

THE DEPARTMENT STORE BADGER

Because Macy's (second floor) never turns off the florescent lights, the department store badger no longer knows whether it's night or day. He burrows away in last season's pillows in the storeroom corner, waves of quiet chatter occasionally jostling his dreams of digging. He remembers the meadows, so thinks they must be real. He doesn't remember how he became the department store badger, only the sensation of being propelled forward slowly and a gust of wind rustling his fur. When it gets quiet, the department store badger comes out, blinking at the bright light. He shuffles through the empty aisles of bedding and metal pans, passing by the collections of suitcases and buckets of colorful plastic egg slicers. His favorite aisle is the coffee aisle, where he sometimes catches a glimpse of his own distorted reflection in the shiny metal of the espresso machines. Once, he knocked over a giant bowl, and the ringing sent him running, nose to the ground. Another time, there was a small brown bird perched on the swinging lights. For a moment, their eyes met. He flashed his teeth. Occasionally, he finds bugs—delicious snacks. Another time, a mouse. He crunched its bones viciously. He picks through the trash bins at the checkout booths, sampling the food court leftovers and sandwich crusts. Eventually, they come for him with a long pole and a plastic cage. They corner him among the couches, and for a few moments he holds his ground under a floral loveseat, snarling.

THE GOOD GOOSE

is always swimming with her goslings. She never decides to sit just one out. Each summer afternoon I watch her from our screened-in porch, gliding like a tall ship across the pond, goslings bobbing like buoys in her wake. The goslings don't have her black neck yet, no patch of white streaked across their faces—they are only soft, getting bigger each day. By this time next summer they will be gone. Sometimes her gander is there too, bobbing his head up and down. On the porch table we keep a bird book, one I inherited from my mother's friend. When I was younger, I used to want to be a birdwatcher like her. She was always pulling out her binoculars to stare up at the sky. It seemed to me that birds and happiness were intrinsically linked. Something to do with the flying, I think. I want to ask the good goose how she does it. Does she ever look at her gander in the mornings with an indescribable feeling of tiredness? Does she ever get fed up the way he chews, the way he dives his head under the water and holds it there for long, so long? The good goose is patient. She's a family woman, nudging the ducklings in and out of the water. On the hot afternoons, when I tire of watching the good goose, I go for a swim across the pond and back. I catch glimpses of the sky when I turn my head for a breath. I decide that watching birds is not about happiness, but yearning. Flying, I say to no one in particular, is only a kind of falling. As I swim I imagine that goodness, like the goose, is waiting for me on the shore.

THE HUNGOVER SQUIRREL

The difference between the hungover squirrel and the other squirrels is the difference between an acorn falling and what happens after which is the absence of falling, a blank. Too much fermented pumpkin the night before. Waking up alone, again. Soreness settling like a new layer of dust in the muscles of his legs. The other squirrels stamp their feet and chatter away high up in the maple. He does not acknowledge them. He spends the morning squirreling around in the dumpster. Sometimes he finds little crumbles of bread and, on occasion, a few leftover drops of coffee. But the sun is bright, too bright. Two humans arrive to share a cigarette by the dumpster. They take him by surprise but he is too hungover to jump, only creaks. The hungover squirrel stares at them, thinking of nothing but the pounding in his head. He moves his ears back and forth. The girl looks away from the man and for a moment their eyes meet. The hungover squirrel clicks his teeth at her and scurries away, stopping after a moment to look back and then, twitching slowly, changes his direction.

Budapest

It's what we don't say
that holds us together.

In the late afternoon,
walking along the Danube
we talk about the hills

and the color of the water.
The street names
are as foreign and clumsy

in our mouths as sand.
My father, slapping the concrete
with his umbrella as he walks,

wonders aloud about
peace and wars that tear apart
countries and names.

A hundred years ago,
my family said goodbye
to this tiny corner of the blue sky.

We are both here and there.

Here, in Budapest,
where the pregnant hills
meet hollow flatness.

But we are also
in the innards of New Jersey
where my father

is the smallest brother again.
We are thinking
of the American Dream

and trundle beds.
World War II on the radio
and bombs that fell, and didn't.

I'm glad we are here, together.

It's just the two of us

walking and chatting,
the way it's always been.

We are two old souls taking
one last lap around the block,
the weavings of the past

spread out behind us
like shrapnel, or wings.