

WALLDOG

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This story is about a dog and a wall. A dog looking at a wall. Nothing more. I will not say what breed of dog it is, or its color/s, size, age or temperament. You supply the dog. I know you can do it. An irrefutably tangible canine.

The wall, I will tell you, is painted 'Simply White' in eggshell finish. It gives off a slight reflection. (See? You bring the dog, I bring the wall.) The paint is so fresh that it is not quite dry; the smell would stand more distinctly in the room were it not for the open window, which is just out of view to the left of the dog. For all practical purposes, there is only a wall and dog in this story. The paint is acrylic. A floor is implied.

If you've gotten this far, you have committed to your role. And, more importantly, to your dog. I assume that you have already defined the dog physically. Not in great detail, perhaps, but you've drafted a passing semblance at least. The size and color, the length of its fur, and the level of grooming, whether its ears flop down or point up. This dog is either a specific dog that you have personally known or a composite of any number of canines (family: *Canidae*): Pug, Labrador, Deerhound, Shepherd, a Pekinese-Chihuahua mix, or an inextricable mutt.

I'll wager a guess: Your dog is standing, not lying down. You want a participant in this story, some tension. The dog, to a large degree, must care. If the dog is lying down and its head is up, the tongue is decidedly out. Am I right? If it is fully standing at attention (the ideal pose), its tongue is in.

By the way, if, in playing the miscreant, you have supplied a taxidermic animal, you can stop right here. I don't want you in front of my wall.

So we have a living, breathing, salivating creature. Even if you happen to own such a pet, you most likely haven't assigned a sex to this dog—to Walldog. If, by chance, you are a breeder of dogs, you have no doubt done this by default. Regardless, sex does not play a part in this story.

Enough about you.

I want to share something about the wall. There is not a mark on it. There may shortly be thumb prints, smudges, scratches and splatterings—the little fly leavings that can speck up a surface (flies coming in by the open window, since the season is summer, mid-summer, July 9th)—but for now, the wall is pristine in a suitably low-gloss, not-quite-dried-yet way.

Yet there must be something on the face of the paint or reflected in it, for your dog to be observing it so raptly.

In order to see what Walldog sees, you are asked to make a somewhat radical transition. You must sit like a flea on the ridge of his snout. If you are not so inclined to reduce yourself, you must then crouch down and position your head as close to Walldog's as possible, but without distracting him unduly.

Here, I must congratulate you on the verity of your dog. I can sense his breathing, I can feel his warmth. He smells like a dog. Dank, sweet. He has been in the park, hasn't he? Through the puddles of last night's rain. Through the damp wood chips of a dog run. Through stories I have already written. Too bad that you're confined to this room, by this wall, on such an unseasonably cool July morning. The world outside is wondrous, fresh. The world is always fresh. Even here, inside, the wall is fresh and undeniably worth looking at, some small thing that is glinting, turning, flexing its antennae, making noise or putting out a smell.

Walldog's senses are ripe to it. If you are sitting on the bridge of his snout, you know

this. You feel, as a flea would feel, the pulse of his ancient blood.

Still, the dog you have given us, for all his pedigree or lack of it, with the pattern of his coat and latent ‘personality,’ is not very unique among dogs. Only surface details set him apart from any other dog you could have chosen. Dogs are fundamentally alike, for millennia unchanged, as the statue of a mastiff from Ashurbanipal’s Babylon could tell you, thanks to the fact that several species of canine migrated from North America to Asia some seven million years ago. You would have to trek back much further than that to find anyone genetically distinct in his family.

You could have thrown us a curve in this story. With an alteration of just one percent in mitochondrial DNA, Walldog might be a wolf. In fact, the only visible difference between the skulls of *Canis familiaris* and *Canis lupus* is the “stop”—the break in the downward slope of the snout, from the forehead to the tip of the nose. The dog has a more prominent stop than the wolf, who is, if you aren’t aware of it already, the only common ancestor of Walldog.

Truth be told, my wall is far more distinct from other walls than your dog from other dogs. To simplify the exercise, I have chosen to provide a contemporary wall, as might be found in any middle-class suburban home, two coats of paint over a coat of primer over spackled wallboard.

I could have gotten historical on you. Four thousand years ago, for example, in a house on the island of Ithaca, a dog named Argos (as invented by Homer) could have stood before such a wall (composed of a plaster of fine white lime), pining over the scent of his master, Odysseus, who had touched the wall with the flat of his hand before he left for Troy, either blessing the house or absorbing its memory, in case he should be years at war or lost on Poseidon’s sea. If scholars are correct, Argos was some kind of greyhound.

But what is Walldog—a dog arguably of today—looking at? Only you can tell us, either seated on his *stop* or crouched close beside him with a neck that's getting sore.

The reflection on the wall three feet before him is so diffuse that it is hard to describe. The shape is vaguely trapezoidal and has only a definitive lower boundary, since Walldog's shadow cuts it short. So there is a light source behind him, or a mirror casts the light from the window back onto the fresh-painted wall.

