

If You Find an Infant Squirrel

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In early spring you'll spot it—pink, an inch long and squirming—under the largest tree on the street. You'll handle it with rubber gloves, bring it home and skim simple on-line instruction for fostering. Keep it warmer than you keep yourself: a heating pad on low or a hot water bottle. Find a foot long box and line it with soft fabric. Make a pocket in the fabric with your fist. Keep the box covered and know that when you aren't there to watch, the infant inside might fumble out blind and roll into a cold corner where you'd never find it in time. Think you'll do everything you can and know you might not be enough. Make a homemade formula: teaspoon of salt, three teaspoons of sugar and a quart of warm water. Squirt it through a syringe onto the gums. Remember it could easily aspirate. Beware of the small, weak lungs. Wipe the genitals and anus with a warm cloth until the bowels release. Think how delicate life is. Check the nose and mouth for dryness. Think how easily we die. Test hydration by pinching the skin. Remove fleas or maggots by a comb or tweezers. Think of how much ugly there is to fight off. When it begins to grow it sprouts hair kind of like what you find on your legs after a week unshaven, but denser. Learn fast this will not be a fur soft to pet. It's pin-small eyes open and you realize this small thing makes you ecstatic. Two amber points will blink rapidly and you will believe it sees you. Know from what you read that what it actually sees is a roving red-green smudge. Know it's not yet capable of gauging distance. Know this, though this is not where your thoughts go. Not now. What else you know: the squirrel symbolically means diligence and patience. It takes a unique strength to chew the meat from a hard nut. Feel inspired by how simple and instinctual the actions that keep the air moving through us are. Skip less trips to the gym. Think less about how time goes so fast and you continue to go so slow. Watch as it breaks its first peanut at the foot of your bed. Watch as it realizes it can leap from the bed to the nightstand and up into the dark of your closet. Believe in the goodness of symbols. Find symbolism in the long leaps – from chair to bookcase, from one room to another room. Believe it can't hurt to try and protect that. The day it chews through your laptop wire marks the first day you describe it with the adjective jumpy. From here on find yourself calling out its name more frequently and with a more demanding tone. Think of this voice you use, question whether or not this animal knows it—the only human sound in its life. No, you decide. Begin to believe it's not very smart since it doesn't register your voice and then change your mind, thinking it's so smart it's realized how to ignore you. Come to understand this animal holds no commitments. This animal's become far flung, anxious, made of long leaps, combative with carpets. This animal chews everything you need intact. Think, if only you could contain its moving with a wheel or harness. But, no. This squirrel, now full grown and pacing, begins to remind you of your sleepless mind late at night: no off switch, no deescalating, no wrangling, even in a contained space, and everything outside hangs so large and not necessarily seen in true color or true distance. Nothing about it is your fault but you are no savior and this is when you know it. You go to some warmth in the cavity of your throat. You hear the words control yourself. So you read how to build an indoor a cage out of chicken wire. A large cage you deem worthy of its pacing and jumpy nature. You place it between your living room and kitchen, where it can see you most. To walk past you must squeeze between the wire and the wall, the cage scratching you nearly every time. On your legs you collect small signs of an obstacle of your own making. At night in bed, over the white noise of your humidifier, you

hear its incisors clicking against the chicken wire. You bring this clicking into your sleep. You take this clicking into you dreams, where it nips open your arms, you heart—everything inside you spilling out. A mess worse than anything a squirrel could leave. In the morning while you shower you look down at the scratches on your legs and realize these cuts show no origin— they could be from anywhere. Opening the bathroom door, it jolts and you jolt back. In a cat carrier, you take it back to the largest tree on the street. Opening the small door, it jumps up the trunk to a limb and quickly jumps back down, landing on the sidewalk where it stops and sniffs the concrete. With this you are convinced it doesn't know what it wants. But you believe it will come to know with time, so you walk another direction. Looking back you see it trip over a tree root and you realize you wouldn't know it again if you saw it.

THE WAY I REMEMBER IT

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You'd started smoking again and your hands smelled like dirty coins, so I turned up the music as we kept going under the pigeon-gray, the bridges, between shredded billboards and then an electric blue balloon in the air, curling in someone's wrong direction. I could have said *Come on, realize*, but sometimes even we aren't enough to understand our smallness. I could have said *Look*. If I had known to look myself—at brief wisps in the car mirrors, at kaleidoscopes passing Greenmount Cemetery, at all that gray around a balloon, at how lucky we were to have thought we were bigger. Then the light went red and the balloon was gone like a moan tucked into a hole. On the corner, the autistic boy waited for a bus and he inched his fingers toward something alive and a beauty peeked through that you scolded me for seeing—the warm slits of his eyes and mouth had no idea either, but this was how he wired us. The approaching bus jerked us all in new directions. We all went further. We all continued.

3 short works featured in *PANK*, 2009

HOLE

Some say the hole where her eye should be is beautiful and endless.

There is no jewel for that, no single story for where it goes.

Some say the hole is a symbol, like a delicate cave or vulnerable slope leading down the body and away from the incidental circus streets. Each humid corner. Telephone booth. Loud tattoo parlor. Chemical smelling dry cleaners. Gas station under vibrating construction.

She rubs the skin that rounds the hole. Faces west. Angled so the hole is unseen by the man watching her as he idles his car at the light, appearing as though she's pushing back sweat and hair.

In his head he makes a story about where she's heading.

If he knew her he would suggest they discuss the unique pulls of gravity that govern all things large and unwieldy, such as love, and the conversation would sparkle. "It's the idea of tension between two otherwise independent objects." He'd talk authoritatively. If she knew him, she would not be impressed.

Above them, the sun is sinking and milky light spills over the curve of her back, the profile of her breasts and the fan-like gesture of her arms. No jewel is so valuable as to come close to that, he thinks.

The light turns green and he idles the car a minute too long. Santana playing and his fingers lightly tapping the wheel.

She turns her head toward him.

THE TRICK

He says "we could be like pirates," and his starch smile reminds me of a 1950s postcard. Piiiiirates! He says, prolonging the I of the word while stomping at a seagull on the dock. There's something about the tightness of his skull and the shape of his chest as he runs out of breath that makes me think I could follow him anywhere, if only to see he got where he needed to be. He motions me to his side, showing me how to decipher the flags on the ships in the distance—a trick he does every Sunday—and I react as though this lesson is everything and everything has been pared down to the essentials: standing where the Chesapeake cuts the horizon, with him—slightly like a pirate and running low on breath.

AFTER THE FUNERAL

It was a Sunday—already a common day for crying. But everyone agreed—without saying as much—that had they bothered to cry, it would have been a small disaster.

Instead, there was the sound of the grandmother's wheezing on the yard's doorstep and the sharp mews of the calico at her feet, there was the ringing site of the burn holes in her oversized t-shirt and the loud clang of embarrassment for those who noticed the quick burst of her left nipple as she bent forward to pick up the cat.

And for those who bothered to consider it, this site of her made it clear that the day was wide open; somehow full, blank, bright, like that initial moment the rain clears or the fog lifts from the

water and the boats return to view. And with such blankness came the notion that asking questions about what would happen next would have only stilted the yard's conversation.

She was fragile, yes, but she had said *don't worry*. Everyone wanted to see with her, not through her. Everyone let her be—for one day—a faithful portal into their futures.

So they let the day continue and in the yard, brown doves plucked the grass, the dog fell in the corner after chasing a fly, they ate pie that was as sweet as they had expected it to be and beyond the yard a siren floated by. There was a lengthy conversation about a falling chandelier that had killed four in Tucson and how, therefore, to own a chandelier could be deadly.