

THE QUARRY

NOTICING

Alison Hatzantonis

Spring

Have you noticed? Did you smell it? The wattle is out. That unmistakeable scent is in the air, but just a whiff as it is only beginning to flower, the perfume not yet overpowering. Did you notice the tickle in your nose, the slightest sniff? It's starting, hayfever season. Did you hear the whipbirds? They were out in force this morning. That elusive, incongruous little green-black bird with the punk haircut and the dominating voice. The male and female were having a cracking duet high up in the blue gums. Did you feel the condensation on your hair from the cool spring morning, turning it frizzy and making you shiver? But mostly did you notice the dogs? Don't you think they resemble their owners? Or maybe it's the other way around, do the owners look like their dogs? I think they subconsciously must want to.

Did you catch the chocolate Labrador going past, so fat that he sometimes rolls down the path when he trips over his own feet? His owner is somewhat portly, to say the least, puffing after him. And the running dogs. Did you see the greyhound today? Did you see

yesterday the whippet and the other day, the red Kelpie? They all join their lean, fit owners on their daily run, pacing studiously at their owners' heels, keeping up, urging them on, like a canine personal trainer.

Did you see the staffy, following his nuggety bloke around the park, both of them with no neck? And the power walking lady, her black curly hair pulled back and up in a high ponytail, which bobs up and down as she walks. Her two black poodles prance behind her with their tails bobbing along with hers, in unison. Their resemblance to each other is uncanny. I once asked her, as nonchalantly as possible, if she noticed the similarity. She laughed incredulously and looked at me as if I was strange.

'No of course not. I rather hope I don't resemble a dog actually,' she flounced. I found her incognisance puzzling. What was going on here?

And I notice the naughty dogs. Like schoolboys hiding behind the gym from the teacher. Unwatched by their self-absorbed owners who are always on their phones, they get up to all the mischief they can before getting caught. Hole digging, ball stealing and general destruction. These dogs can put the Australian cricket team to shame with their ball tampering skills. They are the masters of feigning innocence when caught, and swap looks of irreproachability with their owners when challenged.

Did you see the old man leaning on his cane as he slowly hobbles along? His seventeen year old schnauzer waddling behind, their arthritic hips clicking as they go. They are both deaf and oblivious to the bikes and scooters whizzing past them, saved from injury by children with quick reflexes. Sometimes they get separated, stopping in their tracks and peering myopically around for each other. I suppose the best part about having a dog is growing old together. These two definitely look alike, with their grizzled old muzzles covered in grey.

Do you notice the lanky young guy with the endless legs? They match his Irish wolfhound's legs, the two of them tall, thin and a bit awkward, taking great strides around the park. They lean over other dogs, peering down at them with interest. And did you see the new guy, he seems very shy, standing away by himself? He is not sure of the park protocol, watching tentatively. His young, white German Shepherd cross behaves strangely too, making tentative approaches for play but unsure how far to go. His body language disturbs the other dogs who chase him away. He is like the new kid at school, unsure of where his place is.

Or the pretty lady with the Pomeranian who drives to the park, then sits on a bench. Did you see where her dog sits? On the bench next to her, the two of them happy with their daily exertion. Both satisfied that being there is enough. She hides her face behind a wall of hair and occupies her time by flipping through apps on her phone.

Have you come across the aggressive owners? Like the frustrated, angry man fighting to hold his leashed, snarling greyhounds, swearing at me to move aside on the path.

‘Get out of the way, you stupid bitch.’ His angst at the world on show for all to see, with his dogs channelling it like canine mediums. And the bald man with the bullet-headed bulldog, who both just growl at everyone?

I had an interesting altercation with the bald man once. His bullet bulldog I’ve discovered is a sniffer, insistent on sniffing other dogs beyond the point of decency. Bullet head sniffed me and my dog continuously until we both were annoyed. The bald man looked away.

I’ve noticed all these people. Upon some further research, I found that apparently there is a psychological mechanism which explains why a person might choose a dog that looks similar to themselves. It is simply familiarity, especially around the eyes. Apparently looking into similar eyes to your own invokes a feeling of the familiar, which is comforting. This makes research rings true as did you notice me, with my curly brown hair and brown eyes. My labradoodle is like me with his brown eyes and curly fur. We also share characteristics of indifference and aloofness, turning away from friendly overtures and pretending to be busy with our game to avoid conversations. He is very observant of my interactions with other people, knowing who my friends are, the ones I am willing to share a few words with. And he knows when it is time to leave. So maybe he notices too?

