

# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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## Recommended Song Pairings

"Ash Wednesday," Jacob Euteneuer / "Ashes to Ashes," David Bowie — it's inevitable, of course, but some of us get there faster than others (admittedly, "Dust in the Wind" might stay on theme slightly better, but we're not going to make you listen to Kansas)

"Fox and Tiger," Charlie Harmon / "Three Little Pigs," Green Jelly — fun, irreverent takes on classic tales

"He Was, After All, a Gopher," Andra Skaalrud / "Sparrow," Simon & Garfunkel — different attitudes towards sparrows, same agonizing need for love and a home

"Are You Man Or Aquatic Ectotherm?", H. L. Nelson / "Cowboys of the Sea," Bruce Springsteen (or, if you can't find that one, Charles Trenet's "La Mer") — imaginative, fishy fantasies

"Why's Wally," Mark A. Rayner / "Somebody's Watching Me," Rockwell (with Michael Jackson) — there's a fine line between paranoia and being right about everything all along.

— Laura Garrison

## Ash Wednesday

Jacob Euteneuer

It started with your nose. I always thought it was your best feature. We were sitting on the couch, and I leaned over to kiss it while you gazed at the blue glare of the TV. At first I thought it was me, that it was my mouth, my body that was turning to dust. I pulled back from your nose and put my finger to my lips.

It was almost like the sand in Jamaica where we went for our honeymoon. Fine and white. I ran it between my thumb and index finger. You stared straight forward. I think you had known about it for a while and didn't want to tell me because when I looked at you closer, I could tell you had been crying. I hadn't noticed before.

I took your hand in mine. "Let's go for a hike," I said.

You gave my hand a squeeze. "But the wind and the sun. And the other people."

I shrugged my shoulders and stood up. I helped you up from the couch and into your hiking boots—the ones we bought when we first moved to the mountains. The ones you said you needed because they rose up past your ankles and you thought they would prevent snake bites. I always told you that it wouldn't be a snake that got you, and it turned out I was right.

"It's more like the dirt from a vacuum filter than the sand from a beach," you said. You were worried about making a mess in the car. You stared at the back of your hand and gently blew on your fingertips until they dissipated in the air around us. The recirculated air from the car's A/C that sent the same wind with the same dust around and around through our lungs. I took breaths that filled my whole chest and held them in until I could feel my heart pound against my ribs.

I parked the car at the trailhead, but you didn't want to get out.

“Was it something I did?” you asked. I assured you it wasn’t. Each of your fingers was down to the first knuckle and your elbows were rounded instead of the sharp angles I had become accustomed to.

“And what if I can’t walk. Will you carry me?”

I nodded. You were limping as we got on the trail that would wind down to the stream that cut a path between the pine-covered granite hills on either side of us. I wondered about your boots, about your toes in the boots, and if they were still there or if there was only a pile of dust at the front of each shoe where your toes used to be.

We rounded the first bend, and you sat on a stump to catch your breath. You coughed and it was like a child clapping a pair of chalkboard erasers together. A white cloud that cast no shadow escaped from your lungs.

“Does it hurt?” I asked. That was what I was worried about. I didn’t want you to be in pain. I wanted it to be a release. You were disappearing before my eyes. Your eyebrows turned to dust and were carried off by the wind.

You got off the stump, and placed your hand on my shoulder for support. You straightened the bottom of your jacket, and whole clumps of dirt fell out as if you hadn’t showered once in your life. As if this was just an accumulation of so many details, so many memories, so many that you didn’t know what to do with them so you shed them off like a dog in the summer, you molted like a goose after it lays its eggs.

But it wasn’t. It was you. It was corporeal. It was real. It was you that was crumbling in the heat of the sun and taken away by the wind. I didn’t know when it would stop or if it would, but what I kept thinking about was what I would do when you were gone. Where could I get the glue that could piece together the billion tiny fragments of you that were scattered around our house, around the car, and all over the trail?

You stumbled, and I reached out to catch you, but your hand was gone. I scooped you up from the ground and carried you in my hands. You were so light, like a piece of wood that had been sitting in a fire for too long. With each step I took, I could see the parts of you rub off where my skin touched yours.

We reached the bottom of the valley. Two chipmunks were chasing each other through the dead leaves beneath the pines. I didn't know if it was out of love, camaraderie, or anger that they dashed and tackled each other, and I guess it only mattered to me. The chipmunks were going to do it no matter the reason. Up above the valley where our car was parked, a turkey vulture glided in lazy figure eights. Down by the river, a groundhog perched on its hind legs.

"I knew this would happen, just not like this." Your voice came out like a whisper. It smelled like dry earth.

I leaned in to kiss you, but you crumbled away like a cicada shell in the hands of a child. I watched the pieces of ash that had once been you twist in the wind until they reached the river, and then I couldn't see them anymore.

I said them, but what I meant was you.

**JACOB EUTENEUER** lives in Akron, OH, with his wife and son where he is a candidate in the Northeast Ohio MFA. His stories and poems have appeared in *Hobart*, *WhiskeyPaper*, and *Front Porch Review*.



# Fox and Tiger

Charlie Harmon

You ever hear the story of how Fox tricked Tiger into thinking he was the King of the Beasts? Well, one day Fox was taking a midday stroll through the forest, cigarette dangling precariously from the end of his snout, white-tipped tail swishing at a jaunty angle, when he heard a branch snap not five feet behind him. He paused long enough to TAP TAP TAP the ash from the end of his cigarette and turned to find that he had a close-up view of what might well have been thousands of jagged teeth, accompanied by a low, rumbling growl of the type that has made more than a few of the forest's denizens mess their trousers. Not Fox, though. He was slicker than Mother Goose's shit and he knew that no good had ever come from showing fear to a predator.

"Hail and well met, Tiger!" he said, bowing deep enough that the tip of his tail stopped just above the ground in front of him. "I'm afraid I didn't think to carry any breath mints today, but if you—"

And just like that Fox was flat on his back, pinned beneath an enormous, striped paw, with only his head and tail free and clear. He had, however, managed to keep the cigarette in his mouth, which is an impressive feat if you think about it.

