

ENCOUNTER WITH A DUSKY-FOOTED WOODRAT

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Toward the beginning of my walk on Skyline Trail, where it switch backs through the Monterey Pines, before arriving at Iris Trail* which proceeds downhill, I nearly stepped on a sugar cookie, bent to pick it up. No edible delight had fallen from a picnicker's hand, but a rock shaped like a perfect heart. It was light as a cookie too. That was a good way for my walk to begin. I like finding signs along the way.

I thought I'd leave my notebook in my backpack today, not make notes. I'd see what I see, let it slide through me. But once you retrieve a heart from the path, that's kind of hard to do, so I noted, "cookie." Not that, were you to open to that page in my notebook, would what I'd written be legible. But I knew. Often jotting a few words is all I need to remember what I want to write later.

A leaf fell from a tree's high branch, making me think of William Stafford's poem *Ways to Say Wind*—"Lets a leaf come down in style." What a lucky girl I am that poetry fills my life and arrives on my tongue at the just right moments! The leaf came zigzagging to the ground stylishly, first a little jig left then a little jag right.

I walked for a nice while, going down as far as the down goes, till the choice was head up and home or go farther. This day had more places to go so I turned up the hill, walked past the spot where when the ladybugs are flying they're flying here, the spot there's always a breeze, even on the stillest days. Suddenly I yelped, startling myself, not even realizing that I was yelping or why.

I'd come a mere few inches from stepping on a rat. How quickly the mind knows what it sees before the mind knows what it sees. I tried to make sense of it. This rat was sweet to look at, about six inches long. Its snout was rounded. It had a mouse-like demeanor. What's a rat doing on the path in the middle of the day? Why didn't it run when it heard my yelp and saw my foot—too close?

Backing away, giving berth to both of us, I stopped, looked carefully. The fat little rat, that I later found out was a dusky-footed wood rat, was shivering in the hot sun, swaying slightly side to side. Its eyes were barely open. I thought I saw a cut on its side, looked closer. Yes, indeed, a wound, upon which flies were gathering. One fly touched its nose, but the rat didn't flick it away.

I got down on my haunches a couple of feet away. Sunlight caught a glint in the rat's now fully open eyes. We looked at each other, slowly. I saw no inclination on the rat's part to flee, and was surprised to feel none myself. I began talking to the little creature, tried to make of my voice a lullaby.

"I'm sad that you're hurt," I said in a whisper.

"I'm so sorry." At which point, surprising myself again, I began to cry.

Here's what I took home with me: The image of light in the rat's eyes, its look of sorrow, the slight sway of its body, and the knowledge that one being suffering is the same as any being suffering.



* Jacks Peak Park is partly within the Carmel River Watershed. Iris Trail is part of the park trail system.