

On Necessary Fictions

The first time the black dog became more than just a black dog to me was at a clinic. I remember sitting in a waiting room across a gigantic wall of medical brochures and catching sight of two pointy, black ears peeking back at me. Well, I had some time to kill anyway.

It was then that I first learned of 'Churchill's black dog' - his penchant for referring to his recurring bouts of depression as being in the company of a black dog. Also, that this sombre association between the black dog and depression did not begin or end with him. In fact, the black dog metaphor is much, much older and extends all the way back to antiquity.

I remember thinking of Ampersand - our then newly adopted puppy, a tiny, hyperactive black ball of fur, still small enough to disappear under the sofa. I remember thinking also about the disastrous year I had had so far, and finding it so very odd to have found an unexpected and unexpectedly robust connection between these two wildly disparate experiences - of living with a black dog and of being depressed.

I wish I could say that the useful parallels between these two black dogs came to me at once, because there are many compelling reasons to reframe depression as a familiar domestic pet. When I look back at that time of my life, I would surely have been comforted by the idea of depression having a defined outline, or to have thought of living with depression as a negotiated co-existence - just like how we might learn to adjust our lives to accommodate our pets - rather than as a state of passive victimhood. In reality, however, the rich and useful metaphorical connotations of the black dog did not cross my mind at all.

It's perhaps a bit like how essayist Teju Cole writes about the mystery of somebody's favourite film - that it hinges on multiple factors that have to line up just right. Perhaps your favourite film isn't [even] the one you like best, but the one that likes you best.¹ I think this is true for most things that we hold dear. So, of this symbol and of its particular importance as a necessary fiction in my life - in a way, I think the black dog chose me too.

After all, I hardly have to squint to see the imprints it has left across my life. From the bedtime stories of Black-mouth (or Or-chui) that my dad used to tell us, to my grand-aunt's overly-excitable black mongrel that I remember more as stories than in my memory, to my neighbour's hyper-territorial, monkey-warding guard-dog that gave me nightmares all through my childhood after I got locked in with him on one occasion - the black dogs go on and on, a recurring guest waiting for the right moment to establish a more prominent presence.

¹ Teju Cole, *Known and Strange Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016) p. 122.

My thoughts returned once again to the black dog years later, as I began to sketch from life while in art school. At that time, I was working largely with graphite and so every dog became a black dog. And there were many of them.

In part, this was because it was in the middle of the Covid-19 lockdown and Ampersand was an easy and only too obvious choice of a life model. Yet, as one of my lecturers was quick to drily point out - for all my wobbly lines and distorted forms, many of the sketches were clearly not of her. This time, finally, I was ready and more than eager to follow this thread of inquiry down the rabbit hole.

Of course, to an extent, making these dogs was also my way of looking for answers - of wanting, hoping, to re-establish some meaning to this muddled period of my life that never seems distant enough to be placed in the safety of past tense.

But if there is one thing I learned from going through depression, it is that the answers we go searching for, if there are any to be found at all, are often messy and incomplete. We ask complex questions but yearn for simple answers, like:

What is depression?

Who am I?

And now, what does the black dog truly signify?

As it turns out, the black dog has, across time and place, always been an ambiguous symbol representing a host of different ideas. It is both man's best friend and 'terrestrial devil',² guardian of the night as well as harbinger of death, disease and destruction. In classical and contemporary iconography alike, the black dog features as a staple of dogged and persistent longevity.

Yet, more than any manifestation of the black dog, what resonates with me most is its capacity as a symbol to contain a multitude of meanings. The black dog represents many things, and each individual idea that it stands for is no less valid or valuable for it. In this context, meaning is something that is lost or gained, understood and re-contextualised, depending on the perspective that we choose to adopt. When we think of the black dog and when we think of depression, its meaning is what we choose it to be; what we choose to see.

So, Dog Days is about the black dog as a metaphor for depression. I have chosen to depict instances of peculiar canine behaviour that I have observed in my own dog as a way of exploring what 'strangeness' means. Filtered through the lens of human expectation, the

² Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Michigan: G. Bell & sons, 1893; digitised in 2009), <https://www.google.com.my/books/edition/The_Anatomy_of_Melancholy/E-PQAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0>.

strangeness of a dog may simply point to the parts of its existence that have been lost in translation. This is perhaps true of the experience of depression as well – *strangeness*, as taken to mean *unexpected*, rather than *unnatural* or *abnormal*.

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