

The Art of the Mountain Mutt

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Tricia said sure, she'd spend the rest of her life with me, or try to. We were alone in the Idaho Sawtooths, on a turquoise morning. I figured being alone was important. I'd never cared for theatrical proposals – skywriting and other such grandstanding. Bullying a potential mate into saying “yes” in front of witnesses always seemed a bad start. Even if you're sure of yourself, it's only fair to give the maiden the opportunity to decline the honor of your hairy presence every day of her life without fear of public shaming. But I did try to stack the odds in my favor with the setting. It's hard to do much at Alice Lake besides contemplate a perfectly ragged horizon. The atmosphere for the pivotal Q&A might have been perfect, but for a canine complication: Pokey, Tricia's duty-driven border collie, had infected paws.

Pokey had all the famous border collie traits – tolerance, laser perception, a haughty sense of purpose, etc. He and I had known each other for a few months by this time. We'd hit it off immediately when he'd uncharacteristically crossed a three-lane street to greet me on a quiet Sunday morning. He'd even stayed with me once, during which time he'd put on a pound a day. But Tricia made clear that our friendship could become strained. Whenever a man had shown interest in her, Pokey had developed mysterious, showy ailments that required gasping and limping. These had always effectively re-ordered priorities around the house. I hoped I'd gotten past this threshold with Pokey, but I wasn't sure.

At Alice Lake, the limp was real, and serious. The week before, we'd been negotiating a seething hillside at Vulcan Hot Springs, where hundreds of near-boiling seeps and springs are scattered. Entranced with color-coded microbes, Tricia and I had stepped carefully through the thick steam, pointing at this and that. But a rare whine reminded us of how careless we'd been. There was Pokey, hopping from foot to foot, gamely trying to pick his way through scalding water. I scooped him up and threw him in the cold creek, where we made him stand for some time. Then we bedded him down in our cedar camper, where Tricia plied him with home-made pills and poultices. He was cooperative, though we practically had to hogtie him to keep him from following us up Mt. Borah the next day. A few days later, he was doing his bit to keep the squirrels trim, and eating again. So we didn't think twice about having him scout the Alice Lake trail. Bad idea. We were steps from the lake when we realized his pads weren't yet calloused enough for the granitic terrain. He was stepping gingerly and looked gaunt. It was late in the day, so there wasn't much to do but bundle him into the tent, apply the balms, and turn in.

My nights tended to be full of questions in those days, but this one was full of answers. Tricia woke regularly to examine the patient. Feeling in the way during these tender intervals, I extracted myself from the tent and stomped about, gazing at galaxies. Pokey was healthy and I knew he'd recover. But considering the life choice I was about to spring on Florence Nightingale, it seemed some agonizing was in order. I tried hard to feel uncertain. The moon would have none of it. I groped for some twinge of fear. Pinprick wishes beamed cheerily away. Despite the cosmic show, I found myself watching the nuzzling heads silhouetted against the side of the tent. I decided to stick to the plan. The next morning, I carried our wounded comrade to the lake. We hunkered out of the wind and I got to the point. As it turned out, we were on the same page.

But how would we evacuate the patient? Fortunately, I'd brought a day pack. I unzipped the top, cut two holes in the bottom, and bungeed it to my chest. Then we placed solemn Pokey in the contraption. He sat facing me, hind legs straddling my waist, front legs over my shoulders. Tricia volunteered to carry our two larger packs out, strapped together. Thus encumbered, we lurched down the steep trail. Pokey adjusted surprisingly well to the jury-rig. This was an active, independent collie, after all, who hated to be picked up, much less carried. But he knew he was in trouble. I'd considered putting him on my back, but figured he might try to eject. So there we were, nose-to-nose. I could hardly see around his blocky head, so Tricia led the way. Pokey had high-contrast, yo-yo eyebrows that magnified every glance. On this trip, eyes and brows collaborated to convey nuanced shades of tragedy, courage, and trust. He never squirmed. By the time we arrived at the trailhead, Pokey and I were spiritually superglued. We hardly noticed Tricia's gasping and limping.

