

# Animals in the Yard

and other circumspections

Benjamin Obbiter



# Animals in the Yard and Other Circumspections

by Benjamin Obler

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## About the Author

Benjamin Obler is the author of the novel *Javascotia*, published by HamishHamilton/Penguin Books UK. His short fiction has appeared in Slate, The Evansville Review, and Qwerty. In 2014 his short story “The White Man’s Incredulity Furrows His Brow” won first prize in the fiction contest judged by Lydia Millet with the journal *Puerto Del Sol*. Obler’s nonfiction has appeared in the London *Guardian*, Campaign for the American Reader, Writer’s Block, *ThirtyTwo* Magazine, and Mill City Bibliophile. He holds a Master of Letters from the University of Glasgow, Scotland, and teaches writing at The Loft Literary Center of Minneapolis ([www.loft.org](http://www.loft.org)), and Gotham Writer’s Workshop ([www.writingclasses.com](http://www.writingclasses.com)) in New York City.

He has spoken on BBC Radio and on KFAI in Minneapolis. In October 2014, Obler co-hosted “The Correspondence Salon” a literary event in Kingston, New York.

He lives and writes in Stone Ridge, New York, with his partner Theresa and with the bears, foxes, turkeys, snakes, frogs, mice, chipmunks, hawks, butterflies...

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## Introduction

Circumspection is careful consideration of all circumstances and consequences. That's what these pieces are. "Animals in the Yard" is primary among them, because it concerns the imagination—a preoccupation of mine. People with overactive imaginations know the hazards that daydreaming poses to professions, relationships, and well-being. And they know the richness it affords an otherwise staid life. In the title piece I'm dressing for work in the morning, gathering up those tokens of stature, the corporate ID badge on a lanyard, wallet, phone, keys, etc., when I look out the window to the yard below and leap into a flight of storybook fancy about the neighbor's dog and a yard-bound bunny. This moment speaks for the five-year span during which I wrote these pieces, while I worked full-time in publishing, first in Minneapolis, then in New York City.

There's an old saying that to be a writer working in publishing is like being a butcher because you love animals. There's truth to that. But a closer analogy might be a zookeeper. A zookeeper fosters life rather than slaughter, but he still is responsible for the unglamorous business behind the scenes. I count myself lucky. I worked in educational publishing, primarily around reading instruction and assessment for K-12. There are publishing sectors that are worse for a writer's burgeoning hopes and developing voice: marketing, advertising, B2B, for example. I never had to poison the waters of my tone with hyperbole or clutter my diction with legal effrontery. I often edited nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama towards the goal of quality prose, clarity, sense, readability, etc. Yet the longer I worked in publishing, the more my energies went to people management, meetings, hiring vendors, drafting contracts, invoicing, scheduling, and production issues whose object could have been crates of soup or dish sponges. All the while, my hours lengthened, and my cortisol levels rose.

During these stretches, some evenings, alone in my apartment, for an hour or two, I would get to engage with the blank page—splash in the verbal bath. Daytime was spent in constant engagement with busy, beleaguered, belabored, bedogged people—an editorial staff. Evenings, I was blessedly alone. The results are thought explorations in directions I could not travel by day. They are rejections of professional necessity. They gave me the sustaining sense that behind the false front of my workday life was an identity as a writer. The Editorial Manager frowned; the Writer smiled.

The stories come in many forms and modes. “The Reader” is flash nonfiction in which I hand off an assignment to a freelance copy editor in a mall parking lot. Every word of it is reportage. “The Night of the Skunk” is a story set in everyone’s least favorite place: a gruelingly boring and meeting. It too transpired much as described. “A Place Called Hell”—you might think the title says it all, but though it is set in a workplace cafeteria, the hellish place is Florida as described by a colleague, a place where, he reports, people don’t change.

