

# The dog days of winter

I awoke at 4 a.m. on a snowy February morning dreaming of and missing my parents while thinking about the dog days of summer. If I could explain the workings of the subconscious mind I would do so as I accepted the Nobel Prize for science, but I do not have a clue, only appreciation. Many problems are solved, jangling nerves and emotions soothed by our never offline mind, courtesy of nature's sleep mode.

I drifted off the night before knowing I would shovel snow in the morning. Now awake, I struggled to retain my dream before it disappeared amongst bothersome conscious thoughts of the day to come. I pulled on long johns, wool socks and tossed my jeans over a shoulder, then cranked up the thermostat as I shuffled through our dark, Victorian home to the kitchen. Radiators steaming, coffee pot perking, I propped open the back door and released our Sheltie, Sammy. Paws crunching on the white blanket-ed deck, he scampered to and fro before doing his duty and scrambling back inside for breakfast, gobbling his grub with the intensity of a starving man.

Ah, Dog Days, I thought, my dream rushing to the fore. With a jolt from a stiff cup of Joe, I flipped my mind and laptop off sleep mode and Googled Dog Days. Beginning with Wikipedia, I switched back and forth between blank mind and snow-white document screen, tracking

ever lengthening threads of information and thoughts sparked by my subconscious wanderings.

The Romans, I learned, called the dog days of summer "dies caniculares and associated the hot weather with the star Sirius ... the 'Dog Star' because it is the brightest star in the constellation Canis Major (Large Dog)." On our modern calendar the "dog days of summer" follow the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, and run from July through August in the Northern Hemisphere and January through February in the Southern.

Unaware of the original meaning of the phrase, many of us associate dog days with the lethargy of domesticated dogs during these blistering months. But, unlike the Romans, we do not sacrifice any of our furry friends in hopes of abating the heat; instead, we retreat to air-conditioned rooms or lie in the shade with our pets and take a nap.

Mmmmm, I thought, giving Sammy a pat on the head and with my brain, the computer and radiators humming scrolled down the screen, alternately reading and writing.

It seems that in the 19th century, dog days were thought of as an evil time when, according to John Brady in his book *Clavis Calenderia* (circa 1813), "the Sea boiled, the Wine turned sour, Dogs grew mean, and all other creatures became languid: causing to man ... burning fevers, hysterics and phrenises." Although

## About Voices

Voices columns are personal essays on life. To submit a column for consideration for Voices, please send the column by email to [letters@news-gazette.com](mailto:letters@news-gazette.com) with Voices in the subject line, or by mail to Voices, The News-Gazette, 15 Main Street, Champaign, IL 61824-0677. If possible, include a jpeg head shot as an attachment with email, or a head shot with mailed columns. Columns should be a maximum of 750 words.

not written in reference to the dog days, Noel Coward's lyric "only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun" is the 20th-century take on the sultry days of summer. As for 2013, in our anxiety-riddled society, the dog days are a time to wax on climate change and our impending doom.

This prompted thoughts about my melancholy dream of my parents. Jumping down the screen, the text reminded me that we live in an equally halved world above and below the equator. So, conversely, when the Southern Hemisphere is lolling through their dog days, the Northern is experiencing the shortest day of the year around Dec. 20.

Now, there is no corresponding popular phrase to capture the two months which follow, but they are associated with the winter blues.

According to the U.S. National Library of Medicine "some people experience a serious mood change during the winter months, when there is less natural sunlight. This is called seasonal affective disorder (SAD) ... and is a type of depression."

Of course, I thought to myself in the now cozy kitchen, most of us do not go mad in July or August or plunge into a clinical depression in January and February. But as a writer with a vivid imagination capable of conjuring calamities provoked by the slightest of pretenses, it is reassuring to know that they may be due to nothing more than the tilt of the Earth.

"You're just out of sorts," my mother used to say, "get busy and it will go away."

And there it was.

I stopped typing, gratefully punched the "save" button and refilled my coffee cup. I stared out the window, the weak winter sun sparkling off the crystallized earth.

My parents both passed a few years apart at the end of January, their funerals held on harsh, unforgiving days like the one yawning before me.

My father, a decorated combat GI in World War II, received a full honor guard, a line of gray-haired veterans standing at attention, freezing rain soaking their uniforms and streaming down weathered faces. I have no idea how long they waited

in the drizzle before we arrived, but they were ramrod straight and ready for their fallen comrade. It was one of the most moving and reaffirming moments of a depressing day.

Although 82, my mother died unexpectedly. She was in the hospital for minor surgery and choked to death the night before while eating. A classically trained pianist and soprano, her once perfect posture was destroyed by osteoporosis, her internal organs collapsing on one another, and she could not muster enough wind to clear her throat. A nurse discovered her when she came in to pick up the dinner tray.

I spoke to Mom earlier in the day, never thinking it could be our last conversation.

I heard my wife, Yolanda, stirring upstairs and I made another pot of coffee. Sammy, hunger satiated, stretched out near a radiator, sound asleep, his world a place of perfect contentment.

I switched off the laptop, slipped on my jeans, laced up my boots, donned a wool cap, leather coat and gloves and shoveled snow.

It was time to get busy.

Mike Pemberton's short stories have appeared in such literary journals as *Aethlon*, *Touchstone* and *Euphemism*. His first novel, "Transcendental Basketball Blues," was published in 2011. He lives in Hoopeston and can be contacted at [www.mikepembertonbooks.com](http://www.mikepembertonbooks.com).