Summer

The morning air is losing its crispness. Gone is that delicious coolness and the warm air is lingering all night now and into the mornings. Summer is stampeding towards us and the dogs are panting more and running less. Did you see this morning that someone has put up a sign on the dog bag dispenser?

‘Lost staffy. Last seen at the park.’ His owner, the nuggety bloke is standing nearby looking forlorn. The black curly haired pony tailed lady is cheering him up, talking about

microchips and friendly neighbourhoods. They walk off together to look for the staffy, the poodles scampering behind.

And after that, the small crowd had gathered to discuss the lost dog, everyone eagerly offering advice on where he could be and what they could do to help. The fat lab's owner promises to put something on Facebook and everyone agrees to update the post if they hear anything. I noticed then the old man on the edge of the crowd, his schnauzer is playing with the white German shepherd, the younger dog gently nuzzling the older dog. The old man seems delighted and animatedly chats to the shy young man who is smiling now. They are discussing their dogs and swapping training techniques. I overhear the old man saying the best part about having a dog is growing old together and feel smug that I had noticed this already. He then said he has trained his old canine companion to smell when his toast is cooked and let him know.

I saw later in the day, the word 'found' had been scrawled across the lost dog poster. The portly labrador owner saw me looking at the poster and yelled out 'good news isn't it.'

He took great pleasure in taking credit for his Facebook post which had received a message from a lady three streets north of the park. She had returned home to notice the staffy hiding, shivering and scared, under her front porch. She thinks he might have been chasing her cat under the house but got stuck, thanks to his 'roundness.' We both chuckle over this mental image.

'See ya round' he says. And then I saw them, the nuggety man and the poodle lady, they were power walking together. The staffy was half running, half skipping behind them, valiantly trying to keep up with the poodles who would routinely stop and look around for him. They all seemed to be enjoying their liaison.

Autumn

I felt the air change today. Did you feel the nip? I've noticed more long sleeves being worn in the park now. The heat of the past month is abating and everyone strides around the park a little faster now. The dogs don't need coaxing anymore to chase one last ball.

I see the power walking couple with their poodles and staffy every day now. The bloke seems to have a neck now, his handsome chin emerging thanks to the exercise. All three dogs

trotting in time behind their people. And I watched the pretty Pomeranian lady, she is walking now too, no longer confined to her bench. Her dog wanders along behind her and was bailed up by the Irish wolfhound. I could see he wasn't doing any harm but noticed the grimace of distaste on her face. I think the lanky guy noticed too as he hurried over to drag his boy away. Surprisingly she relented and asked him, 'is your dog a rescue?' in that pitying tone often used to explain away bad behaviour. I heard him laugh.

'Yes, but that doesn't have anything to do with his issues. He just thinks he is fearfully attractive,' he said. Before he could say anything else, she jumped in with, 'he probably just needs to meet more dogs,' a trifle flirtatiously I noticed.

Winter

All the dog jumpers are out now. No, not pole vaulting or hurdles, but the little knitted jackets, pullovers and vests that everyone puts on their dogs when the wind gets bitter. They walk around stiffly, the larger dogs with grievous looks on their faces, the smaller ones humiliated by the dashing home-knitted attempts they are forced to wear. This attitude of clothing animals mystifies me and I often wonder if owners forget that their dogs already have a coat on. I look at my dog, happily sniffing and weeing all over the place with not a thought about being cold and laugh silently.

I saw the old man today. It was the first time in a long time. He looked happy to be out and about. He was being pushed in a wheelchair, his schnauzer sitting on his lap looking frail. Pushing him was the shy young man, his white German shepherd having a great time barking and trying to bite the wheels of the wheelchair. They both smiled a cheery good morning to me as I passed.

Spring

I heard my first whipbird today and the wattle is back. It seems to bloom earlier and earlier.

The bullet-headed bulldog knows me now and charges over for a sniff. His owner doesn't growl at me or my dog anymore and even stands nearer while the dogs circle us. He seems close to striking up conversation.

Did you see the notice for the Christmas party? It is to be held at the park, BYO drinks and dogs. It seems to have gone up very early this year. A few owners cluster around the poster, discussing details. The fat lab owner is there, and the Irish wolfhound and Pomeranian owners, talking and laughing together. The party sounds like fun. Maybe I'll raise my theory of dogs resembling their owners and see whether anyone else has noticed.

I'll definitely be there.