

Young Writers Award - 2004 runner up

Only Dogs And I by Christopher Boulton

I.

There are the dawn-swarms on the city platforms, percussion of the rush trains, the bodies moving in shifts onto hostile concrete, half-dream of our rat morning; the woman smoking above painted yellow lines.

We turn caffeine black in the tunnels, and this is the only time she will turn to look at the people within the carriage. Riding the peak-trains is a self-test of discipline; one must never make eye contact with other human beings. The interior lights clank and fail at certain nexes in the rail and it is within this brief darkness that she feels she can finally rest and see, like a girl who must breathe underwater. Some hidden technology beneath the train, the machine-effect.

A bridge casts geometric shadow onto river pavement, the shuttling shade of the train as it passes over, this image broken briefly by a lone runner. She will focus on that until the train enters another tunnel, wiping out everything. The runner a woman she knows she will never see again.

This is perhaps what she wants, she thinks. To run.

Night was a clasp too hot to sleep within, and yet the days carried rain. She had clutched out three hours rest on the couch under stale light from the television then rose and musically prepared a cup of tea in the kitchen, the early dawn, listening to water boil and the teaspoon chime, then took her cup to the balcony with a pack of cigarettes clutched, smoking again, a box of matches she found amongst stationery of Cano's on his desk. Grey smoke posing as breakfast.

The day pale and damp and already the rising noise, shift worker traffic and the tattered conversations of dawn runners, dogs at wire fences. Across the street, beneath the powerlines, she saw an uncurtained window, and hoped to see a figure moving at this hour, another female in the anno meridian. She sat down and almost immediately saw the insects in a clot on the tile, the ant's cluster and sprawl, a twisted line like a solar-system. There was a centipede amongst them, dead, conquered, held up trophy-like where they were densest. She felt immediately sick with their number, remembered being covered with these insects once, before she knew how to talk. Deepest memory. She imagined a middle-eastern funeral, a foreign newscast, some ancient clan-war, with the latest dead carried shoulder-high through the throng of streets above ranks of militants. She imagined men in rag-masks and headscarves, angry and weapon'd, and ferried above them, sixty men long, a dark centipede glimpsed between banners.

She watched the ants preparing transport for the body to their Queen. Did ants have queens? Cano would know. She'd ask him later, if she remembered, when she saw him again.

She imagined her own body, curled as though sleeping and swarming with this same plague. They carried her across the tile on their backs to the Queen, inchmeal on the grid.

She sees posters pinned to poles in the city-streets, photographs of missing people. She knows these people were probably dead, looking at their faces. She knows it is not impossible her face might replace these one day, that she is not exempt. That people vanish all the time.

We grow older, she thinks, we turn morbid. When she was a girl her father had cut his hand badly with a saw and she has been thinking about that lately.

She feels self-conscious at pedestrian crossings, hears talk of Chinese New Year in passing conversations, though it is months away yet. Sees men on telephones whom she thinks might be serial killers, clearly murderers of women. An eighteen year old girl has been stabbed in a car by her lover, and she wonders if the act was in Passion.

She sees an old rastafarian with his dreadlocks whispering an inch off the concrete. She sees a man talking quietly to himself and smoking a cigarette. She sees a man waiting for the traffic to wane so he may cross the street.

He is holding a white plate, a knife and fork. She imagines there is a salt shaker in his breast pocket. He must be hungry, she thinks, and imagines this: there is a woman somewhere in a nearby apartment building, she cooks the same meal every day, a secret recipe, cajun-black fish, lotus soup, and she has a legion of males siren-summoned by the smell of cooking. They come up the fire escape in a line with plates tucked under their arms like shields, secret lovers who will fight later in the street for her affections, after they have eaten. She has dreams about carbombs. She is waiting for a train.

In the crowd she comes upon a woman she knows, and there is that slow moment of recognition, the street-vertigo, a memory rush. They seem to spy each other at exactly the same moment, a nanosecond. The young woman's name comes easily, because it is also her own. They are both named Susannah.

In the cafe later Susannah takes a Polaroid camera from her bag and takes Susannah's portrait without a word. Wicker-back chair, the cafe slump, nine a.m., the strangers passing at the window. She says, "Last night I dreamed this city was being attacked by waves of aircraft, of all different kinds. Bombarded, really. I kept going outside and there were bombs falling everywhere. I know nothing about bombs but the technology of my dream was quite sophisticated. We didn't know who the pilots were but we suspected these men were our own, and had been turned against us by an evil dictator. Hundreds of people took refuge in a church but I went back outside." She adds sugar to her coffee. "What did you dream about?"

"Lava."

"Cool."

"Magma. Lava."

And how strange that these two individuals should collide on this day, at this time. She will mine the situation for significance, she will scan for patterns. Two girls with the same name. She realises they would not have met if not for Cano on the phone that morning, if not for her decision to leave. If the dog had not targeted the boy.

Susannah said, as if hearing this, "Where's Cano?"

"He left me, but I'm expecting a call. At the moment he's staying with his parents and brother at their vineyard. Right now I'm waiting for a train to go see him. So I have an hour to kill. I could have stayed at the train station but there was too much disease. He left the city to escape me. This morning a small boy, the son of family friends whom we both knew, was attacked by a dog and is now in hospital. The dog escaped, into the vineyard of all places. When I spoke to Cano this morning a group of the men were going out to look for it. They're hunting it down to shoot it. Hunting it down like a dog, I suppose, which is apt. Right now I should be at work but I spent the morning on my cellphone lying at a secretary."

Becoming aware now that she will tell this woman everything, this woman whom she hardly knows. Confess over a lazy coffee spent within the stormeye of hate-love. She is on the verge of that boy again, she knows it, she moves toward him at the sound of his voice, feels balanced somehow on his shoulder. Can feel his tongue already in her ear.

