

29. Dog Days

Close encounters with domestic, feral and wild beasts make your heart hurry. He'd turn a corner to find pheasants and vultures in trees above him or close by, a tom turkey in middle of road, or a wonderful 10-point buck. Once on a bikepath after dusk, flicked on light and looked ahead at scores of glowing eyes—probably cats, possums, rabbits, raccoons, skunks, or squirrels—all of which scattered as Al approached. For a state once considered to be hunted out, wildlife was staging a comeback. Deer herds are estimated at an all time high, tens of thousands. There are even nesting pairs of American bald eagles and peregrine falcons. While surrounding woods are not exactly thick with obvious wildlife, which prefers cool deep woods in heat of day, you actually could see such phenomena while skin diving. Close up, he saw shoals of menhaden attacked by schools of sword-snout yellowfin, which swim up to 65 knots, very much like standing between lanes on an interstate expressway with extra risk of being impaled. Ocean teems with crabs, lobsters, sharks, shellfish, starfish and wriggling life, except, of course, where it's so contaminated life isn't supported, as in coves around upper bay, or totally fished out. Even then things creep around harbor's edge, gangsters, wharf rats, and who knows what. Life finds a way to survive.

Man is not alone on this planet, just a major nuisance to most other species. There are a million known insect species with populations each in the trillions. While not keen on encountering either, he appreciated creatures that feed on insects, such as skunks; they should be bred, scent neutered, and set free, instead of totally useless domesticated cats and dogs, which constantly suck up resources and contribute little or nothing to society. The very notion that animals are domesticated was repugnant to him. Lions and wolves were magnificent, genetically sanitized poodles and tabbies sad, tame prisoners with broken spirits. He visited another hatchery that had some huge trout lunkering around in a tank. Fish eat bugs, too, massive quantities. They breed fish and release them into the wild to bring balance, why not certain rodents or other hunter species? Instead, humans rear pets, which also attack and kill whatever they can, sterilize surrounding landscape for sport, so they can dominate urban deserts they create and inhabit. Yards with dogs have fleas but no lawns, at least not for long. When will they quit screwing with Nature? When you commit to her,

she conspires with all her minions to help you, but try and despoil and exploit, and she'll get even in a hurry.

People are entitled to their opinions and sentiments. Just remember, cat, dog and horse breeding was always a hobby for aristocrats, not something for the masses, serfs, slaves and working class, who could barely feed themselves never mind hungry animals, unless they were kept for hunting food or later becoming food themselves. Gentry used dogs to keep the poor at bay; mounted police still use horses to control crowds. Attack dogs and bloodhounds enforce exclusivity and privilege. Today, breeders propagate billions of cats and dogs and foist them for profit onto neighbors, who let them out to hang around in your yard, constantly digging up your garden, getting underfoot or glaring at you. You're forced to kneel every time you get into your vehicle, as if in prayer—and rightly so—because their favorite resting spot is in shade underneath. Owners have been suckered into thinking that keeping pets means they are akin to royalty, better than you. Ownership is a source of pride, a substitute for more important needs, like a healthy environment teeming with wild game. For many, a kitten or puppy becomes a surrogate baby brother or fills an empty nest. For football playing millionaires, snarling pit bulls are to fight and torture, while prejudicial racial profilers on either side support or vilify them for it. A lapdog will pit humans against one another, as in that battle between pet adoption agency and talk show hostess. So, 63% of American households now include a pet: 88 million cats, 75 million dogs, 12 million reptiles, and countless filthy fish, insects and rodents. People just clean up after them, when they should trap and release them far away. Of course, lots of deer mean more big predators, mountain lions and wolves, as well as deer ticks that carry Lyme Disease or mosquitoes carrying bird viruses or malaria. Bicycling, or even going, outside at night is already a little too dicey.

He was for balance, enlightened resource management, not antivivisection, fur hating, tree-hugging craziness, which is how activists become when pendulum swings too far toward despoilment and personal loss. People who care feel they must be as persistent as newsboy Johnny Gasparini in that dark comedy "Better Off Dead", who just couldn't let go: "I want my \$2!" If you want political action you must be a pest, seek compromises, such as carefully thinning woods, not cavalierly clear-cutting them; caring for mammals, not torturing them during testing; disturbing a few nests, not driving a species into extinction; recycling garbage, not stacking it up as breeding grounds for a plague of fly maggots and mosquito larvae, which spread disease and defy normal food chain

management. If you do wrong, you pay, and the price can be just awful. People never listen, neither to him nor the Pied Piper, until pestilence enters their homes and drains milk from baby bottles.

