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Why Rats Make Perfect Subjects

by Marilyn Ringer

Sometimes we know we are wrong.
The motions we make
suddenly hurtful, our shoulders,
our hips, become painful hinges
that beg to be oiled, but we go on
as we always have, unable to change
the arcs of our rotations.

Something is truculent in the brain
of slow ramp movements,
something dark in the heart
that can't eat change,
something vulnerable
to anesthetic's allure, a falling fog
that wraps us in cool cotton.

If you train a rat over time to push a lever
for a pellet, and then all it gets is shocking pain,
it will still take innumerable trials to extinguish
the memory of its pleasure. In this way,
we, too, hold on to what was,
our rat brains in charge
despite the unpleasant tingle.

