

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 28, 2007

## Friday Poem

Filed under: poetry — alecsothblog @ 4:24 am



Last week while I was traveling my wife had to put down our sweet dog Charley. Charley wasn't named after the Steinbeck book, *Travels with Charley* (he came with that name from the Humane Society), but he was as worthy of adoration as Steinbeck's poodle.

Though Charley usually came to the studio with me, I never took him on the road. I probably wasn't as good of a companion as Steinbeck. One of Steinbeck's previous dogs, an Irish Setter named Toby, chewed up half of the only existing manuscript of *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck wrote to his agent, "The poor little fellow may have been acting critically."

I've spent a lot of time this last week looking for the perfect dead dog poem. Most of them are pretty terrible. (I've posted eight here). But this one by Gerald Stern feels about right:

## THE DOG

By Gerald Stern

What I was doing with my white teeth exposed  
like that on the side of the road I don't know,  
and I don't know why I lay beside the sewer  
so that the lover of dead things could come back  
with his pencil sharpened and his piece of white paper.  
I was there for a good two hours whistling  
dirges, shrieking a little, terrifying  
hearts with my whimpering cries before I died  
by pulling the one leg up and stiffening.  
There is a look we have with the hair of the chin  
curled in mid-air, there is a look with the belly  
stopped in the midst of its greed. The lover of dead things  
stoops to feel me, his hand is shaking. I know  
his mouth is open and his glasses are slipping.  
I think his pencil must be jerking and the terror  
of smell—and sight—is overtaking him;  
I know he has that terrified faraway look  
that death brings—he is contemplating. I want him  
to touch my forehead once again and rub my muzzle  
before he lifts me up and throws me into  
that little valley. I hope he doesn't use  
his shoe for fear of touching me; I know,  
or used to know, the grasses down there; I think  
I knew a hundred smells. I hope the dog's way  
doesn't overtake him, one quick push,  
barely that, and the mind freed, something else,  
some other, thing to take its place. Great heart,  
great human heart, keep loving me as you lift me,  
give me your tears, great loving stranger, remember,  
the death of dogs, forgive the yapping, forgive  
the shitting, let there be pity, give me your pity.  
How could there be enough? I have given  
my life for this, emotion has ruined me, oh lover,

I have exchanged my wildness—little tricks  
with the mouth and feet, with the tail, my tongue is a parrot's,  
I am a rampant horse, I am a lion,  
I wait for the cookie, I snap my teeth—  
as you have taught me, oh distant and brilliant and lonely.

## 16 Comments

1. Thanks, these poems unfortunately fit into my life right now.

*Comment by David — September 28, 2007 @ 7:36 am*

2. Alec, I'm so sorry to hear about Charley. I read somewhere that every dog story ends tragically—and yet even now, as my dog, Jack, nears that point when I'll have to make the trip to the vet's that Rachel did, I'm planning for a puppy. We sign up for it all over again, because there's so much good before the inevitable heartbreak.

Thanks for the poem.

*Comment by Liz — September 28, 2007 @ 9:04 am*

3. Dear A, R, C, A,

Sorry for your loss. Charley was a sweetheart!

*Comment by karolina — September 28, 2007 @ 9:05 am*

4. Charley was a dog, that even a cat person like me could not help but love. I am so sorry to hear about his passing. I'll always think fondly of walking him through the streets of your old neighborhood in the cold of a Minnesota winter. My condolences to you, Rachel, and the little ones. Take care.

*Comment by Justin — September 28, 2007 @ 10:32 am*

5. condolences on the loss of your dog. this reminded me of one of the more touching songs that I've heard about dog loyalty and death. it's from the anthology of american folk music (a must have). I couldn't find lyrics, but some of the lyrics are contained in this post. the song really needs to be heard for full emotional impact, it's quite moving.

*Comment by mark s — September 28, 2007 @ 11:31 am*

6. Sorry for your loss, Alec.  
Safe journey, Charley..

*Comment by Katia — September 28, 2007 @ 1:27 pm*

7. In hopes of turning tears to laughter, let me both extend my condolences to Alec and tell a little story of how my wife Heidi and I spent the wee early hours of this morning.

Our dog Coya has been sick the last couple of days and prone to sudden fits of diarrhea, we (Heidi) awoke around 4:30 am to her pacing around. Heidi decided to let her out back to do her thing rather than risk an explosion inside. I, half asleep, nodded off again, only to hear Heidi yelling at Coya. I thought it was just a case of Coya chasing a cat. Then when Heidi came back in I smelled it.

Coya had walked down our deck stairs to find a skunk sitting below. Of course being dog, she grabbed it in her mouth and started shaking. Of course being a skunk, the skunk sprayed her

stinky oil all over Coya. She immediately released the skunk and ran back up into the house. The skunk waddled off through the fence, alive to spray another day.

