

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.