

# How to Tell Wild Animals

*This humorous poem suggests some dangerous ways to identify (or 'tell') wild animals! Read it aloud, keeping to a strong and regular rhythm.*

If ever you should go by chance  
To jungles in the east;  
And if there should to you advance  
A large and tawny beast,  
If he roars at you as you're dyin'  
You'll know it is the Asian Lion...



Or if some time when roaming round,  
A noble wild beast greets you,  
With black stripes on a yellow ground,  
Just notice if he eats you.  
This simple rule may help you learn  
The Bengal Tiger to discern.

If strolling forth, a beast you view,  
Whose hide with spots is peppered,  
As soon as he has leapt on you,  
You'll know it is the Leopard.  
'Twill do no good to roar with pain,  
He'll only lep and lep again.





If when you're walking round your yard  
You meet a creature there,  
Who hugs you very, very hard,  
Be sure it is a Bear.  
If you have any doubts, I guess  
He'll give you just one more caress.



Though to distinguish beasts of prey  
A novice might nonplus,  
The Crocodile you always may  
Tell from the Hyena thus:  
Hyenas come with merry smiles;  
But if they weep they're Crocodiles.



The true Chameleon is small,  
A lizard sort of thing;  
He hasn't any ears at all,  
And not a single wing.  
If there is nothing on the tree,  
'Tis the chameleon you see.



CAROLYN WELLS

### Glossary

**ground:** background

**discern:** make out; identify

**hide:** animal skin

**peppered:** here, covered with spots

**caress:** a gentle, loving touch

**novice:** someone new to a job

**(be) nonplus (sed)** (usually only in the passive): (be) puzzle(d), confuse(d), surprise(d)

## Thinking about the Poem

1. Does 'dyin' really rhyme with 'lion'? Can you say it in such a way that it does?
2. How does the poet suggest that you identify the lion and the tiger? When can you do so, according to him?
3. Do you think the words 'lept' and 'lep' in the third stanza are spelt correctly? Why does the poet spell them like this?
4. Do you know what a 'bearhug' is? It's a friendly and strong hug — such as bears are thought to give, as they attack you! Again, hyenas are thought to laugh, and crocodiles to weep ('crocodile tears') as they swallow their victims. Are there similar expressions and popular ideas about wild animals in your own language(s)?
5. Look at the line "A novice might nonplus". How would you write this 'correctly'? Why is the poet's 'incorrect' line better in the poem?
6. Can you find other examples of poets taking liberties with language, either in English or in your own language(s)? Can you find examples of humorous poems in your own language(s)?
7. Much of the humour in the poem arises from the way language is used, although the ideas are funny as well. If there are particular lines in the poem that you especially like, share these with the class, speaking briefly about what it is about the ideas or the language that you like or find funny.

**English is funny, because...**

We have noses that run and feet that smell

# The Ball Poem

*A boy loses a ball. He is very upset. A ball doesn't cost much, nor is it difficult to buy another ball. Why then is the boy so upset? Read the poem to see what the poet thinks has been lost, and what the boy has to learn from the experience of losing something.*

What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,  
What, what is he to do? I saw it go  
Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then  
Merrily over — there it is in the water!  
No use to say 'O there are other balls':  
An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy  
As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down  
All his young days into the harbour where  
His ball went. I would not intrude on him;  
A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now  
He senses first responsibility  
In a world of possessions. People will take  
Balls, balls will be lost always, little boy.  
And no one buys a ball back. Money is external.  
He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,  
The epistemology of loss, how to stand up  
Knowing what every man must one day know  
And most know many days, how to stand up.

JOHN BERRYMAN

## Glossary

**O there are other balls:** The words suggest that the loss is not important enough to worry about

**shaking grief:** sadness which greatly affects the boy

**rigid:** stiff

**(to) intrude on:** here, to enter a situation where one is not welcome

**a dime:** ten cents (U.S.)

**desperate:** hopeless

**epistemology of loss:** understanding the nature of loss — what it means to lose something

**epistemology:** The Greek word *episteme* means ‘knowledge’ (it comes from a word meaning ‘to understand, to know’). Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge itself.

### Thinking about the Poem

In pairs, attempt the following questions.

1. Why does the poet say, “I would not intrude on him”? Why doesn’t he offer him money to buy another ball?
2. “... staring down/All his young days into the harbour where/His ball went ...” Do you think the boy has had the ball for a long time? Is it linked to the memories of days when he played with it?
3. What does “in the world of possessions” mean?
4. Do you think the boy has lost anything earlier? Pick out the words that suggest the answer.
5. What does the poet say the boy is learning from the loss of the ball? Try to explain this in your own words.
6. Have you ever lost something you liked very much? Write a paragraph describing how you felt then, and saying whether — and how — you got over your loss.

