

Ocean State Review
2016 Vol. 6 No. 1

JEN HIRT Pit Bull Economics

A few years ago, I realized I wanted to rescue dogs, but with my house in the city I had room for only one dog, my Labrador. So I became a volunteer dog walker at the Humane Society. At orientation, our trainer started with urgent reality of shelter life: "Most of the dogs you will walk will be pit bulls." Then: "Some of these dogs will be euthanized. There is a big dog fighting problem in this city." We all glanced out the window at the distant skyline shadowing back alleys and basements where, sometimes, dogs were fought. I wasn't sure I was ready, but if the pit bull was the dog that needed rescuing, that was dog I would help.

Years ago, I'd seen two police officers trailing an emaciated and injured pit bull as it trotted through my midtown neighborhood. One officer had her gun drawn and the long metal catchpole extended; another tossed bits of a sandwich. That morning was foggy, and I watched the trio disappear into the grayness. Later that day, my dog and I came across the Unitarian minister and his perfectly trained pit bull. Our dogs played like friends. His pit bull was one of the best dogs I'd ever seen – quick to obey, full of the right energy, quiet, pretty with a thick white strip down her attentive face.

I thought about those polar opposite pit bulls as the orientation dragged on. I had already answered a multiple-choice question indicating my feelings about putting down unwanted and dangerous dogs. I had chosen the option that said, "I understand it has to happen some times," which was true, it was what I felt, but I also knew it was the answer to circle if I wanted to volunteer. I had not told anyone that I was a writer, a professor, someone obsessed with the ways we say what

we don't want to say. The real answer was that I didn't want to give an answer.

There were six new volunteers at orientation. Half of us were named Jen. The staff member running the meeting chuckled over this and handed out a brochure featuring the sun shining on happy adopters with happy dogs – two fluffy white pups, a Chihuahua, a husky, and a chocolate Labrador.

There were no photos of pit bulls.

Question #7 under FAQs: Why does the Humane Society have so many pit bulls?

Three months later, I'm walking a homeless whipper in the big field next to the shelter. At one end are two exercise pens. As my whipper sniffs and thinks about peeing, I turn to see who is in the pens – a rottweiler, a pit bull, and two volunteers. I don't normally watch the other dogwalkers and their charges, because I have to pay attention to my own dog, but today something compels me to turn.

The rottweiler is leaving his pen, his volunteer behind him taking up the slight slack in his leash. I see the rottie drop his head in what might be a growl directed at the pit bull. The pens are close – just two feet between them, so these little moments of bad behavior aren't unusual. But then I see the pit bull lunge and hit the gate which does what it isn't ever suppose to do – it swings open into the space between before and after.

It's a dog fight, the first I've ever seen. It's a blur of brindle pit bull and black rottie, violent as colliding typhoons. They waste no time getting each other by the neck. The bigger rottie shakes the pit bull like a sack. The savvy pit bull uses the split-second after the shake to twist loose and dive for the rottie's belly. Into each other they rage. It's mad. I pull my whipper close to my side, even though we are pretty far away. I have one of those irrational thoughts that sound brilliant in an emergency: I will tie the whipper to a tree so I can run over there and help

pull two powerful dogs apart, as if I know how to do that. But I can barely move. *How has the pit bull's gate swung open like that? Gates can't fail!*

The other dogwalkers jump toward their respective dogs – the older man who had been tending the rottie and the older woman who had been in the pen with the pit bull. But the fight is a static roar of all that is wrong and also purely, rightly animal. Suddenly the older man is caught in their legs, like a child yanked into a thresher, and the woman can only yell his name and flail her arms.

I know I have to run for help because I'm the only other person outside. The whipper is ready for this, even though he's just been neutered and is not supposed to engage in anything other than a potry break. No better breed for a sprint, and what awful luck, because we have to dash across the field and down the long empty hallway before we find a staff member who drops her clipboard and is out the door ahead of us. I have the oddest sense of pride that the whipper and I are perfect together. We will run to rescue everything, like latter-day Lassies.

The young James Thurber owned an American bull terrier named Rex – probably not quite the pit bull that comes to mind today, but close, as Thurber made a point to clarify that Rex was not one of those English bull terriers. What we know of Rex is his loyal companionship with James and his brothers, as well as his legendary fighting. In "Snapshot of a Dog," published in 1935 (a long 25 years after Rex's death), Thurber writes that Rex "was a tremendous fighter, but he never started fights. I don't believe he liked to get in to them."

If Thurber can admit that his dog was a fantastic fighter, now might be a good time to admit that I don't particularly like

pit bulls, which may have been why I was walking the whipper on the day of the fight. I've thought long and hard about what I don't like, and it's so petty it is almost shameful to admit. I don't like their eyes. Too small. Too hard.