Our guy recovered quickly. When we organized the nuptials in Ouray, Colorado, a few months later, the invitations featured a dapper Poke E. Porter in black bow tie. He always had a formal look, with white shirt and black coat; the tie just completed the effect. Thus attired, he was the greeter at the wedding, positioned at the door of the old stone church. (Halfway through the ceremony, it was clear that he'd gone back to being a personal trainer for tree-dwelling critters.) Years later, when we understood the breed, we realized that we might show him. But the "faulty gay tail" wouldn't do. It was always expressing something, and when he ran gleefully toward us, it whirred like a propellor.

Pokey taught us a lot — how to find the right dog, for instance. He'd been abandoned on a country road and taken in by a farm family. When Tricia drove out to see another dog the farmers had advertised, this quiet, six-month-old pup escorted her around the place. So we came to rely on that method of connecting: make yourself available, but the dog gets to choose. We also learned to manage Border Collie Intensity. Because Tricia lived in Mount Hood, Oregon, while I lived in Salem, sometimes we'd rendezvous halfway, in Portland. We'd roll out our sleeping bags in a park adjacent to the zoo. We slept well, but Pokey often stayed bolt upright, every collie molecule at battle-stations as he puzzled out the ungodly noises emanating from the zoo. We appreciated the diligence, but he was always worthless the next day. So we made a new rule: everyone sleeps indoors.

Living with Tricia at a remote, waterfront cabin, he'd been raised without a lead. He usually stayed close, but it never occurred to him that he shouldn't climb a tree to escape confinement. He walked all over downtown Seattle with us, off-leash, five feet ahead, stopping to wait patiently at every corner. We had a dozen great years with him — one of them stolen, as he endured heart surgery, then rebounded to hike again. He even made it up 14,000-foot Windom Peak, where we had to hand him up like a parcel over Volkswagen-sized summit boulders. Just as at Alice Lake, he was a bundle of trust, and happy to be there. A dog's dog, Tricia had named him for a warped "Poky Little Puppy" record she'd had as a child. Strangely, ten years later, he and I found a copy of the record in a vacant lot. "Where is that poky little puppy?" He's everywhere, all the time.

We lasted three dogless months before presenting ourselves to likely companions at a metro shelter. The lower half of the cage doors were covered with sheet metal, so all the adoptables were on their hind legs, making conversation. We stopped at what looked like an empty cage. Tricia pointed to the rap sheet on the door. "A border collie mix." At the sound of her voice, a luxurious black tail slid from under the door and swept back and forth across our ankles. "Is that you?" we asked. The metronome quickened. When we opened the door, a huge black collie emerged, pushing his nose into our hands. Zeke was a Newfoundland-border collie mix: 85 pounds, black with a white shirt and paws, a square head, big ears, and webbed feet. We confirmed the Newfie in him by his habit of sleeping flat on his back with his paws in the air. He had a goofy Newfie personality, except when channeling his inner collie.

He was a young, city dog. When we brought him home to our unfenced property, he disappeared immediately. To Zeke, freedom meant, “run for your life before they catch and punish you.” We resisted the impulse to chase. The big guy was all over the mountainside for about a week, then hardly left the deck without us. That turned out to be the case for all our dogs. They might’ve wandered more if we’d been couch potatoes ourselves. But we made time for three good walks a day, with more ambitious expeditions once or twice a week. If you’re active, dogs soon realize they’ll miss the fun if they stray too far. And a tired dog is a good dog. This strategy isn’t foolproof, however, as bloodlines govern the roaming urge. We’ve known malamutes to serial-walk everyone in a large neighborhood, despite having healthy, well-trained people at home.

One such malamute, Cooter, became Zeke’s partner in crime. Whenever Cooter’s family truck rolled by, Zeke would race them home, his buddy egging him on from the window. Zeke would greet everyone as if they all lived together before trotting back home. Both dogs were on the dominant side, which kept things interesting. Competitive eating was a favorite sport – gobbling and eyeing one other from across the room. They were a great team. Cooter covered more territory, but Zeke developed stealth capabilities. We called him Zeke The Sneak, because of his instinctive ability to blend his jet-black head and body into any shadow — from which he’d watch us calling him.

Zeke had a couple of other buddies. One was a massive, slobbery Rottweiler who showed up on inky winter evenings for romps. We could hear the dogs galloping and wrestling and panting far and wide, but we couldn’t see them. Eventually, the Rottie would go home and Zeke would appear at the door, festooned with frozen slobber. The other friend was a young wolf, Shadow, who would join us on our walks, dragging twenty feet of chain. Even with the handicap, he loped effortlessly ahead. Zeke, too, was loose-limbed, but he was all knees and elbows trying to keep up with Shadow. The magnificent creature clearly belonged at a wolf refuge. Fortunately, that’s where he ended up.