There are fond reminiscences, such as one of John Updike (“A Mighty Oak Falls”) upon the occasion of his death; and “December Tale,” which recounts the communal warmth I experienced with neighbors while digging out cars out after a blizzard. Language and matters grammatical get their share of attention. “Neologism in Progress” seeks the right word for the blasting of cell phone music in public. “Plan B” sees me quibbling with a crucial vagary in a Reuters story about the pregnancy drug. “Alternative Punctuation,” written on a plane out of NYC on the first travel day after hurricane Sandy, introduces the world to the Concomitant Mark, the first new punctuation mark in.... well, perhaps ever!

Plenty of the pieces take very mundane matters as their subjects: “Noise” reflects on cacophonous Brooklyn, as a neighbor’s violin practice penetrates a ceiling; “On a Bike” is a prose ode to the release of worries that pedaling brings; in “Parfait” I shamelessly mimic Nicholson Baker in close observation of an airport food purchase.

Finally, as a category, are responses to literary and cultural events. “Against Readings” is my reaction to attending a Denis



Johnson reading in which his ego seemed to upstage him. “Jobs” warns against the kind of virulent aestheticism that embarrassed the death-bed Steve Jobs. “Libra” offers a quick thought on male characteristics in DeLillo’s novel. “Saunders” reports on banter between me and George Saunders at his 2013 Brooklyn reading.

These pieces were written initially for no one but myself. They are varied. If they are united by anything it might be by their voice, which baldly seeks immersion in something, anything, other than the tedious, impersonal, frantic business of work. I hope they might provide the same immersion for you. I hope they might prompt you to take new notice of the animals in your yard.

## ANIMALS IN THE YARD

Homeownership promised to be an education: in repairs, in responsibility, in acclimatization to the guillotine of massive debt. An unexpected outcome, though, has been acquiring an appreciation for what inspired Beatrix Potter, E.B. White and other children's authors to write stories of the common critters that live in yards and their purlieus—animals with names, personalities, families, conflicts, and crises.

It's early April now, and two consecutive mornings this week, I've been at a window at just the right time to spot a blue heron (I think that's what he is) flapping slowly by in the sky, long neck extended, headed towards Webber Park, where I believe he spends time, or perhaps resides, in the pond. His travel is so regular—I saw him almost daily last fall—it's easy to think of it as a commute, such as to a job; and his manner so stately and graceful, personification is almost reflexive. He's surely a *Mister*, and his coat of slate suggests the civic utility of a delivery uniform. He's likely employed in such a capacity—always has been. He's affable and dutiful. When he hands you a parcel, he remarks on the weather, chuckles, and tips his hat.

Earlier this week I saw him from the kitchen window, and this morning from the bedroom window as I stepped into a pair of pants. (Evidently I do this while looking out the window—Catholic shame?) I wondered where he had spent the winter. Continuing my study out this second-floor window, down into the yard, I saw a rabbit bounding around the parking pad, and the neighbor's dog, a smush-faced, snorting but harmless Pug named Taco, on the other side of the fence beside the woodpile. The dog and the rabbit seemed not unaware of one another, but seemed unworried, which surprised me—one being a prey animal and the other a spastic pooch who barks terrifically at most everything. It was as if they understood that the fence separated them absolutely—the same understanding I have with an irascible neighbor on the other side my house.

This perceived understanding, as if these animals tolerate each other reluctantly as some of us humans do, and the sight of them going about leisurely business in the morning sun, with frost still glistening on the shingles, brought to mind a sense of character and setting such as is depicted in children's stories. The simplicity of such tales can be painfully appealing, especially as an observer gathering his corporate ID badge, wallet, cell phone, iPod, and workout clothes, in preparation for my own travels to a dreary office. Yes! The happy lives of garden critters! How rich with potential! What marvelous blank slates! I'll write a book about a yardful of animals! So less complicated than human lives. What'll happen? I can work that out later.

