



The Dogcatcher Hates Politics
by Matt Roberts

from *Post Road 10*

Selected by Pagan Kennedy, author of *The First Man-Made Man*, *Black Livingstone*, *Confessions of a Memory Eater*, *Spinsters*, *The Exes*, and *Stripping*.

The Dogcatcher Hates Politics stands out because it's just so damned funny. And the use of language wowed me. He does amazing things with that phrase "bite stick certified." In fact, I loved it so much that I think I may assign it to my Intro to Creative Nonfiction class. – PK.

The dogcatcher doesn't like politics. The dogcatcher left his job at the zoo because there was too much politics. The dogcatcher likes this job because there's no politics. Just him and the van. And the dogs. The bats. The people. And the occasional ride-along.

The dogcatcher's boss is bite stick certified. He wears an orange T- shirt tucked into tight blue jeans with black leather motorcycle boots. He has long, oily black hair pulled back in a ponytail and round, wire frame glasses. He makes me sign a release. Then I meet the

dogcatcher. The dog-catcher is skinny with hair that falls below his shoulders and a goatee. He wears a silver cross in his left ear, a pair of sunglasses with rectangular purple lenses, black denim jeans, and a khaki uniform shirt with patches and a badge. We get in the van, the dogcatcher's "office on wheels."

Two vans at a time in the cities, one north and one south. Plus one van for unincorporated county. That's three officers for all of the cities, towns, farms, and ranches in one of Colorado's largest counties. One officer to round up all of the dogs-at-large and dogs-in-custody north of Trilby Avenue. Stray cattle and horses, elk, and deer are the responsibility of Division of Wildlife. Raccoons, skunks, and birds-of-prey are the dogcatchers'. Both the newly dead and the flattened to the road.

"On a hot summer day, maggots can be a problem," he says. "Not a lot of room in the back of the van. No time to run to the dump." That's the worst part of the job.

But it beats politics. Scraping a dead, maggoty animal from the black-top beats politics, whatever that means. But the first call is a live one. A dog-in-custody. The white van has yellow lights that are essentially worthless. They are almost never used. The dogcatcher can't use his lights the way a police officer can. The dogcatcher doesn't scream through traffic lights with a wailing siren. He wears a khaki uniform with a badge and patches but carries no gun. He is bite stick certified. He carries a flashlight and a leash. A stainless steel clipboard and a coffee can without a label.

He's seen this dog before. A beautiful brindle boxer whose bob tail wiggles with joy at our arrival. She is happy to see us. She hops into the back of the van as if we were taking her to the park for a game of Chuk-It. The dogcatcher calls in the description. But he knows this dog. He knows where he is taking her. He calls it in anyway. The dogcatcher uses the radio. "William Four back in service." "Copy."

The radio hums and fuzzes with chatter. The other officer is in Loveland, pulling an iguana out from under a house. The iguana doesn't want to come out from under the house. The radio calls for William Four. Two separate bat calls. Lots of calls about bats. People are afraid to handle bats. People are afraid of rabies. People are afraid of dogs. "But that's Hollywood's fault," the dogcatcher says.

The dogcatcher isn't afraid of any dog. The dogcatcher isn't afraid of bats. The dogcatcher's sister had rabies shots. The dogcatcher isn't afraid of rabies. He has a coffee can and leather gloves. He has been trained. He is bite stick certified. He doesn't trust Hollywood.

The dogcatcher doesn't dream of Hollywood, although this is not his "career dream job." He tried to get on with DOW, but the Division of Wildlife is apparently rife with politics. Maybe it's not what you know, it's who you know. And work elsewhere was problematic as well. The dog-catcher mentions "running into the mental thing about zoos."

The dogcatcher and his wife worked at zoos. More than one zoo. Baton Rouge. Cheyenne Mountain. Others. Perhaps the mental thing about zoos is having to defend your career

choice to liberal family members that refuse to wear even fake leopard-print clothing. Or perhaps conservative family members who wanted you to be an accountant or a dentist. Perhaps the mental thing about zoos is watching the tiger pace the perimeter of his enclosure for hours on end or the silverback gorilla who always turns his back to you. Perhaps the mental thing about zoos is waking up every morning and desperately hating your job because you feel insignificant in these animals' lives. Always thinking that the next zoo will be different. Then running out of zoos and going to school. The dogcatcher's wife is in school, to get a degree. A degree that will help change things at the zoo. The dogcatcher's wife is going to make a difference.

But the dogcatcher's life is different now. The zoo is only a memory. A story shared in the office on wheels. Now the dogcatcher is looking for bats.