I had several twilight arguments about sleeping arrangements with snow-encrusted Zeke out at the perimeter of our five acres. He wasn’t buying the “everyone sleeps indoors” axiom. He was determined to stay outside at all hours, in all weather. I couldn’t bribe him in, because he wasn’t much of a foodie. Finally, one night I picked him up and carried him to the house. Presto. After that, all I had to do was squat near him and he’d run for the dog door. A sentinel has his self-respect, after all. In any case, Zeke was happiest when wet. We wondered how he managed to stay soggy that first summer until we caught him belly-flopping into a neighbor’s kiddie pool. So we found an old pool for his personal use. In the spring, when the creeks were raging, we’d often see Zeke’s black head rocketing downstream as he pulled for the far side. He’d emerge far below and bound back, daring us to take the plunge.

But he wouldn’t have lived to a ripe age if he hadn’t learned that old chestnut about discretion being the better part of valor. Before we started taking down the hummingbird feeders at night, black bears made our deck a regular stop in their foraging. Zeke objected to this. He’d bark and posture, getting almost nose-to-nose with some *Ursa Majors*. A couple of times I had to threaten to pick him up before he’d abandon his post. Then one day a big cinnamon took a lightning swipe at him just as he turned toward the house. It missed by inches. Zeke and I exchanged a “Whoah!” look. After that, he perfected the over-the-shoulder bark, while beating it to the house. Eventually, however, he developed a casual relationship with bears. One day Tricia came home to find him lying near Magua, a Newfie friend of his. But as she approached, she realized the larger black lump wasn’t Magua after all, but a small bear. Zeke and this bear hung out companionably from time to time. You can have all kinds of friends once you learn the discretion trick.

Zeke lived long enough to have a couple of protégés. The first was Roscoe, a Seattle street dog we brought back to the Rockies after a short experiment in city living. Roscoe was the go-along, get-

along sidekick Zeke needed to keep his ego in trim. If you've had more than one dog at a time, you know the pattern: old dog doesn't let the new dog in the yard; lets the new dog in the yard, but not in the house; lets the new dog in the house, but not in the bedroom, etc. In no time, we were being outflanked for bed space. But in the daytime, outdoors, there was always room for everybody. Our deck provided spectacular views of the continental divide, and dovetailed onto a granite outcrop. There, Zeke and Roscoe settled into a couple of duff-filled depressions almost every day. We've known countless hours of contentment in our lives, but the top third were spent contemplating bright peaks over those nodding, noble heads.

Roscoe was a smallish shepherd mix. He was one the rare dogs I've known who could really grin — not the typical panting dog smile, but a pulling back of lips to show the front teeth and gums, as humans do. Street life had made his coat straggly, but after being whisked from sea level to 8500 feet with winter coming on, he packed on the fur. Within a month, he looked to be twice his former volume. We set him up with an old futon, and he nearly wore it out. We figured he needed the extra shuteye for fluffage, but it turned out something else was going on: he was a ninja warrior after sundown. Beneath that teddy bear appearance lurked serious bush skills. We'd bought an old cabin, and mice were a problem until Roscoe found his calling. We never actually saw him catch a mouse — they just disappeared. Fortunately, he failed to graduate from mouser to squirreler. Like Pokey, if Zeke zoomed in too close to a squirrel, he'd shift his gaze and pretend to be chasing something else. Roscoe didn't understand the protocol until the day he cornered a pine squirrel on the deck. Zeke looked on, beside himself, as Roscoe pounced and was promptly munched. I grabbed Ninja Teddy, opening an escape route for the squirrel. As it turns out, a bit nose tends to gush. Holding Roscoe's head back, applying pressure with a kerchief, I felt like a parent escorting a biffed kid off the playground. Roscoe was soon grinning again, but Zeke was distraught for days.

