

Yorick: Memento Mori

I have a terrible job. No. I take that back. Look at it this way: I have a job, and in this economy—well—you know. There are parts of my job that I really do like. I get to go to conferences and meet lots of people. I get a kick out of helping teachers. Imagine—the girl with the GED—explaining skeletal features to real teachers. Back at the office I enjoy the puzzle of reassembling a disarticulated skeleton. That’s pretty cool. So really, I can’t complain. Much. But there are days.

The day Blue came in was one of those days. Usually I don’t name the dogs. In fact I try hard not to think of them as dogs, or cats, or whatever comes to my boiling tanks. Maybe I should explain. I work for a company that makes skeletons and replicas for classrooms and museums. You know, that skelly named Jerry that hung in your 7th grade classroom, the one your teacher dressed up for holidays? He probably came from my company.

It’s not really my company, but we all think of it that way. That’s because the employees aren’t compartmentalized. Everyone is supposed to be able to do every job, aside from accounting and data entry. Each day is a little different. Some days you work with plastics, putting together a hundred human skeleton replicas like Jerry. On weekends you might go to a teacher convention, or museum opening. I enjoy that, hearing how our products—I try hard to think of them that way—as products, help out in a class. It helps a little.

But not the day Blue came in.

The past week I had bounced around between packing and shipping—doing that *Jane of all Trades* thing. I was bored, almost ready to be back at the boiling room. Almost. Our animals come to us already dead, the discards of human society, ‘shelter’ animals. I worked in rescue for a couple of years. Hated it. I know, some of the animals luck out; end up in a place that really cares, a place that fosters, and has a reasonable rate of adoption. The place I worked didn’t have the money or resources to keep up with the rate at which people threw away their pets. I guess it made sense for me to switch careers, to work at the final destination.

My boss told me our company is the ultimate in pet recycling. Martha, my best friend at work, tells me that ‘at least we’re using the animals, not letting them get buried in landfills.’

I don’t know if I buy that. I’ve learned a lot about how the pet industry works, at least on the ‘we-don’t-want-him-can’t-keep-him-you-take-him’ end of the spectrum.

Some of the shelters euthanize humanely. Others don’t. We get animals from all over, but you learn fast which states have the biggest problem, or the creepiest shelters. I won’t name names. Who knows, maybe I should. Martha said when she first started working in ‘*bone reclamation*’ the ‘used-dog problem’ was related to where the biggest greyhound tracks were. She told me how they would get hundreds of dead greyhounds in a week, all electrocuted. They put them in a concrete room with a wet floor. You can guess the rest.

We don’t see so many greyhounds anymore, now it’s bulldogs. American pit bull terriers, Amstaffs, Bullies, lots of names, all the same. Big headed, loveable monsters; some scarred like old cordwood. Others come in sleek and fat, a stark contrast to the ones

dripping with mange, every bone showing through their skin. Those sad babies hardly need to be boiled. We see our share of other breeds, and lots of cats, the occasional horse or exotic animal, but in the three years I've worked here, it's all about the pits.

Animals come in wrapped, others on pallets, or bags and boxes. That's why I try not to think about it. Resist the urge to give a soft cold head one last pat as I slide the body into the boiler.

But this dog. Oh! I saw him from across the room. He'd never been someone's pet. The scars told that much. Scars traced his story across my heart. I couldn't quit looking at him.

I set his body aside as I worked, looking at him from time to time. Dog in, bones out. Flushing the tank. I have a mantra to repeat on tough days. It helps me remember that the bones will be in a classroom. The dogs that had worn these skins weren't here in the room. They'd already stepped on that mythical rainbow that dog people talk about. I'd never understood that reference. Why a rainbow? And why stepping on it? Who thought that up?

Blue lay at my feet. If you didn't look too close he might've been asleep. His ears were brutal, cropped to bare nubs. Humans do that to puppies as young as six weeks old. I touched the scarred edge of one ear; the holes told me that the cropper had used fishing line to suture the wound. Had Blue gotten the opportunity to enjoy puppyhood? Had there ever been a moment in his life where someone had cuddled him? I looked up the state of origin, decided no. His mother had been chained to a kennel, out in the weather, her pups taken early. Only the strong survive. Survive until the day they lose a fight, or someone decides to beat them to death.

The scar on the right side of his face started at the ear nub, and ended at his nose. Curious, I peeled back a lip. His right canine was shattered, the central nerve exposed. There were deep puncture wounds on his legs and chest. Had he lost that last fight and been killed by his owner? The dog-inflicted wounds were painful but not deadly. Had his been a death by baseball bat? Kicking? Strangling? I imagined Blue looking up at his owner, uncomprehending, wagging his tail; forgiving the violence.