My dislike is not just for pit bulls. I don't like small fluffy dogs who have hair instead of fur. I don't like dogs without tails. I don't like Chihuahuas. I like retrievers and shepherds and quiet giant breeds, maybe because of the phrases so easily associated with them – gentle giant is what we call these dogs.

Back at the scene of the fight, the dogs are separated. The rottie is flat on the ground with the entire staff around him. The pit bull is still standing, held back by one vet and one volunteer. I realize who the pit bull is, and I do that thing where I cover my mouth and turn away – only later admitting it was to stop myself from crying out. The pit bull is Bo, my favorite if I have a favorite homeless untrained pit bull. I had walked him several times, and he'd always been a gentleman and an avid tail-wagger, happy to go wherever. And he had big eyes. He had been changing my mind about the demeanor of untrained pit bulls – they could be friendly and gentle. Bo was proof. I could see it in those eyes.

The rottweiler is gasping. A staff member says, "get him into an isolated kennel." If anyone says anything about Bo's next destination, I don't hear it.

I have no obligation now but to walk the whipper back inside where a young woman, her face pale, is removing Bo's paperwork from the plastic sleeve on kennel D6. She leaves his red fleece blanket with white snowflakes – a remnant from his December intake date. All the dogs are oddly silent, and a piano sonata plays over the sound system. I realize I'm shaking. I wander the hallway, against the flow of everyone heading to the examination rooms. Volunteers aren't allowed there. I need

to say words to someone, to snap myself out of wherever I've gone, but I don't want to be a bother with questions. I find the older man who went under the dogs and miraculously, he's fine, leashing up another dog for a walk, like he does all day every day. Is it really back to the routine? He tells me he pulled so hard on the rottie's leash that the big dog passed out, which I later learn is one way to stop a dogfight - restrict the dog's ability to breathe so it has to let go to gasp. "I hope they don't put down Bo," he says. "He broke through that gate, but it's the gate's fault." What a strange thing to say. Maybe it's what we have to tell ourselves. Maybe this is the language of rescue.

I have to leave because I can't stop my arms from shaking. I come across another staff member in the parking lot. He's walking a tall female Doberman who is slim as a nightmare. He tells me that not only is Bo's cheek torn, but one of his teeth is loose, won't stop bleeding. I'm already assuming the rottie will be spared, so I ask him if Bo will be euthanized. "Not necessarily," he says, without much conviction. "Bo needs three votes against him, two from staff, one from an administrator. They won't vote right away." I immediately think of the language of reality shows. Maybe this is the language of rescue. Or is this the anti-language?

I think a lot about the phrase "pit bull." Sometimes I think we need to rescue them from a name gone bad.

"Pit bull" suggests where it fights and what it fights like. The first documented use of the phrase in print, from the February 28, 1927 edition of a boxing publication called *Ring Magazine*, still frames many perceptions today: "It's the slender pit bull that is chock fighting-full." In 1936, the *London Times* posited the dog like this: "Another difficulty in America is what is known as the Yankee Terrier or Pit-Bull." Just another *difficulty* over there in *America*. The phrase "pit bull" is used too as an adjective, and for that we can thank President Ronald Reagan,

whom the Oxford English Dictionary cites as the first person to chain this dog to metaphor. He was speaking at the yearly meeting of the National Alliance for Business on September 14, 1987. When he reached the point in his remarks about the usual Republican strategy of lowering tax rates for investors and businesses, he cautioned that the Democrats would challenge Reaganomics with their own strategy. Reagan (or, more likely, his speechwriter, Peggy Noonan) had a new phrase for what the Democrats would enact: "On the other side, you'll find, if I may coin a phrase, 'pit bull economics.' It may look harmless, but let it loose and it'll tear America's future apart with higher taxes, new and costly programs, and protectionist trade policies. It's dangerous."

Reagan went on to tell a racist pit bull joke involving two neighbors:

One neighbor knocked on his neighbor's door. "Do you own a black pit bull?"

The fellow said, "Yes."

"Well," he said, "I have to tell you it's dead."

"What do you mean it's dead? What happened?"

"My Pekinese killed it."

"Your Pekinese killed it? How?"

"It got stuck in his throat."

Reagan's pit bull is black and it chokes on its attempt to eat a purebred. And although the dogs in effect killed each other, the joke is phrased so that the purebred kills the pit bull.

Twenty-one years later, Sarah Palin told a pit bull joke at the Republican National Convention: "What's the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull? Lipstick."