Tiger's wide, flat face rose into view over the paw. He bared his teeth again, and Fox tilted his head to the side just in time to avoid most of a drop of tiger spit big enough to put out a small fire. Tiger just stared down at him for a moment, yellow eyes deep and impassive.

"I wonder if you'll be as funny, Fox, after I've shat you back out," Tiger said, and his voice was deep and rumbley enough that it tickled Fox's ears. Tiger hated each and every one of the creatures

of the forest and the kingdom beyond, but he hated the clever ones the most, and there was not a one more clever than Fox.

"While I'd never underestimate," Fox said through gritted teeth, wriggling like a worm on a hot sidewalk, "the comedic potential of dung . . ." He leaned his head forward, just enough to crush the burning tip of his cigarette into the soft, downy skin between Tiger's toes. Tiger leaped about a hundred feet in the air, letting out a yowl that would have broken glass if there'd been any nearby, but he landed on his feet, like always. Fox, meanwhile, was brushing dust and dirt from his fur. "That's *much* better!" He took his tail in both paws and held it up to his face, looking for dirt. "Now, as I was saying," he licked the pad of a paw and rubbed at a grass stain, "you're not going to eat me."

Tiger, who was sitting on his haunches, spreading his toes to squint the tiny burn, stopped to look at Fox. "And why is that, do you think?" He bared his teeth again, as his face was not terribly expressive. "Because I would tend to disagree."

"Oh, Tiger," Fox said, dropping his tail and placing his paws where a waist might have been. "I sometimes forget that no one ever talks to you because you're such a terrible bore—"

"Because they *fear* me," Tiger said, because deep down it *did* bother him that none of the other animals liked him, though it never occurred to him to stop trying to eat them.

"Okay," Fox said with a condescending nod, "'fear.' Anyway, that's why you haven't heard the news. I'm King of the Beasts now! All the beastly denizens of the forest, not to mention the kingdom beyond, are now my subjects. They fear my wrath, as should you."

Tiger had a lot of things to recommend him—his strength, his speed, his ability to digest almost anything he swallowed—but he was, bar none, the most gullible creature in the forest. He was also the second dumbest, after Sloth. "Wait, seriously?" he said.

"I'll tell you what," Fox said. "I really shouldn't have to, but I've always liked you—" Tiger nodded at that blatant lie, because like I said, he was a dummy. "—so here's what I'll do. I'll follow the path

in the same direction I was going, and you follow from as close or as far back as you like. If the first three creatures we encounter don't flee in terror at the sight of me, well," he sighed, "I'll let you devour me."

Tiger's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and he thought about the offer for a good long while, not realizing that he'd lost the game the moment he allowed Fox to talk to him. He looked at Fox, looked down the path, and looked at Fox again. "Promise?" he said.

Fox resumed his stroll through the forest with Tiger stalking through the trees behind him, drifting from one side to the other and back again. Tiger did his best to keep out of sight, but not only was he the size of Old Mother Hubbard's Cadillac, he was orange.

After a bit of walking, they came upon a big, thick log, upon which a roughly man-shaped creature was seated. It was covered in thick, coarse hair and beard, so long and intertwined that it was unclear where one ended and the other began. It looked like nothing more than a tumbleweed with pale, skinny arms and legs sticking out of it. It had a pair of boots much too big for its skinny little feet, made of strips of banded metal, one of which it was wearing and one of which was on the log next to it. Its bare foot was also propped up on the log, and it was doing its best to trim jagged, yellow toenails with a potato peeler.

"A pleasant day to you, my good goblin," said Fox with a small bow. "I don't want to discourage an impulse towards grooming, but I believe you may be doing that wrong."

The goblin looked up, shrieked, and fell backward off the log, all at roughly the same time. It was up in a flash, and it didn't even bother trying to run, not with that big, iron boot on its foot. It held the boot in its hands like a package and hopped on the bare foot, and with such speed that a passerby might be forgiven for thinking that that was its preferred method of travel.

"See?" Fox said, turning toward the forest behind him with his arms extended.

"Goblins are cowards," Tiger said from behind a young maple. "That doesn't prove anything."

After only a few more minutes, they ran into a group of short, stout men in grimy coveralls and miner's helmets crowded around a transparent, crystal coffin with a young woman in it. One of them stood at the coffin's head.

"We've done everything we could, men," he said. "We've tried shaking her, we've tried shouting at her, we've tried throwing cold water in her face—"

"I drew a mustache on her!" said one of the others. "DER-HAW!"

The leader glared at him for a moment, then sighed. "Yes, thank you, Marbles. That was fine work. The point is," he went on, managing to give the impression he was addressing everyone except Marbles, "we've exhausted our options. There's only one thing left to do." He pulled something out of one of his pockets. "We've got to drive this wooden stake right through—"

Fox, who had pointedly cleared his throat a few times, gave up and said, "Ahem."

The little men turned as one, and then the leader said, "SCATTER!"

There was a momentary flurry of panicked shouting and tiny, flailing limbs—one of the little men said, "But what about the princess?" and another cried, "She might as well be dead already!"—and then they were gone.

Again, Fox turned back. "Must we really see this exercise through to its inevitable conclusion?"

Tiger, who was doing his best to blend in with a circle of toadstools, said, "We agreed to three. Keep walking."

Some time later, Fox heard a couple of high, piping voices and stepped into a large clearing that looked like it had been hit by a tornado. Straw was scattered everywhere, and a pig in overalls was using a push-broom to sweep it into piles. Another pig in an apron was wearing work gloves and collecting things from the ground—

shards of glass and dishes, scraps of linen, what looked like a broken television antenna—and tossing them into heavy-duty garbage bags.

“I’m just saying,” said the pig in the overalls. “It seems like too much of a coincidence.”