I had learned one thing about pits, and I couldn't decide if they were stupid or saintly. They could take human abuse and still keep giving. Hoping, wagging, wiggling. Waiting for that human piece of shit to act right. These gentle warriors had blown me away the years I worked in rescue. Having never known a kind hand, how they would come out of their kennel, dragging their tow chain, and roll right into your arms to cuddle.

I couldn't take it anymore. I put in another dog. The pile was getting smaller. Blue's turn was coming up. I didn't look at him, but as I stirred my cauldron, there he was in my mind's eye. That steel grey color dog people call blue? This dog had it in spades. We see a lot of blue dogs come through these days. It's some kind of fad. Before I took this job I didn't realize that dog colors could be faddish. I wondered if people called up breeders looking for specific colors, like buying a new coat, or a car.

His blocky head was decorated by what had once been a perfect white stripe and blaze. Even ruined by scars, old and new, his face had style. Three white socks, so even they could have been painted on, reached almost to his belly. The left front leg only had one white toe. I imagined a painter in the heavenly place puppies come from, working hard on making Blue perfect. Maybe the painter had run out of white that day, and had

pressed out the last of his paint on that one toe, leaving Blue with mismatched legs, a Dali dog.

I knew enough about the breed to be sure Blue had been handsome, more than that, the kind of dog you see in the show ring, winning prizes. He had that look, even dead on my cold floor. The look of a champion. Not that he'd ever had the chance.

It was getting late. All my other 'products' were in the final phase of stripping and sterilization. Tomorrow they would be sorted. The best would be reassembled as full demo skeletons. Others would be picked over. Dog skulls, for example, are a hot commodity. A single skull can sell for between fifty to one hundred dollars.

I can't explain it, but I was worried that Blue might be taken apart, bits of him discarded, parts sold separately. I delayed a bit, cleaning up, checking the vat for debris. Cleaning the traps. I was being crazy, and I knew it, but there it was. I knelt on the floor and gathered up that cold body, so not like the dog he must have been. It was difficult, but I made myself put him in the vat.

He sunk down without a sound. I'm not sure what I had been expecting. A sigh? A gentle woof? Silently, willing away tears, I stirred the cauldron. By the time I left that day, what was left of the dog I'd named Blue was organized into a plastic tote. I could barely look at him. The tag number the animals come in with follows them, a sort of toe tag to keep track of who knows what kind of data. I was about to slip the tag into the holder on the tote. On a whim I whipped out my sharpie, scratched out the number and added the name Blue.

I expected that to be the end of it. The next day I came in, found I was scheduled to work in the bone room. The room where Blue was. Great. He'd pranced through my

dreams all night. Now I had to face him again. Martha was working with me. That was the good news. The bad news was that someone had noticed I had messed with the tag. Martha told me that the data nerd had been all worked up, even though you could still see the number.

“I told him to stuff it,” she laughed, but her eyes were sad, searching my face. Her expression told me she understood. We didn’t discuss it until his box came up. Martha was respectful, handling each bone with care. The number and size of the fractures was unlike anything I’d ever seen. Ribs, that blue foreleg, even his pelvis. The dog had been beaten. Not once, not twice, but so many times that I lost count. Not my co-worker. Martha has a degree in forensic pathology. Worked as an M.E. somewhere in Chicago. She doesn’t like to talk about it.

Martha took her time, pulled out her lights and scope, showed me the remodeling in his bones, how to date the damage done. He had one tiny healed fracture at his eye orbit, along the line of that vicious scar. She traced the injury to his tooth. The sight of that gentle finger along his skull tore me apart.

I never cry in the bone room. Sometimes in the boiling or receiving area, never in here. I sat on a chair and held his skull while Martha finished up. She didn’t say anything; just let me cry it out. When I got up and pulled myself together Blue was in two totes. I knew it; he was going to be sold for parts like a junkyard car. Fitting end for the classic junkyard dog.

Martha had put the busted bones in the box destined for the bone meal plant. The remodeled bones were saleable. A lot to be learned from looking at those injuries, what

caused them, how long ago, how the injuries piled up on one another. Blue would have a chance to teach the next generation of forensic folks. I liked that idea.

