

ENGL 255: Writing Humor  
Professor Ryan Wepler

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Abigail Bessler

To Rufus, Who Was a Shitty Gerbil  
by Abigail Bessler

February 5, 2016

Dear Rufus,

I always wanted a dog. Did you know that? Well, it's true. From the age of four onwards, I wished for a dog on every possible wish-granting thing I could find — birthday candles, fallen eyelashes, clocks that read 11:11. *Please, please, please*, I would say, *just let me have a dog*. Every Christmas, when I got a present large enough to hold a dog inside, I would look up at my parents with crazed eyes and scream, "IS IT A DOG?"

It was never a dog, Rufus. It was never a dog.

Instead, on my ninth birthday, I opened a much-too-small box and found *you*. And let me tell you, you were a shitty, shitty gerbil.

I tried to get on board, I really did. I named you "Rufus" after the naked mole rat in *Kim Possible*, my favorite TV show. And my parents tried to get me pumped too. They gave me a book on gerbils. It was titled, "Gerbils." You know what I learned from reading that book? That gerbils fucking *suck*.

Did you know the Latin name for gerbil, *Meriones unguiculatus*, translates to "clawed warrior"? I read that on page 11 of my guidebook. I didn't need to read it, though, because by the time I read that page a *day* after getting you, I had scars crisscrossing the lengths of my arms and hands.

I read too that gerbils could be "scooped up in one's palm" and would "remain there without restraint." I found that sentence amusing, especially halfway through week two of our co-habitation, when you catapulted out of my bloodied hands and scurried your dirty gerbil paws all the way under my bookshelf. It took three people and two hours to get you out, and you didn't even look happy upon rescue.

At some point my parents decided that maybe if we got a *super cool gerbil cage*, I would like you. So, we did. We drove to PetSmart and walked past the cute puppy section and got a goddamn gerbil MANSION, with three multi-colored floors and a yellow wheel and two tunnels that ran down the sides like rodent marble staircases. The Dowager Countess would have felt at home. But remember what happened when we put you in there? You were too afraid to use the tunnels. You stayed there, quivering, stuck on the first floor like a coward.

And that wheel. Jesus Christ. When you ran on that wheel it sounded like a nail got sucked up in a vacuum, and now the vacuum was breaking down. We tried greasing it, like the guide suggested. That didn't work. So, we tried other things. We tried loosening the screws. We tried taping cotton balls around it. We tried waxing it with the gross white wax I got from the orthodontist for my braces. Eventually, we gave up and moved you out of my room, putting you where you'd always belonged, on the goddamn bathroom floor.

Then you had to go and die. Guess what the average lifespan of a gerbil is, Rufus. Three and a half years. Guess how long you lived. Three fucking months. And how about the day you chose: *Easter*. That's right, it was the first time I experienced loss, and you had to make it *ironic*. Jesus is risen? Great, 'cause your gerbil Rufus is full-on DEAD. Afterwards, I got so sad about death I wrote a Sylvia Plath-level tragic poem about it. Here's how it began:

*Rufus,  
ever so small,  
died on a day of bells*

Doesn't that make you want to cry? Oh right, gerbils don't cry, although they do recognize one other by the taste of each other's *saliva*.

A week after you died, my archenemy Jess Nicholson said in front of everybody that she hoped I got two new gerbils and I named them "Please" and "Die" so they'd die even sooner than you. That sucked. But you know what sucked more? That very same day, my parents got me a *new* gerbil, because they thought it'd make me feel better. That one turned out to be pregnant when we bought her, and soon we had SIX BABY GERBILS in our gerbil mansion. My understanding of reproduction was set back by like 10 years.

By the way, you know what baby gerbils look like? SEVERED TOES. And you know we had to do after a month? Bring all but one of those gerbils back to the store. Turns out when they get old enough, gerbils EAT EACH OTHER. Because of course they do. Gerbils hate gerbils as much as I hate gerbils.

Thanks for everything, asshole.

Sincerely,  
Abigail Bessler

“Losing Rufus”: The Full Poem

losing a pet  
(a pet)  
• a friend  
• a relative  
(Losing Rufus)  
Rufus,  
or ever so small,  
died on a day of bells.  
They rang from the church  
on that warm  
summer day  
Easter it was  
my family there  
we didn't know  
until after church  
that my pet  
had died.  
My father ~~came~~ took me to the park  
while mom stayed behind  
he told me what had happened  
and I just sat and  
cried, cried, cried.  
My mom came,  
and I just  
cried, cried, cried  
Maybe I would  
have been sadder,  
if I didn't have  
my family  
to wipe my tears  
Now,  
Rufus rests,  
in our garden  
under a metal butterfly  
to represent  
Easter, death  
and a new beginning.