As I tottered about the house, I continued to imagine this animal kingdom, and was surprised to realize how much I knew about it. With its strong sense of very local community, circumscribed by fences, alleyways and train tracks, its history and growth flowered richly in my imagination. The rabbit, only last year, had been a bunny, born into a family of three on the irascible neighbor's side. They frequently wriggled into my yard through a fence-gap in the corner of our garden. When the bunnies were no bigger than an apple and browner than they are now, they would huddle along our fence, noses twitching, getting to know the place, figuring out, by their mother's example, how to be bunnies. Taco, in his own yard, held in by chain-link, didn't cower and twitch. He stormed and snuffled, exiting his master's house through a flap in the back door, which seemed ripe for being illustrated from the grounds-eye view natural to the animal-based children's story. Taco prowled from hedge to birdfeeder, captious and impatient, collar jingling. Isn't there always a grumpy old man figure in these fables, whether a bear or an ornery badger?

The whole conjunction of neighboring yards could be seen as the cross-sectional set, like an apartment in a French film, of an animal epic. I remembered now how, our first summer here introduced several frogs who enjoy a particularly well-shaded corner. They leapt out of the tall grass when I came around with the mower—a thrilling scene in the tale that was being written. Can't you just picture it, the

layout across the page: Bumpy, the full-grown brown one (he's probably a toad), springs expertly to safety amid the landscaping rocks, his frog legs hanging back in mid-air. He shouts, in that storybook dialogue inaudible to human characters, to the younglings, the small, bright green boys, who are of course frightened but must be brave. They too escape the harm of the massive growling machine. (In real life, the outcome was not so rosy.)

I remembered how the first winter snow made evidence of the rabbit's travels during the night—little triads of padded prints forming trails up the concrete path, a smudge showing the spot where he hid underneath the barbeque. The first spring introduced a new character: the dastardly squirrel who nests in an elm high above Taco's territory and Taco's owner's hammock. He rampages from branch to branch, as we humans travel the skyways of downtown Minneapolis. Fleetly, he reaches our garage roof and from there our tomato garden, which he raids brazenly, leaving half-chomped Brandywines on fence posts as taunting testimony—like a hoodlum leaving graffiti.

It seemed I had a whole ensemble. The blue heron (an avian version of Mr. Furley from *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*), the family of bunnies led by the reticent matron, the toads in the shade fathered by Bumpy, house-bound Taco, and Kraznak, the deranged criminal squirrel despised by all. What a cast. This stuff writes itself.

The next thing that seemed needed was the chapters or titles in the book series. The coming and going of the seasons, and these animals' episodic appearance in the context of my human schedule, was a perfect structure. "The Arrival of the Ants." "Taco Loses His Cool." "How Kraznak Ruined the Garden by Eating and Befouling Hundreds of Tomatoes Despite Elaborate and Plenteous Netting." For example.

Finally, as in TV episodes, or book chapters, the appearance of other guests extended this serial sense. That week or two in fall when flocks of Canadian geese pass overhead in noisy Vees. The arrival of cardinals and blue jays. The stray cat found sleeping in the garage last summer when I left the door open for an afternoon. The mice who also holed up there behind stacks of shingles. The time a

woodchuck was spotted prowling the alley. Even the massive infestation of dandelions we battled our first spring seems like a conceivable story element—a passage in a great novel that began before we moved in, and which will go on long after.

Where this quaint notion falls short, however, is in its practical reality, beyond daydreaming as one sets off for another unappetizing day in cubeland. For the actual potential of this animal cavalcade to tell the kind of stories I want to tell, to my satisfaction, is much less than it seems at a glance. (Like a statistical anomaly, we'll throw out Orwell.) What can I do—make Bumpy an alcoholic and Taco a war veteran with untreated PTSD? What I really want to address in fiction is the isolation of the internet age—but I've never seen any of these critters using a computer. Though Kraznack would make the perfect online predator.

## A SCENE

“Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit producer of ‘Sesame Street’ and other kids’ programs, is cutting about one-fifth of its work force because of the economic downturn. The New York-based company said Wednesday that it’s eliminating 67 of 355 staff positions.”

—*Associated Press, March 11, 2010*

>> Next.