“Listen, man,” said the one in the apron, “I love Iggy as much as you do—he’s our baby brother—but he’s also an unreliable piece of shit. I mean, who builds a house out of straw?” He dropped half a dinner plate into his bag with a clink. “He’s gonna show up in a few months looking for the insurance money.” Another broken plate, another clink. “And then he’s gonna blow it all on truffles.”

“Seriously, Ziggy,” the sweeping pig said. “A big, bad wolf starts stalking all three of us—a wolf who speaks exclusively in rhyming verse, by the way, so you know he’s deeply disturbed—and the very next day Iggy disappears?” He stopped and leaned on the broom handle. “That doesn’t seem like suspicious timing to you?”

“That mangy wolf with the lazy eye did all this? What, did he *blow* the house down?” The pig made a jerk-off gesture with its hoof. “Iggy probably paid him to—”

Fox, who had been quietly approaching them, cleared his throat. They both looked toward him. “Gentlemen,” he said. “It’s me.”

The pigs just stared for a moment, glassy-eyed, then took off sprinting in opposite directions. After a few seconds, the one in the overalls darted back the other way, following his brother, running so fast his feet barely touched the ground.

Fox waited until they had cleared his line of sight, then turned, raised his arms to his sides, and said, “Eh?”

A minute later, having sent Tiger on his way by royal decree, Fox lit a fresh cigarette and started walking again. If there was a bit more spring in his step and a bit more swish in his tail, who could blame him? When he finally caught up to the two little pigs—and

they had run a long way—the one in the overalls was hunched over, hooves on knees, spitting and dry heaving. The one in the apron was lying on his back in the grass, gasping for air. They glanced at Fox as he passed them, and he tipped an imaginary hat in their direction. A wicked grin split his face as he heard, just before moving out of earshot, the pig on the ground pant, “Did you see the size of that fucking tiger?”

**CHARLIE HARMON** has spent his entire life in and around Chicago. After stints as a barista, receptionist, camp counselor, and barcode salesman, he made the decision to return to college, and is now an MFA student in Columbia College Chicago’s Department of Creative Writing and recipient of the Follett Graduate Merit Award, if that’s the kind of thing that impresses you. He has been published in *Prairie Voices*, *Kittenpants.org*, and Columbia’s *Story Week Reader*. He lives with his parents, because MFAs don’t grow on trees.

## He Was, After All, a Gopher

Andra Skaalrud

The world knew a secret, a secret no human could know, which made it all the more tantalizing to Gopher, who ached for so many things, but nothing more than the secret. On the day Peter Swanson and Marie planned to leave for good, Gopher found Sergeant on the porch and said *I have come to ask you about the secret*. Sergeant's ears drooped. *The secret is the most truthful of truths*, Gopher continued, *the answer to all heartache*. Slobber inched from Sergeant's mouth. *Sergeant, it will keep them from leaving*. Sergeant lowered his head. They would not speak of the secret again.

Despite being Peter Swanson's dog, Sergeant didn't appreciate a good secret, nor did he seem to care for much at all save for rawhide and Peter Swanson's gossip. He had a frustrating relationship with his jowls, which never set correctly on his paws, and so he spent his days lifting and lowering his chin in hopes of finding elusive comfort. Truth be told, he was a dog and nothing more, not worthy of something as vital and rending as the secret—

*You say I am not worthy? You are a person and nothing more,*  
Gopher.

*I am a gopher and so much more.*

*You are no more a gopher than a sparrow is friendly. And sparrows were never once friendly.*

Most people agreed that Sergeant was, like his master, a flawed creature; yet for all of his failings, Gopher thought him an extraordinary dog. He could smell hamburgers grilling from three quarters of a mile and could hold a stick and a tennis ball in his mouth at the same time. He craved food the way all dogs crave food, but never once begged or stole from the table. More impressive, he seemed to sense Peter Swanson in the same way a thirsty animal might perceive a change in air pressure preceding a

storm. He loved Peter Swanson violently, without start or end. The scent of Peter Swanson's skin sent Sergeant into a frenzy, his desire beginning as a trembling of his tail and becoming a wild gyration that shook all the way down to the concrete foundations of the porch. Such a passion, so powerful it needed a body all its own, Gopher could usually understand. But not today.

*No one has reason to be joyful today, Sergeant.*

Peter Swanson came around the house. He wore work boots and did not look like talking. Sergeant yelped in glee.

"Get off my porch, Gopher!"

Gopher pressed his fingers into his body. His teeth felt too large, always growing, filling his mouth with tasteless stumps that would not grind down, not with rawhide or rocks or —

"Gopher!"

Gopher squealed. Sergeant, elated, bit Gopher's shoe and held tight.

"You're scaring him, Daddy!" Marie followed around the house and tugged on Peter Swanson's arm. She was short for her age, maybe twelve, but strong.

"Honey, my gun's in the truck."

"He doesn't know any better. You can't shoot him"

Peter Swanson breathed; she was right.

"Sergeant!"

Sergeant rolled to his back. His long tongue lolled to the cement.

"Sergeant!"

Sergeant gurgled and narrowed two amber eyes. He barked once, too thrilled to do much else.

*I will come back, Gopher said, but Sergeant already knew that. And tell Marie I would like a sandwich.*

Peter Swanson and Marie were Gopher's whole universe and his universe was called St. Anne. Located at the confluence of two



rivers, neither of which was particularly noteworthy, St. Anne distinguished itself by being nowhere near anything remotely considered somewhere. Its main exports were meth and venison, though oil and the wheat crop attracted enough people to keep the post office in business. In St. Anne, nothing happened and the roads were no longer roads. People never thought about things bigger than weather and rifles. Such a setting made Gopher's pursuit of the secret difficult. But necessary. So necessary, since despite his hard work, the moving boxes continued to pile higher and higher.

*Master does not want you hanging around here, Gopher.* Sergeant said when Gopher returned to the porch. These days the house stunk of fresh paint; the smell hung on the air like grief.