In the bedroom of the apartment he had left her in when he abandoned the city there lived with her an unknown number of small reptiles, a gecko-type that sometimes appeared whiteskinned, either because of albinism or as camouflage against the painted walls. When she had stopped regularly going to work she would often sit in that room and drink coffee, awaiting these lizards. A friend had told her it was considered good luck by some people, possibly the Chinese. This small piece of random wisdom she had accepted into her body like a Communion wafer. In this way she believed all people had developed their secret belief-systems. People believed in things, she knew, that they would never talk about.

We are full of junk.

It was in this room she had that morning spoken to Cano on her cellphone. A small, pale reptile on the wall. This was the first news of the accident, the boy and the dog, new hunt in the vineyard; the dawning of the day. Afterwards she wanted a cigarette but she didn't have any. There was a cash machine at the train station.

His voice on the line, and she will flee the house for the city. Wormgrey train, cable-veined, the sound of metal. Tunnel-light in stripes. Avoid eye contact with passengers. Discipline.

In the beginning he had wooed her partly by carving his name, in secret, into a table she had owned at the time, which she had since passed on to her brother. So impolite a thing, really - a vandalism - but, too, there was her easy fascination with this small act, with its echo of ancient practice, the carving of a name.

A word placed to influence the Real. So he had placed himself in her life in this way. Had now taken himself out.

I am a woman who must love a boy utterly. Who must bind her veins to him.

In the cafe she notices a man sitting at a table across the room, who glances at her occasionally. She tries to catch him, wanting to know if it is her breasts or her face he is interested in. God, today let it be the face. She eats raw sugar from her thumb and lights a cigarette, needing to urinate but does not want to stand with this man in the room, does not want him to see her in motion, not today, her back turned and his gaze sleeping in the detail. So she will wait until he leaves.

Susannah said, "I have this thing about guerilla fighters. I think I want to marry one."

"Travel, adventure."

"Tall, dark, exactly. I'm talking Eastern Bloc maybe. One of those guys who gets loaned out from another country to train new recruits. I mean, Che Guevara, man, holy shit."

"Che Guevara got lost in the forest, was hunted down and murdered."

"Pity, I know, I heard about that."

"It was fifty years ago."

"I have three T-shirts bearing his image."

And it comes out of nowhere, bullet-hard; the ripple of the animal. From what was known about the incident the boy had not teased it in any way, had not even seen it, and that was what made it so hard to believe. The dog had targeted him. It saw him and it started running. She imagined his small body disappearing beneath the animal, the forearms closing over the face like a violent flytrap.

On her cellphone Cano had described nothing of this, had provided only the facts, the situation, but she could see it all clearly, in sunlit detail. She had never been attacked by a dog but she knew what it would be like. That small private nightmare.

She passes the story to Susannah now, within the dim moods of the cafe, in the way, perhaps, that a stray cough might pass a small measure of disease onto the lips of one's companion, the way she and Cano always shared their sicknesses in the spaces of the days. She wonders if anyone has overheard her, a thin young man, perhaps, bent over pencil and paper, taking it down. A writer was what she wanted, who would somehow relay the story elsewhere. We are all participants in these low transmissions. These systems of people.

A Black Mass. In the evenings at that time there were the fleets of bats moving Eastward toward the sunset, these animals in silent lines or whirling above the houses and apartment blocks like pieces of ash. Susannah could hear their skirmishes in fruit trees, like cats fighting, hiss and mewl, a sound she abhorred, the noise of fight. She drank white wine with icecubes on the balcony and watched this exodus drift out, as though to colonise the born pink quadrant of the sky.

Lotus position on the cool tile and closed her eyes, pretending to meditate. She will remember this time, perhaps, in terms of the animals that haunt the days, that are with her in and around the apartment, for she feels she has in some way generated them, her mind placing them there. The insects the lizards the bats. Her Occult life. They were fruit bats she knew but imagined them as blood-eaters, vampires. That there was human blood within the peaches on the trees.

She spends some of the long day in the room with the geckos, because some part of her believes she is also a reptile.

He calls only after Susannah has left the cafe. She has remained to smoke more cigarettes. And as she speaks to him she stares out through the window into the layered sprawls of the intersection, the low skim of cloud and taxis shifting on the littered rank, the woman passing in Sari, the woman concealed utterly in black but for her eyes. There is the heart-pump of bodies on the painted lines, the nine-deep clusters at the shoulder of the road. The mystic street.

Signal flew out, and he heard her answer. She was in a cafe somewhere sipping coffee and smoking, and he could see that perfectly. He was standing within the vineyard, in the sun, the staves of vine ranked down to his left.

The dog was nearby, he could see it now, resting, pulsing hard. They had all seemed to rest when they saw it, after someone had shouted for the gun. They had all stopped moving. He was remembering how when he was younger, before the vineyard, they had shot pigs with this same rifle that was now being raised against the criminal dog. He had never been allowed to touch it, the gun was his father's only to touch, a limb of him, and still, today, he would not touch it. Instead he carried a stick, a fallen bough, ghostwhite, to defend himself.

And her voice was a datastream, a small bleed of interior history, a thousand stories told simultaneously, encoded and compact. The pearls she wore, her hate for him, the tactile pleasure of her tender breast. Spit, love. Said she was coming to see him.

II.

The dog had sensed them. As he was talking to Susannah he saw it lift its head, hearing his voice or their slow footprints on the earth. When you are within it the vineyard seems infinite. The animal like a Sphinx until it rose, began moving.

There was the gold of its pelt as it came running through the grass. She could see it running.