>> Hi there! How are you today?

>> Fine, thanks. Mister—

>> Bird.

>> Bird. Right. Have a seat.

>> Why, thank you! Don’t mind if I do!

>> My god, can you fit in there? There’s a couch in the lounge, if

—

>> Just made it! A-OK!

>> Good God, look at you. Your legs have giant rings on them. I’m sorry. Okay, it says here, Bird, Big. Well, you’re not joking, are you?

>> No, sir!

>> Well, I’m Arlen Knudsen, your employment agent. Thanks for coming in to RandCorp Temps today.

>> Great to meet you, Arlen! Your name starts with the letter A! Like apple! And annnnnnnnchovy! Do you like anchovies, Arlen?!

[peculiar silence]

>> Okay. Um, let’s start with your details. You’re 44. 6 foot 6. A yellow canary. You didn’t put down a social. I’m gonna need that.

>> Today’s job search is brought to you by the number seven!

>> What?

>> And the letter M!

>> Mr. Bird, could you excuse me one moment? I’m just going to check in with my supervisor.

[Knudsen smiles falsely, gets up, and crosses the room with a stiff back and bulging eyes, trying to appear normal and calm, hoping that it can be proven that the recent long hours and endless interviews with applicants have caused a delusion and in fact there is not a overlarge canary sitting in the chair before his desk which, he reminds himself, has been occupied recently by a series of delivery drivers, accountants, hedge fund managers, and so on, all of whom were perfectly real and not imagined. In the kitchenette, he drinks three paper cones of water in succession, and takes a deep breath. His supervisor would actually be annoyed to be consulted, and anyway doing so might put Knudsen on the other side of his own desk, should his brain be playing tricks on him. When he returns to his office, the bird is singing happily to himself in a nasal voice, neither exactly male nor female, far too loudly, and with deranged cheer.]

>> Sunny day! Everything's right as rain!

>> Okay, sorry about that. [Knudsen sits again.] It's been a bit crazy around here lately.

>> That's okay, Arlen! I'm glad you came back!

>> Where was I? Residence? It just says "Sesame Street." No city, no state?

>> Won't you tell me how to get! How to get to—

>> Just the street is fine. How about qualifications, Mr. Bird? The nitty-gritty, eh? Tell me about that.

>> I like to sing songs, talk to my friends, read books, and learn!

>> Mm-hmm. And your work experience. Do you have any? Lemme guess—coal mine, ha ha?

>> I don't know what you mean! I've been singing songs about the alphabet and talking to my friends and going to Mr. Hooper's shop and learning about shapes and colors for all my life!

>> Is that so?

>> Right as rain, Arlen!

>> Great, great. [Knudsen speaks with a degree of condescension now, thinking if he can just pacify this fantasy until reality returns, or until maybe it is revealed as a practical joke perpetrated by his coworker Jim, intending to be a stress-reliever, something to break

up the monotony, then he'll be fine and not have an actual full-blown crack-up.]

>> That IS great!

>> And what kind of work are you interested in, Mr. Bird? These are very tough times, you know. Demand is high, we've got Ph.Ds on the books with nothing for them.

>> I was thinking something federally mandated! You know, get a piece of those stimulus dollars! Maybe paving roads!

>> That'd be perfect, Big B! I have hundreds of jobs like that. It pays a thousand dollars an hour, has full benefits, and a company car—a BMW 530. I tell you what. I'm going to need some references. Is there a former boss I could call, maybe some letters of recommendation?

>> Today's job search is brought to you by the letter M!

>> No, no, not those types of letters. Who are your friends?

>> Gosh, there's Oscar the Grouch, Elmo, Grover. So many! But my best friend is Snuffle-upagus.

>> Snuffle-upagus?

>> Yes! The only problem is— [for once, Big Bird hangs his head and speaks in a sad tone] — no one else knows he exists. No one else has ever seen him. And no one believes me when I say he IS real!

>> Oh, don't worry. We get that all the time.