*You have not answered my question about the secret.*

*I do not know the secret, but I do know this.* Sergeant took the rawhide in his mouth, softened it with slobber, and sunk in his teeth. *There is no secret that can make them stay. At sundown, they will leave and they will be less yours than they were before.*

Gopher did not believe in a St. Anne where Peter Swanson and Marie could not be made to stay. He told Sergeant as much. If they stayed, Sergeant could sleep in the rye grass and bark at the buffalo. Together they could defend against the unfriendly sparrows, always peering through cracks to watch him, and they would save St. Anne, *yes! save St. Anne!*, by seeking out the virtue hidden beneath the bloody parts cut from freshly killed deer left steaming on the—

*We hate St. Anne for good reason, Gopher.*

*There are no good reasons to hate St. Anne, Sergeant.*

Sergeant sighed.

*Let me explain it again,* said Sergeant.

Peter Swanson had lived in St. Anne his entire life, got a job with the oil company, and raised two children as best he could. The economy eventually took its toll on St. Anne, as it had in many

prairie towns, bringing in vagrants and users and other bad sorts. Peter Swanson wondered how it happened here, a good Christian town, how futures so bright could be dimmed so succinctly. He wouldn't let it happen to Marie. Marie, who was so loyal and soft and lovely, and whose goodness transcended. If they stayed, St. Anne would fail her the same way it had failed Gopher. Marie, that soft, lovely, loyal child who slipped Gopher sandwiches under the fence when it was cold out and the prairie grew hard and unyielding—

*Am I making sense?* Sergeant asked.

Peter Swanson made it clear, when Gopher was only a little gopher, that giving up showed weakness. This was, in fact, the first time in Peter Swanson's entire life he was deciding to call it quits. He said he was protecting his little girl, prioritizing her, but that was just a sugary way of saying he was fed up with his worthless son and was abandoning him to make his own mistakes.

*If you are not interested in hearing what I have to say, get out of here.*

*I am interested, but you are not telling me about the secret,* Gopher said.

*Perhaps there is no secret, Gopher. Perhaps you are just chasing your tail.*

No part of Gopher thought Sergeant was right, though admittedly the secret was still just a wasp endlessly stinging him with the prospect of truth and harmony and joy. The secret was special. He wanted to be inside it, burrowed underneath it, to feel it pressing all around him. He wanted to bite into it the way he might bite into a pear and feel it run down his face and catch in his whiskers and soak into his skin. He wanted it to sustain him and make him grow; wanted it to do the same with Peter Swanson and Marie. The biggest and brightest and most boundless thing; the answer that would save them.

*No wonder they call you crazy, Gopher.*

\* \* \*

No kids played on the playground anymore, which sat on the edge of town next to the old middle school. Gopher liked the playground for many reasons. He liked how the dust settled in the cracks of his tight skin if he lay still. He liked the lack of shade, just two spindly trees long devoid of leaves. He liked when the wind blew and when the rusted merry-go-round moaned in response. Most of all, he liked the company.

"Morning, Gopher," the man said. It wasn't morning. From Gopher's estimation, it was afternoon, and he was itchy. The man shaded his eyes with his hand and smiled a rotten smile.

Gopher asked the man about the secret.

"You still doing the gopher thing?" the man asked.

Gopher asked if the man was still doing the human thing.

"What do you need?"

Gopher only needed the secret. The man shook his head.

Gopher didn't have much hope for the citizens of St. Anne. Most of them were like Peter Swanson—lifers, born on the prairie and raised on whole milk and corn meal. They took the same jobs their daddies left on the rigs, at the ranches, in the mines. Industry jobs, they called them. What was left of the industry, anyway. If they were lucky, they kept those jobs and found wives who were good at quieting babies and baking casseroles. The rest of them, people like this man, came to the park.

"Heard Pete's packing up. You gonna say goodbye at least?"

Gopher stared at the sun and thought about burning up.

"You hear me?" the man said. Gopher asked again about the secret. "You want the secret? I'll sell it to you."

Gopher didn't want the secrets the man had to sell. Yet the man asked again, told him it might help clear out some of the cobwebs tangling Gopher's mind. Would give him a discount too if he ran just one errand. Drop something off, quick and quiet, for a friend.

"Beyond one secret, there's another. Am I right?"

They exchanged a few things, plastic baggies and glances mostly. The man gave Gopher an address and a name, told him to go straight there and not get lost.

*Fine! Fine! Fine!* Gopher said, but the man did not hear.

He found a soft spot near the stairs and let his temptations come falling out. His heart broke against his ribs, over and over again, and his skin stretched and his ears heard. For a moment, he saw to the beginning, saw the mountains of ice drain away leaving a rolling desert from which a single seed gave life to the greatest expanse of prairie. He saw St. Anne and the people with so much. Among it all were Peter Swanson and Marie. They held him in their enveloping warmth and spoke peacefully, lovingly. The dust heaved and he grasped for them, the need clawing and digging and ripping. He thought of the places in St. Anne they would no longer be, the empty footsteps and untouched air. That was a throbbing no secret could dull.

After, Gopher sunk into the dark where he set about feeling nothing at all.

*Phht-phht-pheee!* Gopher sang. *Why are we not stronger?*

Someone from the house on the corner told him to shut the fuck up. Parents ushered children inside and dogs whined in the distance.

*Do you understand how hard it is to watch what you love die slowly?*

He skipped in time with his heart and looked to the sky. It was a perfect evening, hazy and infinite. The sun hung low, melting to a slow burn over the horizon. The field was ablaze, a golden white sheet of wheat, engulfed in a sea of—

*Fire!*

Yet what was a perfect evening without someone to share it with. Very soon, *in minutes!*, he would have no one to sit with, *oh no! oh no!*, while the day lingered and died. Everything left, even sunshine.