Martha ignored that I was still clutching Blue's skull until the last minute and then she held out her hands. I almost asked her to let me take it. We were throwing out enough of his skeleton; no one would miss the skull. But that was weird, right? So I handed it to her, watched her place it in the isolated skull tote. Martha gave him a little pat and closed the lid.

We finished up in the bone room and went for a quick lunch. The rest of the day passed quickly. I tried to keep my attention away from the box of skulls, but it was like trying not to think about pink elephants.

I worried about Blue for days, was he lonely? Wondering if he was making friends with the other isolated skulls. They say all dogs go to heaven, but these are the same people who say dogs step on rainbows, so I'm not so sure.

Martha has approximately 100 dogs—no— it's more like ten, but since they're all rescues, and mostly mastiff types and pits, it feels like 100 when you visit her house. I asked her about dogs and heaven. If she thought my question a little odd she didn't say. Instead, in her usual thoughtful way she told me that she had always believed that dog souls hang around, waiting to get into the next available puppy. If they can score a puppy that will belong to their last master, they hop on board. I asked her if she thought that applied to fighting dogs too, worried that Blue would end up right back where he started. She looked so serious that I wondered if I'd finally tripped her crazy meter.

“No. Maybe.” She said. “But I think if Blue’s bones end up in a good place, maybe his soul will follow along and climb into a puppy that belongs to someone better than the monster that beat him to death.”

I loved the way she called him by name. She’d picked the name up the first day, after reading the tag and yelling at the data nerd. I looked at her now, someone who had given up a serious and successful career to work at a small private company that boils dogs. She tapped the isolated skull box.

“We have a waiting list for remodeled fractures. Blue’s bits will end up all over the country. He’ll just have to visit each location. But maybe you could help him along.” She rifled through the paperwork on the desk. “There’s a science teachers’ convention in Boston this weekend. I’m going. Want to come along? It’s a big one, I’m sure I’ll need the help.”

I wasn’t totally sure why this would help Blue, but I’m always game for a convention, and Boston’s a cool city so I said yes. It meant extra work, but also extra money. Since I do plan on getting into college one of these days, money is always good. It wasn’t until we were packing the van Thursday evening that I realized Blue’s skull was coming along. Martha had taken him out of the isolated skull box and plunked him on the dashboard of the company van. We didn’t speak about it, but it was understood that Blue had been the kind of dog who would’ve loved to ride in a car. If a human instead of a slug had owned him, Blue would have hung his head out windows, tongue flapping and drool racing down the glass.

“I’ve been giving the Blue situation some thought.” Martha began, inclining her head to indicate the dog on the dashboard. “Have you ever been to any of the Northeast teacher conferences?”

“Not really. The furthest east I’ve been was my first one, in Kansas City.”

“That’s right, didn’t you come with me?”

We go to a lot of conferences, after a while they start to blur together. I thought about it and figured she had it right. Kansas City: in the old convention center. The security guard had told me all kinds of stories about how the mob had moved out of New York and Boston and right into KC. How all the buildings downtown were connected by tunnels. That there were dozens of bodies buried in the tunnels, behind the walls, even in the basements.

The hotel we’d stayed in had issues with the body problem during renovations in the 1980’s. Back in her old life, Martha had been the consulting forensic anthropologist on the case. I was so busy thinking about the past that I totally missed what Martha was saying. All I caught was something about how ‘I’d met her too.’

“Met who too?”

Martha didn’t skip a beat. “The woman with the dog, the teacher.”

I tried to round up my thoughts. Martha took pity on me.

“You must remember her. We talked for ages, stayed in the same hotel, the one with the bodies in the basement?”

I was going to say something about the bodies, and it hit me. The science teacher! A woman who had a service dog. A pit bull service dog. A dog named Martha. A bizarre coincidence. Martha the dog, a serious lady with a white marking on her face that looked

as if it had slipped off the side of her head. Martha the forensic scientist, equally serious, her black hair going grey in only one spot, like a chevron on a fin whale, or as she put it, a ‘fashion challenged skunk.’ The teacher, who had looked ill and pale, leaning on her dog. And me: the trainee and would be boiler of dogs.

My Martha was right, we *had* talked for ages. The woman was interesting. Taught 8th grade, loved it. She’d bought an orca tooth and a baculum, the weird bone that racoons have in their penis. Said it would make an amusing coffee stirrer. I hadn’t seen her again, but Martha assured me that this woman was from the Boston area, would be at the conference. And here was the clincher. She occasionally bred her dogs. Martha and I had talked about that after the Kansas City conference. I was new to our business, fresh from doing rescue, hating on all breeders. Martha pointed out that there was a place for responsible breeders, that people wanted good dogs, and this woman wanted an unbroken line of service dogs that were born into her care.