Roscoe was as mild-mannered as they come, and a friend to all. But he surprised even himself one day by sinking his undersized fangs into a fleshy glute. The victim had come to deliver a door. The guy must've been running late, because he didn't bother to acknowledge anybody. He just grabbed the door off the truck, strode past the dogs, and took a big step onto the deck-in-progress. Roscoe's timing was perfect: he nipped the billowy bit just as it was optimally presented. He hardly creased the guy's Levis, but it was the most aggressive thing we ever saw him do. From this and milder incidents, we learned a doggy dictum: Thou Shalt Acknowledge. Dogs have a real fetish for acknowledgment. It's why they cannot grasp the get-out-of-the-way concept. Sure, you can make a dog move aside if necessary — in our case, "heads up" is the command — but their reluctance is obvious. In Dog World, encounters with other sentient beings are center-stage, formal affairs. Each party is obliged to elaborately recognize — or elaborately ignore — all postures and noises and odors. A canine grin is unmistakable. "Woof" means "Friend or foe?" Ignore it, and you're a butt that needs biting.

Zeke seemed on the verge of moping himself to death after the old sidekick moved on, so we acquired an Australian shepherd pup. Zephyr was striking. Strangers would stop us on the street to admire his white chest and hazel eyes. He was a mix of red and blue merle — taupe, really. Early on, he was Pinky Pinkerton, for the shading of his belly and nose. He had a dash of border collie in him and a long, graceful tail. Unfortunately, he was as ornery as he was beautiful. Only his penchant for falling asleep in mid-feist saved our sanity. He instantly picked up on any verbal cue, but hated to be carried and pestered Zeke incessantly. The tired-dog-is-good-dog credo was sorely tested. Every dawn, in all seasons, we'd walk up a small summit for the spectacular views. That first winter, Zeph was sleepy on the ascents and caffeinated all the way down. He'd launch himself at snowdrifts and cartwheel down the trail. He always managed to end up on his back, grinning back at us, tongue lolling. Ever the gymnast, he eventually fell in love with a blue heeler bitch who somersaulted him half a dozen times every morning.

Exceptional beings often have major quirks, but it's often worth the trouble to work around them. With Zephyr, the payoff was metric tons of information. His job was to point out everything that changed overnight. Every morning he'd get our attention, then put his nose on each new mushroom or flower or carcass. This was a massive job, considering how much territory we covered. He was often on the verge of sensory overload. Sometimes even petting was too much for Zeph. There was a magnificent intensity about him. But he won Zeke over before long. The turning point came one icy June afternoon, after we were chased home by hail: Zeke didn't blink when Zeph flopped into his bed next to him. The following spring, neighbors reported Zeke galloping over a hill like the US Cavalry to scatter the coyotes that had surrounded little brother.

The less said of dog death, the better. But Zeke's was such a character-affirming process that a brief description is essential. When he was diagnosed with inoperable cancer, our vet suggested we do nothing but pamper him. The growth was slow and he was not in pain. Eventually, his spleen would burst; then he'd go quickly. So we made up the bed in our old VW camper bus, installed a ramp, and left the sliding door open in all weather. Zeke took to spending almost every waking hour in the adventure-mobile. He was cutting his walks short, but wasn't about to miss any rides. He always came back to the house at night, even allowing himself to be carried at times. We covered a lot of territory in the bus — sometimes with Zeke alone, sometimes with Zeph lying close to his hero. Most of Zeke's walks were therefore accomplished in areas new to him, which kept him going. Inevitably, one day I was returning from the hardware store with Zeke alone when I realized something was up. I pulled over, we lay nose-to-nose, and he was gone in five minutes. It was a great passing, befitting a great soul.

Zephyr matured into a full-bore shepherd. He could see right away that we weren't careful enough, and figured we couldn't be trusted to manage the property. Why, we let tall men cross the threshold, willy-nilly! The mudroom heel-nip became a rite of passage for lanky visitors. Zeph just couldn't abide anyone towering over us. He was always sorry about the nips, and even presented himself for ear-scratches from his victims after they made it to the couch. But, clearly, Steps Had To Be Taken. So we put him in the cab of the pickup when largish people came. You might think this would be some kind of ordeal, but Zephyr made it easy. He'd recognize the vehicles coming down the driveway and make for the truck, executing the over-the-shoulder bark he learned from Zeke. He was big on eye contact, and at these times, his eyes said, "Forgodsake, lock me up! I'm out of control!"

