

PATRICIA STATON

*Rat*

“ . . . his worst fear, his worst nightmare  
was rats and it was rats there were in the cages.”

—George Orwell, 1984

You have to get up early to catch them, when sky still the color of tin glints off a shuddering birdfeeder, no wing in sight, instead, the eye of a rat, your rat, a wharf rat, the wall-of-teeth kind that steals up from the river to raid your dreams. This one holed-up in the topiary, pinching sunflower seeds, fistfuls to shove into that locomotive jaw. Jaw and head withdraw into the depths of the green bubble he’s carved a basin out of (and where’s the vile tail?). I hate him for his ratness, the sheer machete-ness of him, a fear annealed by a too-early reading of 1984. No joke, an evil god who can tear the face off a cat. The hook is, you’ve got to admire something that stirs a biological chill no aspirin can smooth the edges from. I have to like him for the artful way he conned me all spring into feeding him, not some shy wren foraging at dawn. Still, I like him best beheaded by the neighbor’s cat, the fur-bloused carcass raked across the roofline and up to the window, in and down the dark stairs bump at a time, *What’s THAT!?*, his ancestral lines tracing back to some barge at Alexandria.