Dog attacks are quite common. Of the 33% of nation's population who report incidents, there are five million bite victims (could be as many as fifteen million), \$1.0 billion paid in losses—only 1/3 of which is paid by insurance—and these are increasing each year. Owners are civilly liable (criminally in some states) for any damage their pets cause; medical bills are stratospheric these days. Leashes? Owners who care for their pets must closely monitor them at play or securely keep them leashed. Pets unattended, like infants, might get hurt in traffic; not as innocent, some are bred specifically for viciousness. His friends with pets always put them in their cellars or kennels when he came by, as a courtesy, so as not to harass him. Didn't appreciate an angry snout sniffing his crack or being slobbered by dog spit, although owners perversely seem to enjoy this. Why not just stick you head in a toilet, which is where dog took its last drink before licking your face? Dogs lick their own genitals, too. By law, owners are supposed to place pets in containers designed for travel, not let them jump around in vehicles and potentially cause accidents. Not doing so is akin to ignoring laws that call for child restraints, another form of child abuse. A panic stop turns an unrestrained child or pet into a windshield directed missile.

Club members were fearful of dogs, like sheep, gyrating in flocks to avoid direct exposure or huddling together. Riding more often by himself, of an opinion that groups offered no security, in fact, increased incidents, he'd still been attacked many times, vulnerable to bowwow frenzy incited by prior instances and shame induced by riders who've kicked and maced them. Remorseless, attackers saunter home, proud about conquests over timid interlopers. Dogs do protect their territory, but from innocent children, most victims by far, passersby, and other people's pets, seldom burglars, who case a home and prepare for any pet threat. Pet owners think they're safer with attack dogs. High-strung breeds like pit bulls often attack masters and their families, not just newsboys. Horrifically, a local infant was tragically torn to pieces, as news reported, and owner was admonished. A stern warning? How about negligent homicide, 4 to 6 years? Won't bring baby back, but would denounce and embarrass anyone who'd side with owner.

Apart from the occasional miracle pulled off by a Lassie or Rin Tin Tin, mostly overdramatized by pet shop owners and others who profit, dogs seem to be of little use. Billions are wasted every year feeding, grooming and raising pets that serve no practical

purpose, unlike chickens, cows, draft horses, pigs, or sheep. In an agrarian society, animal husbandry was once a valued skill. Mutts were originally trained by man to fight off wild animals, including other curs; he imagined some hunter snapping up pups after killing their mother for food, and then pups bonding with humans as a surrogate pack. There are still some working dogs, such as bloodhounds that sniff drugs, border collies that herd sheep, pointers that hunt, or seeing eye dogs for the blind. In China they eat many breeds. Psychologists suggest that cat fanciers appreciate a creature that doesn't conveniently seek their affection, while dog lovers want a submissive partner. At least dogs don't kill 100 times their weight in bug controlling songbirds every year. Cats were once kept for their ability to catch mice, yet few cats today are decent mousers. They are far better at creating health risks, like fatal asthma and toxoplasmosis, which causes brain damage in unborn fetuses. People speak of herding cats as a metaphor for uncooperative meetings. People hunt down and eradicate wild creatures gone bad, as when a bear or cougar attacks a human, for a comparatively tiny fraction of deaths as their own pampered pets cause.

Dogs need not actually bite you to cause harm. They can make you fall or swerve, trigger a heart attack, or worse. Friends report crashing into trees, falling in front of vehicles, trapped, unable to unclip, veritably a fraction of a second from being run over. Falling's biggest danger is some yahoo coming along fast and not seeing you down low. You've got to crawl to curb even if you have broken bones. Wounds will likely get infected, because roads are loaded with germs. If a dog attacks you without provocation, you could win a civil suit against its owner. If you can prove owner was negligent, easy in municipalities with leash laws, you may sue for loss, pain, and punitive damages. Pet owners are seldom held accountable; victims are reluctant to press charges, and, when they do, animal supporters sympathize with owners, who, to get around leash laws, build dog houses and chain dogs by road edge so they're free to attack passersby but not roam freely. Animals that attack humans on a regular basis need to be put down as a menace to society. It's owner's fault for not disciplining them properly or letting them run loose and pick up bad habits from abusive humans or other dogs. This brought to mind those nauseating displays of affection with which owners smother their pets.