“Remember what she said?” Martha asked. “How hard it is to get people to accept a pit bull service dog? That her history was her best insurance.”

I hadn’t been convinced. Still wasn’t. Not 100 percent. But Martha was right, she usually was. Even if all the legit breeders quit breeding dogs it wouldn’t solve the problem. Not when owners treat their dogs like an appliance. Lets see: we’re moving in together, let’s get a stove, a fridge and a puppy. The puppy mills have a ready-made market. Hard to say who’s really to blame.

I searched my memory banks for what the woman had told us about her dogs. She had shown us pictures, twenty some years breeding American Pit Bull Terriers. She had called them bulldogs, said it was a Boston thing. Her dog, Martha, had sat patiently, black

and white tuxedo bright against the green carpet. Every so often the dog would look the woman up and down. At some point a silent signal passed between them.

“Martha says it’s time for me to go back to the hotel and get some rest,” she’d said, shaking our hands and disappearing into the crowd.

I’d been a little confused until I realized she’d been talking about the dog. It had been my first experience with a service dog. I’ve met a few more since then and continue to be amazed at the relationship. Whatever the need, the dog will fill the gap. I saw the perfection of my Martha’s plan.

We didn’t see the woman until Sunday, the last day of the convention. We’d kept Blue on display, a *not for sale* sign where his soft muzzle should have been. I was glad Martha was there. I never would’ve had the balls to not sell a product. Not that there was anyone to see us, but it felt a little like cheating.

We had scored the booth near the Lego guys. It’s a good spot because Lego gets lots of traffic, and we were the next most prominent display. Our tables have thick black damask coverings. The bones stand out in stark contrast. We’d sold enough to be satisfied, but there was still Blue, staring out across at the Lego people. At least two people had asked to buy his skull. Martha had produced other skulls from the isolated skull box, pointing out Blue’s flaws, the shattered canine, the fractured orbit. She made light of it. “He’s our display model.” No one had asked how the skull had been damaged. If the teacher didn’t come, I had decided Blue would come home with me. I knew now that Martha wouldn’t object. After all, here we were, hours from home, trying to find him the right home.

It was late afternoon when Martha touched my shoulder and pointed. The crowds get fierce towards closing, everyone hoping to score that last deal from a vendor who'd rather not put all his stuff back into the truck. At first I wasn't sure what Martha was pointing at. Then I saw the dog. Just a tail at first. Not the same dog, this one had a long brown tail. The crowd shifted and I saw her, all red-brown with black trim. A little girl dog. Martha the dog had been tall and elegant, a woman of a dog. Could it be the same human partner? I glanced at Martha, found her smiling. She's taller than me, so maybe she could see. The dog was watching a remote controlled Lego robot run through its tricks. Her concentration was complete, every nerve tied to the movements of the machine. Then I saw the dog glance up, and even without being able to see the woman, I knew it was the same person. That measuring glance from the dog, pale fingertips brushing the top of a velvet head. And then they were coming our way.

"Don't say anything," Martha suggested. "Lets let The Fates decide."

I wasn't sure what fate had to do with my dog being used to fight and then beaten to death; boiled and chopped up like an old car, but in three years I've learned one thing. Trust Martha. So I waited. My palms were sweating. I turned the situation over in my head. When had Blue become 'my dog?' When I saw him with his imperfect paint job? When I slipped him into the cauldron? Or was it listening to Martha detail his injuries, old and new. I wasn't sure, but here I was, thinking of that skull as if it were a real dog. A dog I was about to try and give to a perfect stranger, for the sole reason that I liked the way her dogs looked at her.

The woman arrived at the table and she and Martha struck up a conversation as if mere hours had passed since their last meeting. This was someone who was comfortable

with absence, with the odd companionship that strikes up between long-time vendors and clients. She even remembered me! I was worried to ask about Martha, what if something awful had happened? The teacher somehow sensed our question, explaining that Martha was semi-retired. She still went to the classroom, but the new dog was taking over the bigger, more stressful outings.

The new dog was Princess, half sister to Martha-the-dog. The teacher released Princess to come under the table and visit. She gently took a dog biscuit from me and accepted a little water. This dog was a plush toy, plump and soft, all over that pit bull build. Solid muscle cleverly disguised by cute. She had silly stand-up ears, but could origami them into neat folds. Pit bulls say so much with their ears; it's a wonder that people choose to cut them off. Even good owners, people who love their dogs still crop ears. Maybe they don't realize what they're missing.

