

## A NATURALIST'S NOTES

BY DAVID OWEN

People are surprised when I tell them that I, by temperament and by avocation, am a naturalist. I don't look like a naturalist. No pair of field glasses dangles from my sunburned neck (which isn't sunburned), and I don't wear hiking boots or an old bandanna, and my arms are not laden with specimen bags and notebooks and tweezers—the tools of the naturalist's trade, you are thinking, but not of mine. I don't live in a tent, not even for part of the year. I don't own a canoe or a kayak or any kind of net. The shelves in my study? I can tell you truthfully that they are not lined with large jars containing the well-preserved bodies of dead squirrels and such, or with old birds' nests, or with a dozen or so different types of ferns that are indistinguishable to you but not to me. No.

And yet a naturalist I definitely am—though of a particular type. Let me begin my explanation with a metaphor: There is a universe in a drop of water. And within that universe? Much more water, also in drop form. And within every one of those (other) drops? Yet another water-filled universe—and so on and so on, down to about a billionth of a billionth of an inch, I'd guess, at which point everything probably looks pretty much the same.

In other words, the answer to my riddle (about how I can be a naturalist without a bandanna or a kayak) is that I am a naturalist within my own home, which, for various reasons, I seldom leave. The natural world under my roof is as varied and as worthy of scientific investigation as any rain forest, or any other type of forest. Indeed, I have spent the past decade within these walls closely observing, and forming hypotheses concerning, a single domestically indigenous mammal species: *Dachshundus miniaturus*. I own two

of these fascinating creatures—one “black and tan,” the other brown, both “smooth”—or perhaps I should say they own me. At any rate, it is miniature dachshunds that are the objects of my naturalistic study.

For quite a few years now, my special interest has been their means of communication. Yes, my friend, you



are not dreaming: miniature dachshunds—indeed, all dogs; nay, all animals—are able to communicate. They can't read aloud from even a babyish book, but they can convey complex meanings to one another and, not infrequently, to members of unrelated species, such as ours. Over the years, the patient observation of my dogs' “canine culture” has made me conversant with what I now think of as “dog language.” It is almost as though an electronic apparatus of mine had suddenly detected some astonishing new radio frequency, whose existence had never before been suspected (for ex-

ample, because I was listening to a different station). Allow me to share what I have learned.

My dogs—like their close genetic relatives, wolves—sleep much of the day. They do so primarily on the living-room couch, which, by now, smells strongly of them even when they are sleeping elsewhere. Hour after hour, the dogs contentedly loll near my legs or on top of my stomach, their slumber undefiled—until their exquisitely sensitive ears perceive, through the shroud of sleep, the low rumble of the battered panel truck belonging to the mailman. As the truck draws near, the dogs' ears twitch. The short hairs along their spines rise, and their tails bristle—a defensive reflex. A deep growl begins to build at the back of their throats, like an engine commencing to idle, or even to rev. As soon as the mail truck reaches the bottom of my driveway, both dogs leap across my chest and up onto the back of the couch, from which they can see (through a window) the front yard. They begin to bark furiously. Then they jump back onto my chest and down to the floor, run the length of the hallway, and hurl themselves against the front door while continuing, somehow, to bark.

To you, my dogs' fierce snarls would seem like nothing but a violent, meaningless cacophony. To me, though, this “cacophony” (as you call it) is rich with meaning, which I, after years of uncomplaining effort and reflection, am at last able to decode. Following is my translation of a recent such outburst of theirs. Using a complete dog-language lexicon of my own devising, I have rendered it into English:

“*God damn it! God damn it! God damn you!!! God damn you!!! God damn! God damn it! Shit!! Shit!! Shit!!! God-God-God damn it! Crap!!! Damn!!! Damn!!! God damn! God damn!!! Fuck you! Go to Hell!!! Hell!! Go to Hell!! Son of a bitch!! Damn it! Go to Hell!!! Go to Hell!!! God damn it! Damn! God damn it to Hell!!!!*” (And so on, until five or ten minutes after the mailman, himself cursing, though in his own language—as usual—had driven away, and my dogs, reluctantly, it seemed, returned to the living room and, with a couple of backward glances toward the hallway, rejoined me on the couch.) ♦