He knocked on doors, pleaded with them, *you can't leave! you can't leave!*, and imagined the truths he wanted to say to Marie. Marie in all of her lightness and holiday socks. She used to follow him constantly, even when he told her to go away—how could he do that?, *how could I do that!*—and with whom he walked as far as the bus stop where he deposited her—*leave her! how could I do that!*—so he could waste his life doing his stupid bullshit. “I’ll pick you up after school,” he told her, but he lied. Instead, he visited his friends, friends who were not his friends at all, and they met a man and made bad choices. But it was justified, wasn’t it—*expected!*—there was nothing better to do. That was the crux of it. Absolutely nothing to do in a nowhere town surrounded by nothing *nothing!* *nothing!* Peter Swanson got so angry with him, threatening to send him away and begging him to stop for everyone’s sake—“for my sake, please, I can’t do this anymore”—but Gopher didn’t listen because such a powerful, poison-induced need was like that, *isn’t it?*, impossible to see beyond.

“Leave it.”

Gopher did not remember coming to the house, but here he stood in front of the screen door holding a parcel and disturbing the fruit flies. On the road behind him, doors bolted closed and drapes hid living rooms. Unfriendly sparrows squawked and dove at the house, settling in untrimmed bushes and taunting him with their watchful beaks.

“I paid for it yesterday. So leave it.” The voice behind the screen door coughed.

*No leaving. There is too much of that these days.*

“Whatever. Just leave it.”

*Can I come in? To talk?*

“No.”

The voice was as unfriendly as the sparrows, and belonged to a face no one had seen in years. No doubt the neighbors would say

good riddance if the house, and the voice inside, collapsed into the dust.

*Do you know about the secret?*

The voice knew about the secret. He claimed to know the entirety of the world, and more about the absence of it all. Sometimes at night he heard the dogs barking, closer and closer until they invaded the walls of the house; they must have known what was happening inside, smelled the chemicals or the choke cherries, because they came from all around—from the fields, the voice swore. Even though he was sure the stinking pile of shit from the buffalo farm would cover it up, the dogs still came and barked and howled, relentless, always.

*I am very close to the secret. I must find it soon because if I do not the blank spot in my chest will be more merciless and craving than it is right now.*

“What do you think it is, then?”

*The answer!*

“You’re on the right track. Perhaps you should come in. I can explain to you the entirety of the world and more about the absence of it all. I can fix it for you, if you let me. I can fix anything, even things that don’t need fixing.”

*I do not need fixing!*

“You need something.”

Gopher had so many things, and all of them were rattling loose. He ran back home to Peter Swanson’s yelling her name, *Marie!* *Marie!* and even *Peter Swanson!* Peter Swanson, who would always exist on the corner where the county road bent out of sight from St. Anne—the place where Gopher and Marie grew tired of waiting to see his car come through the hills and badlands. Peter Swanson, whose faults were as many as Sergeant’s, but who tried a thousand times harder and still failed. Peter Swanson, who had very good reason not to love Gopher, but did in a predictable and heartbreaking way.

Sergeant waited on the porch, slobbering and wary. He did not lift his head as Gopher approached, but his chest rolled with life. Gopher sunk to the stoop and thought about the boxes taped shut on the opposite side of the door.

*Gopher, have you found your secret?*

*Yes, I have.*

*What is it?*

By now, the boxes would almost touch the ceiling, filled with finger paintings and so much broken pottery. Gopher told Sergeant about the man in the park and the people who closed their doors and huddled behind gauzy drapes. He told him about the unfriendly sparrows, the burning fields, and the voice at the screen door who claimed to know about everything but really only knew about wasting away. Gopher told him about the time he didn't pick up Marie from the bus stop, how she got lost on the walk home, how a neighbor found her in the dark. How Peter Swanson shut his eyes and became a different person when he opened them again.

*Is that the secret?* Sergeant said.

*A secret.*

*Just a secret?*

*Yes, just a secret. A riddle without an answer that will do no one any good.*

Gopher and Sergeant waited for Marie to finish packing while the Big Sky turned red. They watched the grass move for a while, as they used to do, and then looked to the line where the green of the lawn met the dull wild of prairie. Inch by inch, year by year, they had watched it creep closer. Peter Swanson used to enjoy walking the edge of town, a quarter-mile on each side, with Gopher and Sergeant following behind. Together they fought the weeds and neglect. When people saw it, they called them watchmen, gardeners, even lighthouse operators, as if St. Anne was a beacon—which made everyone laugh. But one day, they started to go out farther, the brief quarter-mile becoming a half-mile and then a mile

as Peter Swanson led them farther away. He must have seen something on the other side of that line, something fearful enough to make him realize the freedom of the prairie, the gnawing strength of emptiness, could trap him just as much as bars.

Marie came through the front door. She placed a sandwich in a plastic bag in front of Gopher. His cheeks throbbed.

"Peanut butter and sugar. It's from my lunch, so it's a little soggy."

Marie sat down between Gopher and Sergeant and touched the soft spot of fur behind Sergeant's ears until his eyes slipped closed.

"Dad says you've completely lost it," Marie began. She smiled in the orange street light and Gopher's eyes sparkled at the sight of it. "I think you're sick is all. He keeps saying you're dangerous. But he thinks the worst of people."

She paused.

"You heard we're leaving tonight, right?"

Gopher nodded.

"There's still time, though. I read about places you can go to get better. Not like those clinics Dad wanted to send you to—nicer than that. There are a few near Billings. I bet Dad would pay for it. His company found him a good job there."

Gopher rubbed his lips across the sandwich, breathing in yeast and white flour.

"I don't want to leave, either. I like St. Anne just fine. My friends are here. And you're here. Dad just thinks we'll be better off if we don't have to deal with this stuff anymore."

He knew she meant him. Him and his tight skin and ceaselessly growing teeth and the sparrows always hovering overhead.

"That's not true. You'd be better, too."

He did not doubt Marie, for she was wiser and more hopeful than he could ever be, but if all home meant was belonging somewhere then St. Anne was his home and no amount of wishing could change that. Outside of St. Anne was a world where people lived in boxes, the cars were like sparrows, and the signs changed



ruthlessly. A world where he would have to stop doing the thing that kept him exactly as happy as he was the moment he first saw her face, an angel hugged by pale light. No—St. Anne was a darkness he couldn't overcome. It was his secret, his meaning of life, his question without an answer, an addiction purposeful in the ways it took and continued to take from him. How could he leave it—how could he, *how could I? how could I?*

"You could. I know you could."