Contrary to popular belief, cats and dogs have little cognitive ability. Owner ascribe their own peccadilloes onto actions they observe. What appears to be loyalty is really pack behavior. Canines accept any master who feeds them as an alpha male out of

instinct, nothing more. That dogs are social animals doesn't make them human; some might argue that they're better than humans in some ways. Owners ask victims to WAIT (Wait quietly when a dog attacks—Ask owner if you can pet dog—Invite dog to come close—Touch it), which is nothing more than self-serving malarkey presented on morning news hours. Whether you stand placidly or reach out lovingly, you'll probably get bitten depending upon beast's temperament and training. Some people say dogs are to motorists as cats are to bicyclists, in that dogs are natural enemies of cats, race to persecute small timid creatures, since might makes right, while cats are alert and wary, always looking behind and twisting their ears selfishly as they slink slowly around. Keeping pets costs plenty: damaged furniture, food, grooming, inoculations, registration, stained carpets, vets, and, if ever owners act responsibly, paying for losses their pets cause. Bikes are better; they'll carry you along even when your too tired to pedal. You could join Jemina and be your own pet instead. In some families, pets get better treatment than children. Could it be that pet discipline is simpler to apply, so parents feel more inclined to do so? There's no proof that neglecting pets fosters crime, but there is plenty regarding children, who do have cognitive abilities and require nurturing.

Television ought to broadcast details of attacks so a public outcry might spur justice. Animal control officers, whose sightings are rare compared with the loose animals they're supposed to collar, should be told where to find strays. Filing a police report is currently the only way, but there could be others. He noted places he was attacked viciously, usually in suburbs, typical of this problem nationally, or chased hard, and described aggressive behaviors and animals themselves, not mere barking off road, a list too long to recount. He then posted on listserv his top 20 incidents and where each occurred, but, like filing any report, nobody did anything or even noticed. Somehow people translate kindness to animals as a noble trait akin to Christian tolerance, when, in fact, masters use pets to take out their wrath against mankind by proxy. Caring for pets means keeping them away from motorists and other animals, not tossing them out your door to fend for themselves, freeze and swelter. Then again, who wants a beast inside clawing up leather furniture while out working to pay for both? A growing business sector is pet daycare.

Pet people don't want such a list disseminated any more than boards of directors want their disguises divulged. Keeping attack dogs was a blatant act of inhumanity. Why should either have rights above those granted to ordinary individuals? Why should pet

rights be held above human rights? Pets are exploitatively bred, so why punish them? Ought not owners suffer all penalties, unless victim had tormented brute? If every bicyclist compiled such a list, repeat offenders could be identified, and penalties could be properly levied. But this would take effort for what might be deemed diminishing returns. You'd have to start with a commitment from community and police, who are stuck upholding laws designed to protect property over people. Easier simply to carry a weapon and instantly, irrevocably terminate the threat.

Already he believed there was a feral hunting pack of once domestic dogs roaming towns to his West, after seeing such a group several times in different locations. How can this exist without negligence on someone's part, whether cruel owners, dog officers, indifferent neighbors, or those who don't neuter puppies before they become a problem? Neutering isn't cruel, but a good way to calm a kept animal's behavior. In some countries they ritually circumcise women, yet people are squeamish about neutering pets? What sort of madness is this? Currently, there are costs involved; neutering should be a free service conducted at any town pound. Breeding is best left to licensed kennel owners, if permitted at all.

There was a swift Dalmatian that darted out of a barn every time he took an otherwise calm commute route just a mile from a main street. Not far from there, a German Shepherd plowed across 100 yards of deep snow to catch him, and he barely out-raced demon on a 25 mph burst. In the same town, notorious for its lax enforcement of pet controls, another German Shepherd leapt out from behind some bushes just as a rider and he were pedaling fast on a long decline. Seeing a wall of big, burly humans bearing down hard, Shepherd leapt back with a yelp, luckily, because it would have been a dreadful pileup. Bicyclists must stay in control, if only for their own sake. But who wouldn't pass up an opportunity to zip along where there are few intersections, especially in the country where they'll likely need to outrun such pests? Hurry along, by all means, don't calmly enjoy your surroundings lest you be turned into dogmeat. Need speed? Where's the justice in this cruel sketch? Where are police and prosecutors?

