

## ANIMALS

“One is what one looks at—well, at least partially.”

—Joseph Brodsky

All morning in my hammock burning  
a tight one, poised with pencil and notebook  
and seven-week beard, I look to the pines  
outside my cabin seeking inspiration  
from the birds and the squirrels  
whose singing and foraging, whose  
exclamations, no, arguments, reflect  
*my inner my inner my inner . . .*  
and every so often my cousin Ricky returns  
from hunting rabbits on my four-wheeler  
to tell me he’s thought of a new way  
to beat off: *Anywhere around here to buy  
watermelons?* Even his camo flannel  
can’t conceal that Superdome belly  
and I hate to think how long  
since anyone’s seen his diminutive dangle,  
so I tell him in all seriousness, my sympathy  
sincere, *You might be on to something,*  
but after he tokes and rides away,  
I get inspired, realize I should’ve said,  
*Go drive around these country roads, man,  
look for signs!* and even Ricky would’ve  
nodded with a look of feigned profundity  
like he’s posing for an author photo,  
but I let that moment go  
in order to capture the moment of *me*

alone with the foraging squirrels  
and their question-mark tails, the birds  
whose names I never learned  
to remember. Yet why not simply see it?  
Why not say what happens? Forgive me just now  
if I feel a little sheepish (*question-mark tails?*),  
if I feel a little guilt-sick for my under-  
used brain, the old poetic pathways  
so infrequently travelled that, too easily,  
on warm days like these  
when I find myself finally ass-in-hammock  
with a will to invent, the mind's ice melt  
evades the deadfall of word-alchemy  
to seek instead the well-carved rivulets of  
*roll-another-joint-and-drink-another-beer*  
that feed the Netflix stream  
into the Ocean of Ohfuckit  
till I'm all, like, totally  
washed up on the Jersey Shore. Or surfing  
my iPad on a YouTube. No surprise, then,  
when Ricky rides up all boots and burrs  
with his iPhone out and a video to share:  
*Check it out, brah, she puts Sriracha on it  
before it goes in.* If I tell him I'd rather be  
roadkill, a heap of broken armor  
for a crowd of sarcastic crows, than ogle

fetish porn on another man's cell phone  
does he still announce with equal aplomb  
that he's *just come from seeing armadillos  
banging in the woods like a couple  
of rabbits?* and do I ask him to clarify  
what he means by *come?* or do I  
take a quick peek, close the matter off  
with a simple observation that proves  
I almost care? *Look, man, I've slept  
with fake blondes, and as your video confirms,  
they often don't know how to do it.* And yet  
I feel a minor buzz in my pants.

But it's a text from my wife: *Don't. Be. Mad.*

Well . . . she's at lunch now  
with old MFA friends, a teetotaler couple  
from somewhere up north. Of course,  
I should be there, but my wife let it slip that  
*she's* writing a series of moon pantoums  
and *he*, I don't know, probably writes  
about squirrels. Me: *Why what is it?*

Wife: *They need to sleep over.*

Wife: *I couldn't say no.*

Wife: *It'll be fine—he wants to swap poems.*

How do I express, 160 characters or less,  
how terrified this makes me? *Then ill be  
out there in the trees with blanket&bottle  
&block of headcheese. Send the dogs  
in the morning to let me know they're gone.*

The patio door hinge whines again.  
If it's Ricky with a porcupine,  
I'll cry right now. His hands are empty,  
but what about his mind: *I was staring  
at this log and I had a weird thought—  
the longer you look at something, the more  
it looks like you.* Which must be why  
this poem is making me nervous.