

## **In the Neighborhood**

Ten or twelve, after a day hunting  
frogs and turtles and garter snakes in the marsh,  
I sat on the bank of a pond watching ripples  
fan out silently in the wake of muskrats  
swimming with reeds in their mouths back for the night  
to their owner-built islands that seemed to float  
on the lavender satin the twilight pond had become.

Where we lived was a long walk from the marsh  
but where we had lived not long before wasn't far,  
just downtown a ways, in the tenement  
managed by my Dad's mother, in the neighborhood  
he and my mother had both grown up in  
where, they told us, real rats were said  
to have eaten a baby's fingers while it slept in its crib.

Another urban fable stuck in my head  
but the rats were real. We would see them  
on the street or inside in the hallways and apartments  
but always in the dirt lot behind the buildings  
where the garbage cans were. Every so often,  
after breakfast on a good weather Sunday,  
he would take me and Suzy, our Springer Spaniel,  
out there. When he shoved a broomstick  
under the boards the cans were on, dozens of rats  
would run out on their short legs, and Suzy  
would catch them and shake them to death  
then bring them back to him to put in the garbage.

When we moved into a better neighborhood,  
an apartment in a duplex owned by my mother's mother,  
once at dusk (not long, if I remember,  
after watching *Lost Weekend* on TV),  
taking out the garbage, as I lifted the lid  
one jumped directly into the pocket of my jeans  
where it squirmed and struggled while I screamed until,  
reaching through the terror, loathing and revulsion  
I grabbed it by its ratty tail and flung it  
as far down the alley as I could.

As the sky and water at the pond turned dark,  
I headed back home. Thinking of it now,  
I know should have taken the small turtle

I'd caught out of my pocket and let it go  
but I don't recall having done that  
and I don't know what happened to that turtle.