

You've Seen What Dogs Do to Rabbits

Maggie says this to me on the secondhand sofa, facing each other from separate ends, legs stretched out and tangled, mugs steaming, our morning ritual. We've been talking loud with summer windows open. About debt, and family, and doing too much for not enough, and we're getting all worked up, as we tend to do, and then she mentions nature, how it is so full of harm, and how it comforts her. What she's reminding me of, specifically, is the day a few months ago when she rushed down the crumbling front stairs of our shabby rented house wearing white socks on her hands, me trailing behind her, to where a rabbit was splayed on the bottom step, trying and failing to run, its back broken.

And I remember, that day, the strange, brake-squeal cry that drew me to the window, and seeing the shepherd mix trotting back to the woods, its owners hollering, unable to control their unleashed pet. Then I saw the rabbit flop and kick on the hot concrete, and I thought, *that dog looks smug*.

As Maggie scooped up the rabbit, its body easing against hers, I was too aware of our neighbors with the BMW and curated flowers who I assume think we're weird and poor (in truth, not a stretch, at least on our gentrifying dead-end street), and who I imagined peering out with judgment, maybe guessing we hurt the trembling thing. Maggie used to be more self-conscious, like me, but not as much now. She's quicker to remember we're only briefly here.

We walked carefully up the driveway, toward trees and shade, the rabbit's wiry legs dangling. And seeing her ferry this maimed creature it was impossible not to think of the rabbit tattoo on her forearm, not her first tattoo but the first after her sister's death eight years ago, and how she witnessed the long decline of her only sibling, who waited tables though she had an art degree and a talent for teaching, because she needed money for insurance payments, even after the settlement she got from the male doctor who dismissed her worry about a lump because she was, in his eyes, too young.

"Hi," Maggie said to the small, shocked animal in her socked hands. "It's all right, buddy." Her voice low and calm. And the rabbit's watery dark eye stared up at us, or at nothing, and I couldn't tell if it was frightened but I hoped it wasn't, but of course it was.

How can I explain, watching Maggie lay the rabbit on dirt and leaves, seeing its mouth open and close like a fish's gently gulping, I felt peace? I put my hand on its haunch and we noticed the ticks nestled like drops of tarnished silver in thickets of red-brown fur, drawing life. I wonder now if they were condemned too, stranded on the almost-inanimate host, a bad gamble.

We stood over it, quietly observing its breath, until the eye went still like a wet pebble.

What do dogs do to rabbits? What they are going to do. What they can't help. Or sometimes, what we let them do.

What Maggie means sitting on the couch, I think, is that nothing is fair, or that minus our daily frets and calculations, fairness flies out the window. Misfortune will come. It will bound from shallow woods with wagging tongue and jangling collar, ignoring whatever human voices are swelling on the air, seemingly blithe in its pursuit, and we might try to flee, as we should, and maybe others will hear our yelp as we feel its teeth.

And perhaps, at the end, someone will lay hands on us, animals that we are, bundles of unruly cells that we are, coils of flesh and energy longing to exist, to thrive.

I suppose this is what we were trying to say, without words, to the rabbit: *We know this did not have to happen, but it is happening, and we are here as witnesses, and we are sorry. This will happen to us too.*

In the morning I checked, assuming the body was hauled off in the night by a coyote, a raccoon. Surprisingly, it was still there, and the next day I expected it to be covered in flies, but it wasn't. It looked like the rabbit was napping. Then, one morning, it was gone—maybe snatched up by the same dog, circling back to finish its work—and in its place was a faint, mused impression in the leaves, like proof of a swirl of wind.