The bat is dead. It lies on the cement balcony floor, an almost impossibly small amount of mass. A tiny brown thing to be taken for a lump of mud or a late Autumn leaf. But it's the end of summer, and the dogcatcher uses the yellow plastic lid to gently scoop the body into the brushed aluminum interior of the unlabeled coffee can.

Simon and Schuster's Field Guide to Dogs does not slide across the dashboard of the dogcatcher's office on wheels. The metal clipboard is wedged between the dogcatcher's seat and the center console. The lasso stick hangs strapped to the inside wall of the back of the van, parallel to the floor. A dozen or so leashes hanging from a hook sway back and forth as the van shudders to and from stops, their metal clasps scraping against the floor. The coffee can with its yellow lid rests on the floor, pushed into a space between

the permanent cages and a portable trap. The rear of the van is a maze of wire cage. And the brindle boxer is laying there with her head on her paws, patiently waiting for the park.

The brindle boxer is RTO. Return-To-Owner. The dogcatcher knows the young man.

“You know the dogs before you know the owners,” he says. The owner wears a cream-colored button-down collared shirt and a tie. He was called home from his job at the bank to collect his dog. Perhaps his being home means he owes someone. That someone somewhere might notice him gone. That he will have to make it up to someone somehow. Perhaps this is what the dogcatcher means when he says politics.

The dogcatcher is in it for the animals. That’s his biggest goal. “These people aren’t bad people,” he says, and he wants to be clear about the fact that he’s “not out to get them.” He just wants to make sure that the animals don’t get hurt. He’s here for the animals. Especially when they get hurt. “It’s always a good feeling,” he says. It makes him feel good when they make it. The dogcatcher says, “It’s a real bummer when they don’t.”

The dogcatcher does not give the owner a ticket, even though the license has expired. He sells the owner a new license. Ten dollars. He takes a check scribbled out quickly in the gray drizzle of a summer shower. The dogcatcher sees no reason to stick to the rules. The animal is safe. “William Four back in service.” “Copy.”

The radio fuzzes in and out with the story of another officer in Estes Park looking for a skunk in an old lady’s window box. The old lady is worried about her flowers. “Not a fun job,” the dogcatcher says. The van pulls up to a Blockbuster Video for the other bat call.

This one is GOA. Gone-On-Arrival. The manager followed the dispatcher's advice and left the doors open. This bat won't have to go into the can. This bat won't have to be brought back to the shelter and put in a cooler until the Health Department comes around to collect the specimens. These folks won't have to worry about rabies. The dogcatcher explains how its only two shots these days. His sister had to get fifteen. Right into the stomach.

The dogcatcher stops along the road to stare at a lumpy stain on the blacktop. He thinks about it. Then decides that it's not worth it. "Probably a raccoon once," he says, adding under his breath, "not enough left to make a difference now."

The van stops at a house to drop off a trap. The dogcatcher doesn't catch cats. The dogcatcher doesn't do cats-at-large. The neighbors can rent a trap and do a live catch, call it in, and have it brought down to the shelter. But the dogcatcher doesn't catch cats. "There's just no catching a cat," he says. "If a cat doesn't want to be caught, then you're not gonna catch it."

The dogcatcher does catch dogs-at-large. Most calls are for dogs-in- custody. But the dogcatcher does catch dogs-at-large. It's not that easy though. You don't just whistle the dog to you and it comes running with its tail high, its tongue flapping out of its mouth. It's more likely that the dog's ears are flat and the tail low. The hackles along its back raised. Most of them run in the opposite direction. Half-wild, the memory of a broom handle or leather belt too close for people to be trusted. It can take weeks.

The dogcatcher tells a story. The blue heeler was called in early that spring north of the river, sighted in the empty lot next to the army surplus store. This was before the fires started. The dogcatcher figured that she was probably feeding off of prairie dogs and voles. She ran the first time. Then ran again. Always running away. But the dogcatcher didn't give up. The dogcatcher is in it for the animals. It's a bummer when they don't make it. The dogcatcher returned to that field again and again and again. Always getting a little closer. Some dogs bite. The dogcatcher wasn't afraid of getting bit. The dogcatcher isn't afraid of any dog. The dogcatcher is bite stick certified. The blue heeler was brought in and found a home eventually. "It took some time for the right person to see that little dog's potential," he says. "She was a good dog." It makes the dogcatcher feel good when they make it.

The dogcatcher apologizes for the lack of excitement. Excitement is saving a dog from the possibility of starvation or being hit by a truck. Excitement is a skunk digging up flowers four feet off the ground or holding the tail of a four-foot iguana while lying prone against the foundation of a house. "Excitement," the dogcatcher says, "is a dumpster full of raccoons."