On a certain ride he had designed for club, a long, steep grade began 3 miles in. Several riders stopped on top to take a breather on a rock wall. Savagely, from out of nowhere, a rottweiler bounded through hedgerow with bared fangs and unbridled malice. Owner had sent beast to chase them away. Those closest were so startled, he could imagine them having heart attacks out of fright combined with exertion. So many had congregated, rottie didn't know who to

bite first, and owner quickly called it off, realizing, of course, there were too many witnesses to this malfeasance. There's a prologue. When he originally designed route, he sought sage advice, then picked this intersection as a key turning point between long and short versions of ride, which required extra marking. He scouted, as always, for loose dogs. Noticing none, drew up a map. Time came for painting arrows. Dwelling at intersection for a few minutes, he was also attacked by same rottie. Reaching for door handle, he found he'd locked it out of habit. A terrible moment elapsed as he fumbled with keys, then jumped in and just barely shut door on beast's snout. Dog was obviously trained to attack. He'd been around plenty of dogs, not much more than tail wagging curiosity. There was no friendliness at all in this encounter. Had half a mind to reroute ride, but who wins in that scenario?

Owners led to believe they can frighten off cyclists this way are ill advised. Cyclists can go anywhere country roads take them and seldom know where dogs might await; they vary routes on purpose, which increases chance encounters. Instead of protecting their property, all owners are doing is setting themselves up for lawsuits where they could lose it all. Insurance companies would be wise to multiply annual fees of homeowners' policies for people who keep pets, particularly attack dogs. Surprised they never thought of it, considering their relentless penchant for sucking marrow out of all existence. They probably wrongly conclude dogs deter property theft, all they really care about, since injuries to people can be easily ignored, as evidenced by \$600 million in damages from dog attacks that they get away with each year. Still, \$300 million isn't chump change. If cyclists were like insurers, they'd suffer attacks, sue for damages, and thereby rob pet owners.

There are more little side roads, narrow overpasses, and underpasses crisscrossing interstates than you can imagine, each a godsend to bicyclists trying to find ways across these otherwise impassable barriers. The more obscure a road, the more likely you'll be met by animals. A pleasant ride could be ended or marred by a single incident. As he climbed beside primitive stone walls overlooking bright fields, a golden retriever slashed out at him, forcing him out just as a car was passing. A tragic mishap was somehow narrowly avoided. Dogs trigger chain reactions where a third party takes all the blame, while beast roam off blithely into hearsay and rumor. Substitute a wild deer in this equation, dog owner negligence or outright malevolence would not be an issue, and you'd accept consequences, unlucky break, wrong place at wrong time.

So often had he gone a particular way by a certain corner, he decided to reverse his direction. This meant a climb by a few unkempt lots with a filthy, rust-stained trailer. Determined to not downshift, he was cranking slowly just as 2 rottweilers flew out and flanked him. Quickly, he shifted into granny gear so he could spin up, remembering that if feet are moving fast, it's harder for jaws to latch on. They didn't relent, snapping and snarling at his heels as he rose slowly to crest, shifted and sped forward as his pulse raced 3 times faster. Eventually they gave up, but far beyond their normal territorial zone of 100 yards. Seems he just wore them out. He, too, was worn out, drained emotionally and physically. Didn't remember the rest of ride, and never went that way again, another decent route closed by fear.

After such incidents, he might avoid a route altogether, or, to gain miles on commutes, take wider swings through western hills where he thought he'd be safer. During a late day commute on ride's longest uphill, a pit bull slashed diagonally out of a driveway as the owner lamely called it back. It was as close to being pulled off bike as he'd ever come; not enough strength to accelerate on such a steep grade left telltale gouges on frame and shoes. A Shepherd joined attack near crest, but this distracted pit bull just long enough for him to gain speed as road flattened. For months to come, whenever he went this way he determined to snap turn and speed back down should another skirmish seem likely. Attacks were always most worrisome when climbing prevented you from simply outrunning assailant. His state's toughest hill, a mile of steep to steeper grade, is intermittently haunted by a brown mixed breed that feels its duty is to plague struggling cyclists training there.

Anxieties attend omens and portents that logic and science would ignore. Took a club ride a day early hoping to get most of it in before rain and/or snow. He'd often sneak out before storms to get in short rides. Never knew how long it would be before he could ride again comfortably, especially in late November. Early en route he found a nickel face down. Usually ignored loose change seen while scrutinizing roads for debris. Why stop for a nickel or penny? Anyway, pocketed it, not giving it another thought. Was it lucky? Rewarded for resuming by an exhilarating 40 mph descent to Crazy Corners, he flashed by a pair of snarling Dobermans with no chance to pursue. "Eat my dust," he gloated. But they wouldn't be the last canines he'd confront that day in Dogpatch.

