

Most of a Dog

I'm on the living room sofa when it happens. Pete the corgi-shepherd mix saunters over to the window and starts yapping. I find this irritating. I'm trying to write a short story for a creative writing class I'm scheduled for next semester, and he's ruining my concentration. Well, it's not like inspiration is arising anyway, so I get up so I can see what he's barking at.

It's extremely bright outside. Technically, Pete is an outdoor dog, but I have him and the two cats inside to keep them from getting heat stroke. I couldn't be more grateful for air conditioning. It's so bright and sunny outside that at first it's hard to see what's got his attention. But then I notice movement; 400 feet across the huge yard on the other side of the lake, there's some animal taking a drink.

I ought to say now that this isn't my property. I'm just watching over it while some elderly friends of my parents are away. I've known them since I was a baby, but I'm not familiar enough with their home to know if they have neighbors with pets. Their house is way out in the Mississippi countryside, and the houses are few and far between. That's what makes me so curious. I want to have a better look.

From what I can see, it's something with black fur. The lake is brown and murky; something you'd only drink out of as a last resort. Once I step outside, I can't say I blame him. Scorching heat blankets me and gives me goosebumps. I feel like some malicious deity has turned a titanic magnifying glass onto me. I can almost here a white, continuous ring penetrating my ears as my body adjusts to the atmosphere. It is, after all, the dead of summer.

I walk towards it. I probably should have looked for an umbrella to lessen the sunrays, or at least put on sunscreen. I don't because I'm afraid letting the animal get away.

I get fifty feet closer, and I can tell by the way it moves that it's a dog. A black dog. With each step a new layer of thick white sweat oozes down my skin. I can only imagine the suffering he's going through right now.

I don't think he knows I'm on my way over. He hops in the lake. I can't really blame him, although I also can't imagine anything other than a dog enjoying itself in that fish crap-laden water. That is, unless it's something even filthier than the lake itself, like these flies that have got wind of me. I wave them away only for them to come back, but my interest is still on the dog.

He looks like he's enjoying himself. I'd say I'm about halfway there now. The sight of him brings to mind the days I could afford a gym membership, when I would dive into the pool after a good hardy few rounds on the weight machines. I could go for a swim right now, just not in that lake.

A few dozen more yards along the way, and I'm a little less picky. I already feel like a walking swamp under this Mississippi sun. I can practically smell myself at this point - I'm not far off from boiled hotdog water. Marine feces notwithstanding, how much worse can lake water be? I expect the fish will leave me alone, though I have seen snapping turtles there. I've never been bitten by one. I don't intend to change that.

Horseflies are a completely different matter. I manage to get a hold of one and crush it, its blood spraying across my fingers. Let that be a message to the other flying insects. Or at least the ones I can catch.

It occurs to me the closer I get that this dog might not be friendly. He looks as carefree as any other dog. He's done swimming. He gets out of the lake and lies beneath the shade offered by the woods. That doesn't

change the fact that I'm a stranger to him, though. I understand that approaching a strange dog is never the wisest thing to do. It's just that my curiosity has got the better of me.

I'm about 30 yards away now, and I'm not sure what I'll do once I get there. Call an animal shelter, maybe? I'd hate to leave him out here in the scorching heat, even when he has the pond to cool him off. I guess the first thing to do would be to check if he has a collar. Maybe his owner's number is on it. If he is friendly, he may follow me back to the house. If he isn't, I guess he'll back off into the woods.

I get within 15 feet of him, and I halt. Harsh, icy sensations spike through my blood. I am close enough now to realize something horrifying.

This dog has no head. Its tongue protrudes from a gaping hole in its neck.

I yelp in alarm. That is a deadly mistake; it arouses the dog. Even without a head, it can bark. Its voice is all wrong. It doesn't have just one voice; I can hear many, as though it holds a crowd of miserable souls prisoner, souls who can only cry out when their captor meets new prey. It is a sound straight from the tomb.

I turn heel and run towards the house. I curse myself every step I take. It was already too hot to go outside; it is far too hot to run. I beg God not to let me collapse.

I know the dog chases me. It's barking, and it sounds more deranged. Its pitch wobbles like a Theremin. I can hear it gaining on me.

I fight against horrid thoughts of what it might do to me. How can a thing without a head live? I picture it bearing down on me, shooting out its tongue like a lasso and dragging me down that wretched hole of a neck, trapping me for all eternity amidst whatever else rots inside those ribs.

Sweat blurs my vision. Horseflies collide with my face. I can't brush them aside; all my strength needs to go to my legs. I'm halfway to the house, clenching my teeth with determination, squeezing as much work from my legs as the rest of my body will allow.

I whip my head around. There it scampering after me. Flecks of skin fly off and expose cruel red muscle and naked bone.

I make it to the house, tear open the door, and slam it shut seconds before a meaty wet thud hits the other side, followed by withering howls that decay into agonized moans until all that's left of it are gurgling grunts.

I turn and see Pete shivering in a corner. I realize I am out of breath and soaked all over with sweat. He's an indoor dog so long as I'm around.

As I run bath water, I contemplate what it was I'd just seen. I wonder if it was a heat induced hallucination. Considering the mild burns on my neck and arms, it was stupid to go outside without any sunblock anyway.

That doesn't mean I'm completely over the shock, though. I still shudder with apprehension when I go back out into the living room. Being near the back door just unsettles me. A few hours into another writing session, though, I'm calm enough to check out the window for evidence that I'd genuinely been chased by what I'd seen. I don't see anything at first. I'm ready to write it off as some hallucination caused by extreme heat.

But then I open the door. At the foot of it lies small yellow-brown bones and graying meat giblets, both sprouting black fur patches.

I don't know if there are more things like this out there in the woods. I don't know if they'll believe me when I warn them. All I know is that, once they get back, I won't be house-sitting for them again.