I alternated between patting Princess and watching the teacher work the table. She picked up multiple items, handling the real skulls with a delicate hand. Not everyone can tell the difference between our museum quality replicas and the genuine article. Her eyes had rested upon Blue's skull, I saw them widen with emotion. Instead of reaching for him immediately, she worked her way around the table. The way I'd approach a new dog, with respect.

When she picked up the skull she did something I didn't expect. She held it out for Princess to sniff. I was about to ask why, but Martha nudged me into silence. I followed Martha's eyes, and found the teacher fighting tears.

"He's not for sale?" She asked, voice soft.

“We have these others,” Martha pulled out the skull tote, showed a few to the woman. She, in turn, showed each to Princess. Martha’s face was arranged in this strange half smile. I stood quietly, watching, learning. The woman had placed Blue’s skull in front of her on the table. Her hand returned to his broad forehead each time she handed a skull back to Martha.

“I see nothing’s changed,” she remarked, trying for casual. Anger tightened the angles of her face. “Still mostly pit bulls?” Lifting Blue’s skull, she peered into the empty eye sockets. “This young man had a hell of a life.” A finger across Blue’s broken canine. “He couldn’t have been more than two years old. What happened to the rest of him?”

I caught a sudden vision that she too wanted Blue intact, all his pieces together, and felt a pang of something deep and painful. For a moment I looked away, reaching for calm. What was it about this dog, this skull; that had burrowed under my skin?

Martha was explaining about the fractures, the remodeling, and the destroyed ribs that had ended Blue’s life. She never called him by that name, yet implied that this dog was unique, not just another isolated skull. I thought about that, and what it might mean to this woman and her service dog. What was it like, to be a breeder, to know that any puppy that leaves your home might change hands and end up in the hands of a monster? I wondered if it had happened to her. Watching her lips tighten with the description of Blue’s short, violent life, I decided it had.

“I’ll take him.” Just like that. She didn’t question the ‘*not for sale*’ sign. Somehow she and Martha had exchanged information that I’d missed. In the edges of their conversation had been a communion of like minds. This was a dog who needed a

home, the home he had been denied. If there was a soul attached to that skull, it was coming home with her, to a home full of past present and future dogs.

She insisted on paying for him.

“Don’t give me the ‘we don’t want to pack him up and carry him out to the van speech.’ I know you don’t do last minute deals. Besides, if I buy him, he’ll know I’m serious about providing a happy home.”

As I packed Blue into a box, adding extra packing and lingering over the bag, I wondered out loud if the teacher would use him in the class room.

“I won’t leave him there alone, don’t worry. He’ll live with us.” She touched Princess again. “But he’ll do some teaching. The students will be fascinated. He has a lot to say. Cruelty. The canine capacity for devotion. How we recover from abuse compared to the way dogs recover. Structural conversations, the foramen magnum, the remarkably spiny inner surface of the skull, how much he looks like one of my dogs, oh yes...he’ll have a lot to say.” Her voice held the promise of a smile.

There were tears again. All around this time. None of use seemed to know what to do, what to say. I realized I was still holding the bag.

“What will you call him? I’ve been calling him Blue, that’s what he was, you know, a blue dog, with a white blaze and collar, three white legs and the cutest little white toe on his left front paw...” I took a shaky breath.

“I’ll take good care of him.” She looked thoughtful. “We do a big Shakespeare unit at my school, perhaps we’ll call him Yorick.”

“Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times...” Martha quipped, winning a smile from the teacher.

“Nice to hear someone who actually knows the man, you’d be surprised how often I argue with someone about that quote. Yes, I think Yorick it shall be. If that’s alright with you?” She glanced at me, seeking approval. I nodded, pleased to be consulted. The bag was growing heavy in my hand, as if the entire dog were filling its confines.

“We’re so glad you came,” Martha nudged me. “We were hoping...”

It was time. Another significant look from Martha. I handed the teacher the bag. Felt the weight as Blue’s soul slipped from my fingers to her hand. Blue. Yorick. Getting another chance at life. “Please give him the home he deserved.”

The teacher nodded. Princess nosed the bag and she smiled down at her dog. “We’ll look for him in one of our future litters, won’t we dear.”

I swear Princess nodded.

There was nothing left to say. I watched the little brown dog lead her charge from the convention center, saw them mount the escalators in the front of the hall.

“He’s all good now kiddo.” Martha touched my shoulder. “Let’s get packing. It’s a long ride home.”