Immediately thereafter on another steep climb, saw a hellish black rottweiler patiently waiting, too confident to rush, totally complacent to ambush him in due course. Just then a dump truck

followed by a long flatbed truck eased around and ground to a halt, probably worried monster was going to leap out. This would have pinned him between dog and them. Instead, he passed them all on left, confusing beast, “Where did he go?” Score 1 for bicyclists everywhere except curb-huggers, and a tip of his helmet to those truck drivers. Likewise, when he turned East, a trio of mutts came snapping from behind a stone wall. Luckily, they hadn’t seen him until too late. It had also begun to drizzle, adding to his detachment, perhaps suppressing his *fear*, which dogs reputedly can sense. Though climbing, pressed hard and quickly crossed their territory. Didn’t know if they imagined him as a threat, just wanted to play, saw a creature on a bike as instinctive prey, deer or elk, or they were just plain mean. Didn’t care. Shouldn’t have been there.

Shortly after pike’s fast bumpy descent, while being pelted with heavy drops, looked up to find another canine suddenly smack in the middle of road. Had to brake hard. Not another dog?! No, no, a *full size wolf*. Heart in his throat, he realized that a lone wolf had no interest in him, more likely looking for some bunnies, chickens or possibly a wild turkey from among dozens of he saw in a stripped field where they were pecking at late Fall gleanings. Wolf, a magnificent beast revered as a portent by primeval people, just stared hauntingly for a 10 count and strolled nonchalantly aside, while he spun forward and never looked back. Full of soggy adventure, took a turn off route back to his start, and smack into ride’s 5th encounter, a full nickel’s worth. A tiny agitated Pekinese came bouncing down road yapping. Having already survived 4 patches, his authoritative “Down boy” must have had a hard edge. Furball stopped, stricken, as he sped by. “Bad dog!” may work even better on pooch psyches, but was gratified to count blessings, get out of wet gear, hitch up bike, and motor home to a hot shower.

Wondered why dogs had such an affinity for bicycles. Reasoned it had something to do with breeding them for hunting or even a remote connection with wolves that hunt deer. Bicyclists somewhat resemble deer, a hunched over body a number of hands high with narrow appendages below, who run at a similar speed in straight lines punctuated by sharp turns. Must trigger some instinct to be part of a pack. Wolves he encountered immediately knew the difference, since they were real hunters, not wannabes; to them hunting meant starving or surviving. Fans emulate and idealize their heroes, who hardly comprehend obsessed infatuations. Flattery is useless among wild beasts.

When merely infatuated they call it “puppy love”, and when relations go badly “a bitch”; losers curse “dog gone it”. Unbearably

warm weeks in Summer are “dog days”. Team members who annoyingly shirk responsibilities are “dogging it.” They release “hounds of war”. Becoming “dog meat” and stepping in “dog shit” aren’t at all pleasant. There are practically no good canine connotations. Their loyalty is overrated, since pack betas always challenge the alpha.

While dogs are just another creature to respect, he had real reasons for prejudice. His elderly father-in-law was attacked by a dog while on a daily walk. Papa didn’t buy a car until over 50 years old, still walked everywhere, and survived to 93, what happens if you’re not addicted to gasoline. Papa was a concert violinist, widely recognized as the area’s finest virtuoso, in constant demand for exclusive parties among society’s elite, playing for bishops, governors, senators, and those who appreciated the best for 8 decades. But some thoughtless bastards tossed their rottweiler out to fend for itself. A rottweiler is a large, muscular beast bred for herding cattle not lounging around a townhouse. It jumped up, knocked down, and broke Papa’s bowing arm. Unable to play anymore—no more walks, no more work, spirit broken—a few years later Papa succumbed to heart disease, a sad end to a brilliant career. No lawsuit was brought to recover losses; beast’s owners had immediately packed up and relocated. Had they run over a pedestrian, at least their insurance would have had to pay. But pet violence against humans is not only tolerated but applauded. Anyway, prosecutors ignore crimes against seniors, who figure they don’t have much life left in them, as if that were an acceptable excuse. As a consequence, a unique voice was silenced: less music, more hatred. In such cases, one person’s rights are infringed by another’s. This doesn’t work. Apartment owners should be held liable or shouldn’t rent to tenants with dogs, and here’s another reason why.

He had no respect for pet lovers, who, after all, are legally and morally bound but too selfish to assume any responsibility. Anyway, it’s not their pets they love, which have no capacity to return affection, but themselves. It’s a sick relationship rabidly rationalized. He hated neither himself nor pets, but wasn’t keen on cleaning up disrespectful crap. If dog families were made to take out attack policies, if ever available, upon pet purchases, as if automobiles, the costs of breeding and feeding them would be instantly reduced. Then attack victims would be compensated, less homeless humans would go hungry, and a key fear of bicycling might abate.