*Marie, please do not go*, he said. He held her sleeve and she touched his hand. *Marie, please do not go!*

Her skin felt dizzying on his. She told him to be quiet, Dad might hear. Gopher didn't care. He wanted to be heard, make everyone know it was a travesty.

*An absolute travesty!*

"You can get better."

Gopher held her close. He told her they belonged together and they *belonged here!*, at home, in the place where they were born, where they spent hours feeling the wind. He smelled the yellow dust and flowers in her hair. She was as fragile as he remembered, a little baby who used to hang on his foot and beg him to stay when all he wanted to do, *needed to do! absolutely needed!*, was to go to the park, get fucked up, and pretend good news existed in St. Anne.

The front door opened, and Gopher clung tighter. Marie's small hands touched the wasted muscles of his arms, pushing and pulling at once.

"Sergeant!" Peter Swanson said. Sergeant growled and latched onto Gopher by the scruff of his neck. His teeth, flecked with plaque and rawhide, dug deep into his skin while his jaw shook and refused to let go. When Marie collapsed from Gopher's arms, Peter Swanson picked her up and put her inside, only then taking Sergeant by the collar and pulling him away. The warmth of her hands did not leave his arms, and her screams—*always screaming!*—

grasped at the corners of his body. Sergeant bared his teeth and showed his allegiance.

“Meth head piece of shit.”

Peter Swanson opened his mouth to speak again, watching Gopher with half-closed eyes, undoubtedly searching for the words he’d practiced so many times—“I’m sorry for leaving, I’m sorry for not being around when it mattered, I’m sorry for letting this place take you”—but as Gopher squirmed on the ground and dug his fingers under the dirt, all the things they wanted from each other, all the unspoken prayers and wishes, unhooked and fell away. There it was: Gopher was just another useless addict who would never get better. He would probably end up killing himself or someone else one day. Peter Swanson closed his mouth and dropped his hands. It was the end of all things worth saying on the subject.

Peter Swanson and Gopher waited with the gray sky, fully aware that when it was gone they would forever be as distant as two people could be. The secret would leave St. Anne for good and the specter inside Gopher would claw and dig and rip until it found its way out. Peter Swanson and Marie, harmony and joy and truth, gone like sunshine. Because change is like finding a whole flock of friendly sparrows. Meaning it doesn’t ever happen. After all, Gopher wondered, why would he want to be a human in a bad world when he could be a gopher and live in pure ecstasy. He closed his eyes, forgot the secret.

Truly, it was a beautiful evening to be a gopher.

**ANDRA SKAALRUD** is a writer and young profesh living in the Boston area. She enjoys planning pub crawls and writing for other people’s blogs.

# Are You Man Or Aquatic Ectotherm?

**h. i. nelson**

When the slits open on my neck, at first it doesn't feel any different than taking a normal breath, like I've been breathing this way my whole life. I'm standing in my bathroom after a shower, inhaling the escaped tub-steam, toweling my hair, and thinking about the argument my girlfriend Lindsey and I just had. I'd showered to calm down, relishing the heat and reassuring pat of droplets on my skin. She'd threatened to leave again, and that panicky feeling had taken over. Heartbeat like a drum circle, the weight of gravity a whale on my chest, ragged breaths like I'd been running since we met.

Sometimes she screams like she wants to be heard by the whole world, smacks my cheeks and arms, and one time, she smashed the guitar my dad gave me before he died. This anger comes from her black hole, so I don't get mad. It sucks in everything until there's nothing left. No light, no warmth. But I let her do these things to me because I love her, because I want her to let it all out.

I can't bear the thought of her leaving. When I was eight, my mom left. Just thinking about Lindsey leaving too makes my throat close down small. I can't breathe with her here or with her gone. I don't know what to do. Leaning my arms on the counter and looking in the mirror, I see my steamed-over face.

I tell myself Lindsey is not that bad. "She could be worse," I tell the foggy face in the mirror. I decide to apologize and hang my towel on the hook.

That's when I feel skin unfolding on my neck. Like someone is opening several tiny potted meat lids. After breathing through these new openings for a moment, my brain registers that my nose has stopped working. My intellect kicks in. Inhaling through the slits is like eating through my bellybutton. I have to have water.

Now. But what water? I have no idea. I've only been a land-dwelling being. Water's for baths and showers, pools, for beach vacations and summer sprinklers with my friends.

I gasp and flail, call "Lindsey!" then this new biological imperative takes over and I pop in the sink stopper, fill the sink, and plunge in my head and neck until my nose touches the bottom. The slits suck in the city water, and somehow I don't drown. I decide they're gills. I remember learning in 7th grade science how fish are ectotherms, how their survival is dependent on their environment.

I've never been able to open my eyes underwater, but now I do. It's wonderful, the way my hair strands' shadows almost shimmer, undulating with the water's slight movement. I move my head and the shadows dance.

This water is warm. It's quiet. I still myself and listen to my heartbeat. The lub-dub is my sonal signature. I am unequaled in this sink.

When Lindsey trudges into the bathroom she screams, "What the hell!" while trying to pull my head out of the water. I gurgle, "Nobe, I canb't beeb outb ob waterb nowb!" I'm pretty sure she doesn't understand what I say because then I hear her through the water on her cell saying, "Yes, I'd like to report an emergency. My boyfriend is trying to drown himself."

I yank my head out and try to gather air into my old lungs while yelling, "No, hang up! This isn't what it looks like!" before I have to drop my head back into the water.

It becomes clear that we won't be able to communicate the way we always have. So I pull my head out again and wheeze at Lindsey to get me a notepad and pen. When she brings them, I blindly write, my arms on the counter, *Grew gills on neck. Must stay in water. We can make it work*, and push the notepad her way. She's had it up to her own neck with me, I know. But I don't want this gills thing to be the end of us.