This is not the language of rescue; it's the broken language of political fighting that wants to invoke a fighting breed. I think it is one of the worst things to happen to these dogs. The allusions swing from nation-tearing Democrats to family-first

female Republicans, and the only reality is that pit bulls are the most euthanized dog in America, with the estimate as high as 3,000 every day. It's a number I have to keep rechecking because it doesn't seem like it could be accurate. But it is. It also doesn't seem possible that Reagan vilified Democrats as pit bulls while just one generation later Palin championed Republicans as pit bulls. In a nation that loves to forget its history, maybe I should not be surprised. We have, after all, forgotten why dogs like pit bulls were ever valuable in the first place.

Tom Junod, writing in *Esquire* in the summer of 2014 with his outstanding article "The State of the American Dog," told the story of his pit bull, Dexter, who had been attacked by one dog and who had also attacked one other dog. Junod wrote:

Reviled, pit bulls have become representative. There is no other dog that figures as often in the national narrative—no other dog as vilified on the evening news, no other dog as defended on television programs, no other dog as mythologized by both its enemies and its advocates, no other dog as discriminated against, no other dog as wantonly bred, no other dog as frequently abused, no other dog as promiscuously abandoned, no other dog as likely to end up in an animal shelter, no other dog as likely to be rescued, no other dog as likely to be killed. In a way, the pit bull has become the only American dog, because it is the only American dog that has become an American metaphor—and the *only* American dog that people bother to name. When a cocker spaniel bites, it does so as a member of its species; it is never anything but a dog. When a pit bull bites, it does so as a member of its breed. A pit bull is never anything but a pit bull.

It's a statement that brings me back to the stigma of a name. Changing a breed name is not unheard of. Take rottweilers,

for example. Rottweilers were known by their German name for many years – meuzgerhund – which means butcher's dog or butcher hound, because they were strong enough to haul carts of meat for the butcher. Imagine if that was what they were called in shelters today. Imagine if a Rottweiler's info sheet on his kennel read "butcher hound mix" and a pit bull's read "American Staffordshire terrier mix."

Imagine if Reagan had gone with rottweiler economics instead of pit bull economics.

Imagine if we stopped using dogs to make a political point.

James Thurber's pit bull, who once engaged in such an epic battle with another dog that the fire department had to turn their hoses on him, died at the hands of a human. Thurber wrote that Rex had "taken a terrible beating, probably from the owner of some dog that he had got into a fight with." He could only stagger and fall down, waiting to die until the three Thurber boys were all home and at his side.

The 1960 book where I found Thurber's essay is a nonfiction textbook. It has discussion questions at the end of each essay. The editors ask this:

When things do not fit together or go naturally together, they are said to be *incongruous*. Very often we find incongruous things amusing. In the first paragraph, for example, the dog is compared to "a politician with derby hat and cigar." Point out other examples of humor arising from the incongruous.

After the dog fight, the rottweiler was put on a ten day behavioral hold. Someone put a big black heart next to his name on his kennel. Then he got adopted.

I never again saw Bo, but I kept looking. For months

I was reluctant to ask for the quarterly statement on that pit bull's economics. I lived in a hazy cognitive dissonance, rationalizing reasons he could still be alive but unseen by the volunteers, mainly that he was recovering in isolation in one of the restricted rooms. That option kept making sense to me, although it seems loony now. Or maybe a foster took him home to recover, and I would see him again someday with the scars of battle blended with his brindle stripes. We would pet him and talk, like Thurber, about what a legendary fighter he was. As a writer, I had plenty of endings that allowed Bo to live out his days. For me it was a lesson on Schrodinger's dog, not Schrodinger's cat.

Finally, I emailed a staff member and asked what happened to Bo. She replied right away that he'd been put down due to dog aggression.

It was the simple and obvious outcome, the safer response, the policy, what I'd known but not wanted to know as a fact. I was surprised at how easy it was to accept, like opening a bank statement on pit bull economics that had taken a tumble in the market.

If I could rewrite the textbook on pit bulls and ask discussion questions, I would not take the formalist route of the 1960 book, nor would I take the Humane Society's route of a litmus test at orientation, where they asked me about my thoughts on euthanasia. Instead, I might ask this multiple choice question:

What do we owe these dogs?

- A. Love
- B. Second chances
- C. Advocacy
- D. Homes

I write these answers down and lean back in my chair and assess them. They are horrible. I'm not sure any of them are right.

I revise my language by deleting. Let's just make it an open-ended question. Short answer or long. Take it home if you want. What do we owe these dogs?

Endnotes

Junod, Tom. "The Stare of the American Dog." *Esquire*. 14 July 2014. Web. The statistic about 3,000 pit bulls being euthanized every day comes from Junod's article.

Thurber, James. "Snapshot of a Dog." *A Book of Nonfiction*.

Joseph T. Brown, ed. New York: Macmillan Press. 1960.

The discussion question about Thurber's essay comes from this source.

The etymology and usage history of "pit bull" comes from the online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. The etymology of "rottweiler" and "metzgerhund" comes from numerous Rottweiler sites and Google translate.