But the work is rewarding even on a slow day, even though this is not the dogcatcher's career dream job. The work is rewarding even when it's just a routine RTO of a dog-in-custody. Or protecting people from the remote possibility of rabies. Or helping some old lady keep the neighbor's cat from fouling her tomatoes. The dogcatcher hasn't run into

the mental thing about shelters. The dogcatcher doesn't have to worry that his work isn't making a difference.

The van pulls up to a house in a neighborhood not unlike the others. The dogcatcher opens the clipboard and flips through the paperwork and sighs. He collects the little pad of colored tripartite citations and walks around the side of the house. The rear of the house has a small concrete porch enclosed with chain-link fence. There is a small amount of bare earth and a couple of empty bowls on the cement. A half dozen toys are spread around this small space. A dirty braided rope with knots at both ends. A blue plastic cone. A squeaky hot dog. It's hot now at the end of the day, and there is little shade. The dog isn't here. But it has been. There is shit everywhere. That and the empty bowls are enough for the dogcatcher. He knocks on the door, knowing that there will be no answer. The young woman works and goes to school. She is almost never home. "These people shouldn't have dogs," the dogcatcher says. He starts to write up a citation. It will be left on the door. This is a follow-up visit. The space in the backyard is insufficient for the dog's needs. The yard is not being cleaned. It's summer, and there is never enough water for the animal. Then the neighbor appears.

The neighbor is a middle-aged man in white shorts, dark sunglasses, and dark socks. He wants to explain how the girl, his neighbor, has been trying to take care of the problem. He explains how she is getting people to take care of the dog for her, that he himself has come over to check on the dog on a couple of occasions. He says that she comes home from work during her lunch break to check on the dog. The dogcatcher listens. The

neighbor explains that the girl's parents bought the house and that she is responsible for maintaining it. That she needs to work but loves the dog. The dogcatcher listens. The neighbor explains that she is afraid that her parents will find out about this, that they will take the house away from her for being so irresponsible. The neighbor says she is a good kid. The dog-catcher is through listening. The dogcatcher tries to explain his position. The welfare of the animal is at risk. The dogcatcher is in it for the animals. He's not out to get the owners.

"Probably just scared there's something legally wrong," the dogcatcher says. The dogcatcher isn't out to get the owners. Most owners are responsible. Most owners don't treat their animals as property, as a piece of furniture. "We try not to separate an animal from its owner if at all possible," the dogcatcher says. "That's what's best for the animal." Most owners care deeply for their animals. But sometimes there just isn't time to collect everything that you care deeply about. That's when the job can make a difference.

The fires started in early summer. The fires in the foothills west of Fort Collins, Colorado, were out of control. There was no water. Only wind. Convoys of trailers coming down the canyon carried horses and albums full of photos. Photos of cats and dogs and birds. The speed with which the fire spread meant that some pets were left behind. The dog-catcher and his fellow officers worked around the clock over several days. Returned all but one animal to its owners. That one was simply abandoned. "The guy never came back to get his stuff or anything," the dog-catcher says. The shelter is

run solely on donations. Working overtime without the benefit of overtime pay. This is what the job is all about. It makes you feel good when they make it. It's a bummer when they don't.

At the same time, fires were raging in an affluent neighborhood in the foothills outside of Denver. The Denver television stations fawned over footage of a single baby squirrel carried out of the fire in the pocket of a firefighter. A single squirrel. Found by chance. Saved as a matter of circumstance. Nothing about the dogcatcher and his fellow workers. But that's politics for you.

A firefighter wears a helmet and saves things. A dogcatcher wears a badge and writes tickets. Politics. The dogcatcher hates politics. The dog-catcher doesn't see that his position is politicized by his badge, by the patches on his shirt, the array of useless yellow lights atop the white van. The dogcatcher hasn't run into the mental thing about shelters because the dogcatcher is in it for the animals. He knows that a bat in a coffee can means no one has to risk those two rabies shots, that the brindle boxer returned to the banker did not require a ticket, that the girl who is never home did, that a blue heeler brought in without having to use the bite stick found a home with a family instead of starving to death, and that some animals weren't given up on to choke on ash and smoke because there was no money in the budget to rescue them. The dogcatcher likes this job. The dogcatcher is making a difference. The dogcatcher pulls into the shelter parking lot to drop off the bat in the coffee can and the occasional ride-along. "William-Four out-of-service."

Matt Roberts's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Chattahoochee Review*,
Isotope, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Matter*, *Cimarron Review*, *Ecotone*, and *Ninth Letter*.