In "Glasslight," a much longer story, the writer is looking in though the window at a freestanding, full-length oval mirror, in which is reflected the opposite wall and the back of a coal black dog. In that piece of fiction, the reader is asked to provide all the images reflected in the mirror—the dog, the wall, the petunias in the window box, and the stand of poplars at the edge of the yard. Your task is not so daunting.

Do you see the vague spot of light on the wall, how it changes? It is shifting, almost imperceptibly, the trapezoid breaking out in a spiral. Or is it lifting into a pyramidal shape? Is it fading or growing brighter? It appears to be trembling. A light scrim of clouds passes over the town. Or the sunlight is filtered through poplar leaves kept aflutter in the breeze. Or the window may be curtained in billowing chiffon.

Some part of Walldog's ancestral memory, perhaps, recognizes in that shifting glimmer a Paleolithic morn—as of sun through ice or jungle mist. It's not impossible. And behind that ghostly fire sounds a rain of hoof beats, growing louder—the wildebeest, the reindeer, the aurochs, the river pig. It was the morning that he first took a scrap of bear flesh from the hands of Cro-Magnon Adam. It was the morning that he was given a name. That name, consisting of a glottal stop and two clicks, was bestowed by the same stooped and toothless shaman who had scrawled, in manganese and ocher, the figures of a dog and a stag in the chamber of a cave in the

Dordogne region of France.

That light on the wall reaches out from wells of the past inaccessible to us, the “higher creation.” It reflects the glow of the sacred fire nursed in the throat of a cave, kept from wind and water, and from skulking enemies who would steal the Comfort and leave us in darkness, starving and shivering, but for the service of our friend and helpmeet, *Canis familiaris*, guarding the door of our continuance. It is not for nothing that old Bentback faced down the infernal sprites of the cavern to contribute another magic graffito to the murals of Lascaux.

Or Walldog sees, however faintly, the walls of this very cavity, its dewy portraits held in view by the homemade lantern of a French teenager who had followed his rabbit-chasing dog (named Robot), into the labyrinth, into galleries that currently carry such names as the Great Hall of Bulls and the Chamber of the Dead Man, with their stark and supple illustrations. Walldog is a rabbit chaser at heart, isn't he, an avid prober of holes?

Think of the four-eyed dogs of the death-god, Yama, which guard the road to the Vedic afterlife. And Xototl of the Aztecs, the god of graves and sunsets. And standing at the crossroads, old Hecate's beast, in the twilight veil between life and death. He was the totem-beast of Melkarth, the Phoenician Hercules.

However, we should not force on Walldog the baggage of our own zoomorphic texts, the sodomitic orgies at the rising of the Dog-star and the yearly flooding of the Nile. What has Walldog to do with ancient taboos and sacrifices? With incantations and Canopic urns? Walldog is free to be modern, comfortable, educated, disillusioned, litigious, chemically-dependent and performance-enhanced.

He might sit for photographer William Wegman, one of many in a line of successors to Sir Edwin Landseer, the famous Victorian painter of animals, or even Cassius Marcellus Coolidge,

responsible for the paintings of dogs playing poker circa 1903, prints of which might still hang above the bar of a tavern in, say, Joplin, Missouri, or in a motel office on the outskirts of Flagstaff.

Walldog has lawyers, physicians, shrinks, publicists, stylists, masseurs and his own domain name. He's one pampered, jacked up dog. Yet he's as lonely as Laika on Sputnik II, sealed in her padded cabin, hurtling into orbit. Beyond the pressurized cabin and capsule lies the endless cave of space. Now that's a story one would like to write, but imposing a window into the spacecraft and freeing it of Earth's gravitational tether. "Roadtrip," I would call it, or "Spacebark"—riding with Laika in the redshift trail of the galaxies, confined only by the facts of the periodic table and the received meditations of the voyager.

But the anthropomorphized dog you have given us is hardly meditative. I have to wonder what daydreams of wealth, celebrity or sexual exploits absorb the mind of our faithful protagonist. What stirs his passions? The gossip in the tabloids, Scandinavian sports cars, the NASDAQ, the blogs of retired Las Vegas showgirls, his daily horoscope?

If Walldog has a penchant for Chinese astrology, he deems himself lucky indeed, for this year, 2006 (by Western reckoning), as even skeptics must know, is ruled by the sign of the *gǒu* (狗), which in Walldog years—depending on his breed and constitution—occurs less than 1.2 times per century.

Did I say protagonist? Then here I must stop these indulgent excursions into the history, culture and fancied existential position—how ludicrous!—of *Canis familiaris*. The wall will not stand for such diminution at the price of a few associative cartwheels.

The wall is proud. It will not be stared down. Its drying topcoat of eggshell acrylic offers

only the illusion of violability. Don't come too near it, armed with fables of Jericho and Atlantis.

In northeastern England, from the Tyne to the Solway, Hadrian's Wall, after eighteen centuries, still asserts its ridge on the planet. Seventy-three miles of stone and rubble were mortared there to keep the Celtic tribes in check. A defensive barrier with towers and forts.