I can't see her reaction, but I motion for the notepad again, and write, *Have idea. Put Gilligan in a glass and bring me his cleaned bowl, sealant, and that 3' stretchy rubber w/ 6" hole cut out middle.*

Through the water I hear her say, "Are you kidding me?" I write, *No. Please. I have to breathe.*

She stomps off, then after a while comes back with the things.

My gills are screaming for air by the time I bend over and pop my head in the fish bowl. Displaced water sloshes out, but then I can breathe again. She glues the rubber onto the bowl and seals the edges around my neck. I'll probably get a bad rash, but I'd rather that than die of suffocation.

Once I'm sure the sealant is dry, I slowly stand, holding the bowl steady. It's unwieldy. Lindsey looks at me like I've grown two heads. I burble, "Comb hereb, babeb," and try to pull her into my arms. She flinches and pulls away. It's then I wonder how we will kiss. She marches into the bedroom and shuts the door. I decide to give her some time. This thing is hard for both of us.

I walk to the kitchen and see poor Gilligan in a short glass on the counter. Feeling bad for him, I sprinkle some food in the glass. He doesn't eat any, so I know he's upset. I lean down and say, "Meb toob, Gillb. Meb toob." He probably doesn't hear me, through two glass barriers and all the water. Shaking my head and slopping the water from side to side, I wonder how Gilligan does it, day in, day out. Tomorrow, I'll buy him a new bowl.

My stomach grumbles. Looking in the fridge at the cold cuts, cheese, grapes, I realize I have no idea how I'm going to eat. I lose my appetite and decide to go to bed. At the bedroom door, I turn the knob and it's locked. I rap on the door and speak through it, "Heyb babeb, comeb onb andb openb upb." I wait for a response, but there's none. I let it go and head toward the couch.

I'm unable to get comfortable with the fish bowl on my head. Even sitting up in the recliner is uncomfortable. The water drowns out the fridge's click, the living room fan's clack, all the constant

electric hum. While sitting there, I remember a conversation Lindsey and I had once. We were talking about emotions. She'd said, "I think humans and animals are hungry, all the time. A great, gnawing hunger for love and affection over anything." I'd said, "Over anything at all? What about food? What about air? We have to eat and breathe." She'd just glared at me like she does. I pulled her in for a hug, stroked her hair and said, "I'm sorry. I know what you mean." I think about this for a long time. Eventually I fall asleep.

Lindsey picks me up out of my fish bowl and holds me over the toilet, a sinister grin spread across her face. Then she throws me into the frigid water and I'm swirling, swirling . . . I feel myself freezing before I'm even pulled into the toilet's dark recesses. I wake up with a start, thinking my face and head would have a cold sweat if they weren't already in water.

It's 4a.m., but I try the bedroom door again. This time it opens, and I know she isn't upset anymore. I undress and slide into bed, press against her, feel her heat on my flesh, trying to keep the bowl tilted as far on my side as possible. It's awkward, but I still feel myself getting hard. Even with gills, I'm still a man.

I can't kiss her body awake, but I softly rub the skin on her arms, the dip between her shoulder blades, the curve of her throat. She rolls over, but her eyes are shut tight so she won't see the bowl. I don't mind. I'm past the point of caring. Then she sits up. Uh oh. I know what she wants. I'm going to give it my best shot.

She climbs on top of me and slides down. I'm lying on my back and the bowl is very uncomfortable, but at least it sinks into the bed somewhat. Then she starts doing that hip thing. I love it, but the sensation of the back of my head hitting the inside of the bowl, the water jostling around, makes me panic. I jerk my head up and almost collide the bowl with her head, catching it right before impact.

"I'mb sorryb babeb. Giveb meb justb ab secondb, okb?"

She nods, but I can tell she's exasperated. She didn't get off. Dammit.

I have an idea, and run to the bathroom, filling up the tub enough to cover my head. I light the candle she has in there, then come back and pull her to the bath. I bend over, take the bowl off my head. The sealant rips off some of my skin, but I don't care. I submerge myself in the tub and motion her in.

She gets in and straddles me like she either can't wait or she's pissed. For half a minute she bobs up and down, the tub water slapping in waves back and forth, back and forth. I don't even care that on the back strokes, the water uncovers my gills.

She stops. Then I hear her loud and clear through the water, "Dammit. The water keeps going in my vag. It's freaking me out. I can't fucking do this."

"Nob nob, don'tb stopb."

"Look, I want a boyfriend, not a goddamn fish!" She pushes herself up and out of the tub.

With her back to the candlelight, her face is in shadow. What I can see of it through the water and dim light looks foreign to me, as if I haven't been sleeping and living with this girl for five months. This angry girl. I feel for sure she would hold my head down in the water until I stopped thrashing, if I didn't have gills. I hope she doesn't break my fish bowl.

When she fumes out, I stay in the bathtub. I stay there all night.

The next morning, I awaken with patchy scales all over my body. My thoughts start to repeat themselves, words take longer to form. I randomly open and close my mouth.

It's hard to climb out of the tub. My body is shrinking. I lope to the kitchen, lope back, dump Gilligan in the bath. With great difficulty, I climb back in, circle around the tub. I am weightless. I stay here for what seems like days while Gilligan's fins tickle my

shins, now completely covered in scales. I look down at my changing toes.

Soon, I won't have fingers to call anyone, to write anything, to touch Lindsey. I will only swim and breathe.

"She'll be back soon," I say to Gill and myself. "I'm sure she will."

