mount you ecstatically."

Yet, the ding of a little school bell sounded in my head, and so I said, "Puffin, I find it hard to believe that you could have done anything other than what you did." I said this to confuse her because I knew poodles were quite easy to confuse. I held her gaze as I held my black eyes in the kindly shape of shelled almonds. Puffin thanked me, and shrank back into the bevel of her cone. The room sank in a deep well of silence, and that, after all, was what I wanted. "You are pitifully depressed," I told myself, "for the safety of all, in the name of base territoriality, an inbred dog may not reign while you want to sleep." With that, I rested my head on the arm of the couch waiting for the next dog to speak.

The whiskers on Joe's chin looked like pine needles. "As you know," he said, his jaw trembling, "my sister was hit by a car two weeks ago. She ran from our pack in the frenzy of pain from her injuries. As of last week, I thought I had lost her forever." His blue eyes turned gray with grief. "I felt so anguished." Joe seemed seven times six in age to me, middling in his life span like me, and struggling with the realities of a dog's life. I perked up. It was as if a great fishing pole from the heavens tugged me upright from my nape. My neck and shoulders straightened. My paws slipped out from beneath the nubbin of my tail. "To bring you up to date," Joe continued, "yesterday, I found my Daisy in a dirt field. She was alive!" Joe bayed and bayed. I embellished his slave-song with occasional toodles.

He continued, "I left her stretched out in the unrelenting heat to go off in search of water. It was as if I fled in a wayward frenzy, as Daisy had just days before. I could not help but hold in mind the extent of her despair." Joe had sunstroke. His dry schnozzle flaked. Pink stigmata burned through the surface of his wrinkled lips. Well," he continued, "I stole a garden hose some six miles from the dry field. I brought it to Daisy. She bit frantically through its green loops. I dragged her to a roadside in view of passing cars. She leaned against my flanks. She suckled and bleated in a delirious chimera. A few hours later, a rescue league transported us to a veterinary shelter, but I was responsible for her getting hit by a car in the first place."

"You are pitifully depressed," I told myself, "reject the utopian nature of the story itself; note the self-evident being this story teller projects. Heed cautiously the self-incrimination which crowns a hero."

But I could no longer cater to my melancholy as Bruno panted. His breath vacillated in the air before me. His lower fangs dropped as he raised a Cheshire smile. His mutable self was the antihero and this too proved difficult for me to accept. I looked around. King stood still, staring at the invisible cat. Puffin ducked feebly beneath the motion of the spinning blades. Oh, the fairytales of benevolent human patronage we internalize in puppyhood! Oh, caprice and frolic! Oh, communal naps!

I scratched my head for a moment. My ears flipped spiritedly in the air. King dropped his haunches into the cushion of the yellow chair. "Joe," I offered, "I too have been stunned by traumatic events. It is so hard to move forward in such space, but as you ran off in search of something, you found what you needed: a water hose. This reminds me of a line from a poem I read this week. I'd like to share it with you." Joe nodded. I ticked quotation marks in the air with the thick nails on my paws, "the bridge appears when you begin to walk across it."¹ I ticked end quotation marks in the air. I felt sated. I dropped my paws on the little pink globe of my abdomen. My tongue dropped like a tassel from the front my mouth. Lighted so, I appeared to smile. Joe cocked his hound-head sideways in response. The energy in our listening circle bloated. I tingled from our sublime exchange.

I have been told I look like a monkey. I am leggy, and I saunter. My hair is so black it looks blue in the moonlight but for seasonal outbreaks of alopecia. Summer lasts eight months in the hill country, during which time I must groom myself furiously to prevent an infestation of skip fleas around my buttocks. I am the newest member of our listening circle. I am here to help myself. The narrative of my life has been shattered. I am paralyzed by loss. Silence grows as the ceiling fan tocks. A blameless cruelty lasted so long I taught myself to beg.

¹ Howe, Marie. "The Dream." *What the Living Do*. New York: Norton, 1998.

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