"That's Wall country," warns a blue-painted savage, crouched in his hideout of mountain poplars as a sodden rain drives down. "We don't go that way no more." Through the leaves and rain, a tract of green can be seen in the distance, strewn across the humpbacked foothills and between the quarry ruts.

I wonder if the emperor Hadrian—as architect, traveler and general polymath—was inspired by another defensive work, tales of which must have wafted through the snowy crags and platinum deserts, along the routes of the Old Silk Road, toward Rome. Of course there were tales, sensational tales, from the lands of the Solar Cradle, from beyond Arabia and the Illiterate Steppes.

The Qin Dynasty, long before, had drawn within its wheel of power the ducal states of China, splicing their disparate frontier barriers into one continuous monolith, with forts and beacon towers along its snaking length. To be strengthened and extended by succeeding dynasties centuries beyond old Hadrian himself, into 3000 miles of public works project, such that Laika, if she had had a window...

There is the legend of Fan Qi Liang, one of thousands conscripted to work on the project, who perished in the effort (heart attack? sunstroke? broken neck?) and whose body was entombed in the *all-in-all* wall. On word of his fate, so the story goes, his young wife wept with such colossal passion that the masonry split apart, exposing the remains of a hundred such laborers. In order to identify her man for burial, she cut her finger and held it over each corpse.

When her blood flowed freely onto one of them, she knew that this was Fan Qi Liang. You might ask why a D-O-G was not recruited for this purpose, and whose comforting presence might have kept the poor widow from drowning herself in the Yellow River, as the legend states.

There is the Western Wall in old Jerusalem, called the Wailing Wall. Some years ago, an inexplicable damp spot was reported on its surface, which the mystical rabbi, Menachem Fromann, suggested presaged the advent of Messiah. A damp patch on one of the giant stone slabs, if you looked closely enough for long enough (on the men's side of worship, no doubt)...

There is the *Grenzmauer 75*, the last iteration of the Berlin Wall, with its trenches, fences, wires and lights. Not a typical wall physically, but it throws a long conceptual shadow. It still stands in its entirety, as would the walls of Auschwitz were they completely razed. Walls do not vanish just because they are gone.

But I would prefer not to dwell on such dark evocations. I propose instead walls of glass and titanium, of office towers and basilicas of Art. Or a wall of Sheetrock® painted in Simply White eggshell acrylic, not quite dried, and reflecting the light from a 42" flat-screen plasma television on the opposite side of the room.

So you see, my wall is Everywall. Dynamic, transportable, transposable. From Alcatraz to Checkpoint Charlie. From the Hanging Gardens to Humpty Dumpty. From Homer to Pink Floyd.

But what is this motion, this sudden tremor, that shakes the delicate focus we have tried so hard to establish? Something has happened.

There it goes again.

Walldog flicks his tail.

I have kept you too long in the yoke, I admit. But you took the role willingly, and

performed it—until now—with remarkable patience and efficiency. But you have now committed an error common to the novice storyteller. You have conflated yourself with your character. You have transferred your own impatience to Walldog. You have made your issue his.

You flick your tail.

You stand before my wet white wall, threatening to cast a hair upon it. You propose your own stories. "Rubberchase," transpiring in a city park on a cool summer day. So what is that tree over there by the fence? How clever that you call it an aspen. The undersides of its leaves flash silver in the breeze. Not bad. An attempt. And you recognize (keeping wisely to first-person narration) by the smell of the dirt beneath the picnic table that a black Labrador you have rubbed noses with was here in the rain of the morning.

"Starrynight" you would even attempt, a bit of swagger in that wag, though you forget, or maybe did not know, that Laika expired of hypertension and hyperthermia only four hours after launch. In fact, she was never intended to return. Crouched in terror—the nutritional gelatin smeared on her muzzle, the waste bag appended to her backside reeking—as thermal control malfunctions: The cost of such empathy, with the attendant suggestion of your own sadistic impulses—Ah-*ha!*

With "Bearflesh"—not the most graceful of titles—you are more at ease, and ready to test your virtuosity with a stab at historical fiction. There is rising dust and pounding hooves and the scent of the aurochs in your black, wet nostrils. With a pack of *Homo sapiens* loping far behind, and Bentback chanting your name to the wind as he grips his nub of ochre.

You have done more here, far more, than to exclude my wall from the scene. It is not a far step to heresy.

The dog, you argue, freed us from dependence on migrating herds, since dogs could catch

local game the year round. It was dogs that allowed us to remain in one place and turn our talents to agricultural pursuits, to city planning. *Ergo*, the wall can be viewed as the indirect contribution of the dog. Could there ever have been a wall, you ask, without him?

You have managed, dear participant, to shed more light on your own interests, aspirations, prejudices and intellect than you have informed us of your creature. Was this the light reflected in the drying topcoat of Simply White eggshell acrylic? Was this, after all, what Walldog was looking at, before he left the room so abruptly—his turn so supple, his bound so swift—to attend to the cry of a child?

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