As Coya scampered about, she dripped skunk oil all over the floor. Heidi chased her down as I fumbled around for socks and shoes. We finally got her back outside, but I have never smelled anything so concentrated and potent before. Kind of a cross between burnt tires and garlic. We washed her, but the smell just stayed on. We googled "skunked dog" and found some solutions. I got on the scooter and raced up to the only store open that early to buy some hydrogen peroxide which, when mixed with baking soda, supposedly gets rid of the odiferous oil. Of course, I didn't buy enough hydrogen peroxide so off I buzzed again on the scooter for more.

Problem is that she got sprayed primarily on her face and around her eyes, exactly where you cannot use such a solution. The only thing that's recommended for the dog's face is... douche. So back I went on the scooter, racing to the drugstore which didn't open for another 10 minutes. Right when they opened I ran in looking for douche. Not finding any, I had to ask one of the employees where I could find douche. "What kinda douche?" she asked loudly. "I dunno, just douche!" I exclaimed. "You kinda smell like a skunk" the fine employee said as I was paying.

With douche in hand we hosed Coya and scrubbed her face off. The smell is still there, though not nearly as strong. Our neighbor said the odor can linger for up to a month. We have mopped the floors and lit incense throughout the house. All before 8 in the morning. Hopefully you can draw up a mental picture of this whole episode and have a laugh on us.

*Comment by Eirik — September 28, 2007 @ 2:41 pm*

8. any story involving a dog, a skunk, and douche... is guaranteed to be funny.

*Comment by mannydiller — September 28, 2007 @ 4:05 pm*

9. Hello Alec,

my god what a beautiful poem....I am not exactly what you'd call a dog person...though I have loved a couple of Aussies in my life ..as shepherds; when we walked they herded us to go where they wanted ..they passed a few years ago ....sisters they were....and I fell in love with them. nutting like the smile of a dog..eh?

thank you for this poem and the poems every friday.....

jf

*Comment by jack fischer — September 28, 2007 @ 5:07 pm*

10. Eirik's story made my day. Brings to mind the legendary Squirrel Cop. If you haven't heard that story, it will make your day.

*Comment by Alec Soth — September 28, 2007 @ 6:15 pm*

11. Tough to go wrong having a good dog around. I remember losing Beau, the last of our basset hounds. He was a good dog. Thanks for helping me remember him.

*Comment by Clint Weathers — September 28, 2007 @ 10:31 pm*

12. I have been though this many times. After my Bouvier died I found, "The Last Will and Testament of an Extremely Distinguished Dog" by Eugene O'Neil. I think it will help anyone facing the immanent death for the need to put down old and/or ill dog, or any other pet for that matter. The publisher is Heny Holt and Company, New York.

*Comment by David Dorn — September 29, 2007 @ 4:48 pm*

13. Thanks for the poem. We lost our eight-year-old standard poodle last January to heart disease, and it was much harder than I'd expected.

So sorry to hear about Charlie, though I hadn't heard of him before running across your blog. My thoughts go out to you.

(I ran across your blog via a mention in the Utata group on Flickr.)

*Comment by Jeff Roush — September 30, 2007 @ 1:10 am*

14. Heartfelt condolences to you and your family at the loss of Charley. In honor of his memory, a poem...

WHY DOGS STOPPED FLYING  
by Kenneth W. Brewer

Before humans,  
dogs flew everywhere.  
Their wings of silky fur  
wrapped hollow bones.  
Their tails wagged  
like rudders through wind,  
their stomachs bare  
to the sullen earth.

Out of sorrow  
for the first humans—  
stumbling, crawling,  
helpless and cold—  
dogs folded their  
great wings into paws  
soft enough to walk  
beside us forever.

They still weep for us,  
pity our small noses,  
our unfortunate eyes,  
our dull teeth.  
They lick our faces clean,  
keep us warm at night.  
Sometimes they remember flying  
and bite our ugly hands.

*Comment by Polonia — September 30, 2007 @ 4:10 pm*

15. So sorry to hear about your loss. Any loss of a family pet is very hard. I am and photographer who works at an Animal Hospital by day. No one, no matter what the circumstances, can ever prepare for the day when you have to say goodbye. I am truly sorry.

Oh, and by the way, the best thing to cover up skunk scent is vanilla. My wonderfully friendly fur kid Maisy, decided early one morning to make nice with a skunk that had gotten into our fenced yard. At first I thought it was a bunny she was chasing, all I could see was a furry tail. But as the chase stopped and Maisy started to back up, I could see that it was really Mr. Skunk. No amount of "Run Maisy Run" helped. You could hear the sound of the scent being sprayed right into her face. The worst place to get it.

Three vinegar baths later, the stink was still there. Then for about the next two months, anytime she got wet you could smell it. The first two weeks she had to sleep in her crate right next to a Glade vanilla plug in. Otherwise she had to stay outside.

Good luck to all that may experience similar situations.

*Comment by Octavia Sharp — September 30, 2007 @ 5:50 pm*

16. Alec

I feel your loss.

The unrequiting trust and love that we receive from our pet is undeniable. Putting your dog or cat "down" is one of the unforgiving things one can do.

Godspeed Charley!

jake

*Comment by jake — September 30, 2007 @ 9:40 pm*