It happened on a sunny Monday. Or was it a cloudy Thursday? We were in the front garden. Scratch that. We were in the car. Of one thing I’m certain: The moment was tectonic, as a fiery abyss opened beneath our feet. Our ears roared with the sound of wheels on pavement, as we descended into Skateboard Hell.

Zoe Mae, my (alleged) labradoodle companion, has always been a generally unflappable canine. She’s oblivious to vacuum cleaners, bicycles, and motorcycles—all highly ranked nemeses among dogs. Unfamiliar household objects have never posed the problem they can for others. (Stories about cowboy hats and bowling balls ahead.)

But skateboards? Whoa! Not even the mail carrier could cause such apoplexy: her split-second reaction to the four-wheeled creatures, however vaguely glimpsed or heard; the lunging, leaping, and barking; the very ferocity of her outrage! Scary.

In our heavily pierced and tattooed neighborhood, skateboards swarm like mosquitoes and disrupt our lives willy-nilly, whether we’re on a morning stroll or tucked in for the night. Indeed, the unpredictability of these rumbling menaces is their greatest weapon. My terror alert level is permanently tangerine.

Someone was going to get hurt, I reckoned, whether skateboarder, dog, or the middle-aged biped at the other end of the leash.

“General, we are under attack!” I recently whined to animal behaviorist Patricia McConnell, highly ranked among those who safeguard the sanity between humans and canines. “How shall we proceed?”

“Round up all the skateboards and burn them!” she cried. Clearly, she knew the score. And that’s when I realized the enormity of our problem: We were poorly strategized and sorely outnumbered by my dog’s No. 1 enemy.

FRIEND OR FOE?

Lots of dogs chase fast-moving things (file under “Duh”), and among their favorites are human-powered vehicles. Yet Zoe Mae has never lost her composure when bikes, roller skates, or scooters wheeled by.

People say that sharing your life with a dog gives you a new view of the world. So it was that under Zoe Mae’s influence I began to perceive the especially obnoxious qualities of the mini-surfboard on wheels.

We all know that the sound of a skateboard is distinct and inescapable. We can only imagine how provocative it is to a dog. Cognitive scientist Alexandra Horowitz
I KNOW BOWLING BALLS, AND YOU'RE NO BOWLING BALL!

Of course, not all prey ride a skateboard. In fact, not every high-arousal stimulus moves. There are way more things in heaven and earth when it comes to our pets’ peeves.

When Newcastle, Wash., resident Jeff Skocelas was growing up in Michigan, the family had a dog named Koko. The poor pup hated bowling balls. Koko wouldn’t dare come into the living room if the shiny black orb was on the rug.

“He barked and stalked and fussed until my dad put it away in the bowling bag. Then everything returned to normal.”

Of a shape and color that often scares dogs, the ball suggested potential aggression, a foolproof trigger for high arousal, says McConnell. “My Luke barked at a man with knee pads on, two big round black circles at eye level to Luke that looked like big round eyes that were threatening him.”

Hats are a very popular item among pets’ peeves. Headgear can be mighty confusing to a canine, causing him to not even recognize his human. But Portland, Ore., animal advocate Reed Coleman’s newest rescue, Royce, loves her in her new cowboy hat. Just stand back from the young pup when that same hat hangs on the banister at the top of the stairs.

“His hackles went up like never before,” says Coleman. “He had a full mohawk all the way down his back.”

Welhaven’s take on the inanimate antagonist? Anomaly: something outside the animal’s frame of reference.

“I remember when my Posey Alice was one and a half,” she says. “It was around Halloween. On someone’s fence was a Raggedy Ann–looking straw thing. Posey Alice sniffed it, started wagging her tail, and finally got all goofy puppy.”

Anomalies abound in a dog’s world. Witness the list amassed after I asked my Facebook friends about their pets’ peeves: electric cars and buggy-riding Amish farmers; statues and silver SUVs; saran wrap, baby strollers, and the La-Z-Boy; plastic bags dancing in the wind and the jar of sun tea.

Time and again, though, what causes the most chaos? Skateboards. But now, as they say, there’s hope.

THE ENEMY IS MET

It’s a sunny Sunday. I’m about to borrow a skateboard. I’ll put Zoe Mae’s favorite treats on it, move it around, and ask a friend she adores to ride it a few feet at a time. Over time, I’ll break it all down for her: the noise, the movement, the human on top. We’ll create new associations, and the demon will lose its power. Then, miraculously, hell will freeze over, and we’ll sit back and wave as the skateboards glide by.

▶ FORMER NPR CORRESPONDENT Ketzel Levine and her sidekick Zoe Mae are now in Ecuador working with the animal rescue group ARCA. For more information on how to help your pet overcome her fears, visit humansociety.org/allanimals.