

13 Questions

This piece was originally read as part of "Unleashed," a performance event organized by Holly Hughes at Dixon Place in New York.

ately, I've been interviewing dogs. One thing I've learned about dogs. They don't like to be interviewed.

I tried to frame my questions creatively. They were breed-specific, yet accommodating to mixed breeds. Sensitive, even. Yet, curiously enough, several of the dogs I spoke with gave the same answer to every one of my questions. Which I thought to be nuanced and well considered. Still, no matter what I asked, the response always came back: Squirrel.

Sometimes there was a different inflection. Eager: *Squirrel?* Or annoyed, even defiant: *Could you be more of a fool? Do I have to spell it out for you? Squirrel. End of discussion.*

I posed a series of questions which I began to fear might elicit nothing but "squirrel" as *idée fixe*. Still I pressed on.

What do you think about? Am I your world? Do you know more than you're saying? Why do you like humans?

Where did you learn to put your head on the bottom of the bed like that with your eyes like that? And the sigh?

What embarrasses you, other than the one who is your world but who has named you Fred or Gumdrop or Larry?

How come you will lick a Republican?

What smells so f***ing good everywhere? I'm not smelling it.

I know dogs don't talk. Please. I know that. But, they can tell you things. They have information. They can tell you things.

Our dog is a rescue. By that I mean we are rescued. She's our rescue. Our 15-year-old black Standard Poodle, Pepsee, had died a year earlier. Pizza came to and went from our apartment without incident. Or joy. We were getting far too comfortable not going out in the middle of the rain-soaked muddy ice storm of night. We were bereft of dog. But could we love another?

We named her Henree. Well, why shouldn't she have gender issues, too? She was two and a half. We adopted her in February. We were just going to take the drive and meet her and her foster mom in the parking lot of the Short Hills Mall. That's all. We'd just meet her.

In the first weeks, she ate an entire bag of Reese's peanut butter cups and a chocolate cake; recently, it was a box of truffles we brought back from Paris. Then there was the letter from our upstairs neighbor. Did we know that when we left her alone, Henree ran from room to room, barking and howling without cease? We bought a digital recorder and taped her. She ran from room to room and barked and howled without cease. We hired a trainer. She learned in a minute.

We got her to see that we might go, but we always come back. We got her to believe that this is where she's going to live for as long as she lives. And then she almost died.

Once we knew she would survive, I took the opportunity to interview the animals in the waiting room.

Do you know what death is?

Squirrel.

Come on!

There came then a kind of buzz, a hum, an instant and communal agreement, this grand energy of desire to tell me.

We don't know. We have no idea. We don't think about it. We don't want you to think about it.

I turned my attention to the old dogs in my building: Do you know what's happening to you? How can we make it better? When our aging Poodle entered her last years, there was this brief moment of surprise that registered in her eyes as she reckoned with each new loss. *I can't get up on the chair. What's that about? Okay. I'll just lie down at the foot of it. Then—I can't get up from the foot of the chair. Or: The humans are in the house. Last time I looked they were out. How did they get past me? So, this is how it is. All right. All right, then. Her sweet*

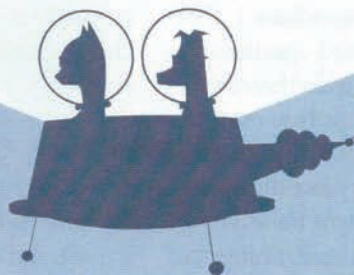
No matter how you frame the question, there's only one answer.

By Susan Miller



*Astra rolled her eyes. "I'm not hard to please
Cooper! It's very simple—spoil me, spoil me, spoil me."*

Cooper knew what he had to do.



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acceptance and reliance gave me a tenderness for old dogs, old people. Old me. For a while, I couldn't even look at a puppy.

But, back to the day we brought Henree home. She's a brown Standard, by the way. Thirty-three years ago I had a baby who died. When I was a young girl, I always had this feeling that I would adopt someone someday somehow. And so, a few months after we lost our baby, there came Jeremy, my son—adopted at two-and-a-half days old. And so it was Jeremy who called from LA first thing each day to see how Henree was when she almost died.

One of the questions I posed to Bess, a Terrier who prayed for Henree even though she would sooner bite her than share the Earth with her, was this: If she pulls through, will it change things between the two of you?

Bess was noncommittal.

In the parking lot of the Short Hills Mall—remarkable for its lack of detritus—my partner and I stood contemplating the papers we were about to sign giving us this darling, goofy, big-nosed brown-eyed gal who had jumped up to hug us like long lost soul mates but who still wasn't, after all, our old gal—our beloved Pepsee. We looked at the papers, at each other, and then we noticed something on the otherwise pristine, well-manicured, clean green grass. It was an empty can. An empty can of Pepsi.

The last question I put to the dogs was something I know a lot of you were probably hoping I would have the courage to ask: What do you really do when we're out of the house?

And you are not going to believe this! They just sleep.

So, I had to know. Why do you need so much sleep?


But, to dream, of course. To dream of—

Us?

I was laughed at.

Then what? To dream of what?

Oh, don't. Don't say it.

... Squirrel. 



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