One day our vet took us downstairs, where dogs were impounded for the sheriff. There, a four-month-old Aussie-husky mix watched us through marbled eyes. A neighbor told us he'd seen the pup hunkered under a piece of cardboard during a recent snowstorm. He'd been living on the streets of a mountain town in winter, and that takes some ingenuity. We called him Jasper, for his copper coloring. The Aussie in him was expressed in white blaze, white chest, and analytical skills. The husky was manifest in his ice-resistant fur, easy athleticism and fine voice. Roscoe howled beautifully when prompted by a siren, and taught the trick to Zeke. But no dog of ours had ever carried on like Jasper when food was imminent. The Hungry Song was more scream than howl; more Wagnerian aria than lovesick ballad. It wasn't so bad when we lived in the boonies, but during the two years we lived on the edge of a mountain city, our neighbors often gazed pityingly at Jasper, while saving harder looks for us. It's hard to explain in casual conversation that you're not actually a torturer of innocent creatures, when an emo soundtrack insists otherwise.

Jas was a composite of all our dogs. He had Pokey's self-assurance, Zeke's goofy charm, Roscoe's affectionate nature, Zephyr's verbal acuity, and his own offbeat sense of duty. His puppy nickname was Ottoman Turk, because he'd perch on an ottoman to get at Zephyr, who favored an old, overstuffed chair. The thrusts and parries went on for hours. This was Zeph's payback, of

course, for harassing Zeke. Eventually we taught Jas the “time out” command. He was surprisingly compliant, always sitting quietly and doing his time. But when released, he’d rocket by Zeph for a final bite: “Ruh!”

I drove old trucks with bench seats then, as our dogs wanted to go everywhere with us, shoulder-to-shoulder, seeing what we were seeing. On backroads, they would drape themselves across our laps and hang their heads out the windows. Only once did we try putting them in the truck bed — when we were inching along a 4WD road. They ejected at the first squirrel. As Jas grew and Zeph settled into the role of elder statesdog, they developed a situational dominance. Zephyr was king of the house, but Jas was trail boss. Every morning, Jasper whacked us all with bare aspen branches all the way up and down the mountain. On longer backpacking trips, he’d scout ahead and wait nonchalantly beside each cairn, while Zephyr, the *uber*-shepherd, wove his way back and forth through our group, nosing each hiker’s knee, giving laggards an encouraging smile. The brotherly bond was so strong that, when Zephyr’s time was up, Jasper placed himself between Zeph and the vet’s syringe. They were in it together.

I tried to teach all our dogs to fetch the newspaper, but only Jasper T. Fetchmeister took the job — with a vengeance. For years, he fetched the paper half a mile. This was necessary because the delivery guy didn’t have the time or equipment to negotiate our road. Once in a while, Jas would lose focus and come home without newsprint, but we’d always send him back. You could see him deliberating as he retraced his route. He’d always remember, eventually, which woodpile to check. Fetching became so ingrained in him that we found ourselves carrying things under our arms so he wouldn’t pull them out of our hands. If he thought someone might witness his fetching, he’d strike a pose. Many a splendid profile was wasted at deserted rural intersections, but when we moved to the city, Jasper lived the dream. Children and the elderly wise would point with glee at the regal bearer of book, mail, umbrella, grapefruit, etc. I’d tell them that we paid extra for the hyper-floppy ears, the tail-high strut, the thespian’s instinct for audience and opportunity.

Late in life, he would sometimes stumble, and miss even the fattest taunting squirrel. But when it was time to turn homeward, he’d still ask to carry anything — *something splashy, please*. The chest would fill, the head would rise, and the fancy march would go on as ever. One day, as ever, he fixed the marble eyes on me to say, “Just tell me what to do,” and I said, “You’ve done it all. You survived, alone, in bitter winter as a puppy. You sang for your supper. You were the Ottoman Turk. The trail boss. The Fetchmeister. You took your time-outs like a champ. Rode shotgun. Scouted numberless trails and found every cairn. When your partner was ready to die, you stuck with him. You are Last Dog.”

Whenever we can, we trek to an unnamed body of water above timberline, where it’s hard to do much besides contemplate a perfectly ragged horizon. We call it Spirit Lake. The ashes of our mutts are scattered on all sides. We wouldn’t take anything for our journey between Alice and Spirit. We learned along the way to shelter nightly with those you love, to notice every natural thing, to acknowledge others, to explore shoulder-to-shoulder, and to dare. Our only regret is that we were never chosen by a female. Lately, however, we find ourselves imagining a sweet coda. She’s everywhere, all the time. I think Jas will understand.