*I think small now. Gill is friend. But sad. Must think think. A face. A name. Is Linn-see. I keep swim. She come me.*

*I hunger.*

*I see her. At high. She unplug. Why Linn-see? Gill swim and swim. I swim and swim. But black hole pull.*

**H. L. NELSON** is head of *Cease, Cows* literary magazine and Associate Editor of *Qu* literary journal. Her publication credits include *Writer's Digest*, *PANK*, *Hobart*, *Connotation Press*, *Metazen*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Thrice Fiction*, etc. Her poem "Absolution" was nominated for the 2013 *Best of the Net*. She is editing an anthology, which includes stories by Aimee Bender, Roxane Gay, Lindsay Hunter, and other exceptional women writers. Her web site is [hlnelson.com](http://hlnelson.com).



## Why's Wally

Mark A. Rayner

*I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky  
and laid myself open for the first time to the benign  
indifference of the world.*

Albert Camus, *The Stranger*

The shirt lay on his bed. It mocked him. It compelled him to wear it, but he didn't want to. He hated the shirt.

That and the stupid hat.

What if he didn't put them on? That was always an option, surely? He had some other clothes, didn't he? He went to his closet and was mildly horrified to see that it was stuffed with striped shirts, red and white bobble hats, and an assortment of jeans. How had his life come to this? He made his way to the back of the closet and could find nothing but red and white stripes. Red and white. The jeans were all blue, the same style. Not even brand name.

Wally looked out at the bedroom, morning sunshine angling in through the venetian blinds.

The light reminded him of Algeria, dry as the pages of a book. Wally had just finished reading *The Stranger*, and it haunted him. He'd been to Algeria, of course. He'd been everywhere.

Wally had met Camus, too, during his time-travelling days. In fact, Wally had met the French writer while Camus was authoring his other famous book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

He remembered the conversation they'd had over cheap wine in a crowded Parisian bistro: "For me, chér Charlie, the only serious philosophical question is this: is life worth living? The world is irrational, and yet . . . yet, we yearn for happiness and the rational. Why? It is absurd. There is no sense to it. This is the heart of my

thinking, Charlie. The absurd is born of our human need for reason and the unreasonable silence of the world."

"But don't you feel as though you are being watched?" he'd asked, not bothering to correct Camus about his name. It didn't matter where he went; everyone seemed to use the local version of Wally. In America he was "Waldo," in Germany "Walter," in France "Charlie." Better not to make waves, to blend in. His instinct was to hide in plain sight, so he rolled with it, always.

"Watched?"

"Yes. Don't you feel like you are constantly being watched?"

"God?" Camus had said, a look of amusement on his face.

"God? What? No. People. That *people* are looking for you?"

"You mean the Nazis?"

"They could be Nazis, but not just the Nazis. I don't know," Wally had said. "They *are* looking for me, though, I'm not making that up. It's like they're searching for me."

Camus had thought about that for a moment and smiled warmly. He had grasped Wally's right bicep, squeezing it like an old friend: "Madness has a kind of freedom in it, though you are in a prison, nonetheless. It is another duality."

And then the crowd had started to thin, and it was time for Wally to go. When he was not absolutely alone, he couldn't be comfortable unless there was a crowd. He only felt safe surrounded by hundreds, or thousands. It was probably why he never worked things out with Wilma. Or her identical twin, Wenda, for that matter. Wally blushed as he remembered the three of them together, that one night. But three, as it turned out, wasn't a big enough crowd for it to work.

Was Camus right? Was it possible there was nobody watching him? If that were so, then there would be a kind of freedom he'd never felt. He wouldn't have to be so circumspect. He wouldn't have to spend all his time trying to blend in with the crowd. That could get challenging, he'd found, especially in more exotic locales, times, realities . . . Wally wondered what Camus would have made

of his stint in a dimension known as Clown Town. The place had been nightmarish. Apocalyptic. Everyone was a clown, and everything was shaped like a clown. Camus would probably have enjoyed the delicious absurdity of the place and time. It was one of the worst scenes Wally had ever found himself in, but if he had been wearing something other than his stripped shirt and bobble hat, those clowns would have ended up juggling with his skull. He knew it.

So the shirt had saved him on occasion, but it was, as Camus hinted, a prison. Like Meursault, the main character in *The Stranger*, Wally faced the rest of his life behind bars. Though unlike Meursault, his life could be very long.

Wally realized that he was still standing in his closet, naked except for his underwear and socks. Red and white striped boxers and knee-highs, of course. His dresser was filled with them.

He walked to the window and opened the blinds. Outside he could see his yard. It was spring again, though he couldn't really tell you how long it had been spring. The trees were in bloom, and bright blue forget-me-nots dotted the lush green grass. He could see Woof's tail wagging strongly enough to shake his whole back end, his front obscured by a bush. The dog had probably found a rabbit or some other creature, helpless, trying to hide.

Wally looked at the shirt and all his other clothes on the bed. When he put them on, and picked up the walking stick, he would be whisked away, as he always was. He looked out at the yard, dappled in the May sunshine, and realized that he'd never been in it. He'd never felt the grass between his toes.

He took off his socks. Slipped out of his boxers and tried to open the window. It was frozen shut. He grabbed his walking stick and smashed the panes of glass. He climbed through, cutting himself in the process. Red stripes of blood wound down his pasty white legs, but Wally didn't care.

The grass felt wonderful.

Human-shaped, monkey-loving, robot-fighting, pirate-hearted, massively-bestselling wannabe, **MARK A. RAYNER** is actually Canadian. By day he is a university prof and by night, a writer of humorous, satirical and fabulist novels, squibs and other drivel. (Some pure, and some quite tainted with meaning.) He's published a collection of flash fiction & three novels, the most recent being *The Fridgularity*.



## On the cover:

### "THE BLIND TOAST"

**Pedro Abreu**

**PEDRO ABREU** draws inspiration from his immediate surroundings and shoots just at the right moment to capture the mystical momentum rather than the narrative. His motives are of unknown protagonists at non-places. He earned his BFA at the Cooper Union School of art and Architecture in New York City. As an independent artist, Pedro has exhibited in numerous solo and group shows internationally including the Indépendants Salon des Artistes in Paris and El Museo del Barrio in New York. You can find his work online at [pedroabreuphotography.com](http://pedroabreuphotography.com).

