

Pink

My husband and I are reading the morning paper on a park bench
 and I've seen the sunrise light up the pollution and make it pink
 almost beautiful
 like the new bloom of a contusion after a heavy blow
 but now I'm absorbing the Adelaide Sun, pouring through its cheap
 pulpy pages
 reading about violent crime as if it were fiction
 "Hey look," David says, "a rat." I look up
 with my face already twisted into something — an expectant grimace
 because I'm looking for the scrofulous city-rat, with the shabby fur and
 the scabby tail
 I'm peering at crannies in an ornate rococo water fountain
trying to see the rat perched on the gilt edge of some flowery scroll-
 work
 David nudges me with his hand holding a styrofoam cup full of coffee
 "No, it's over there," and I see
 an impossibly skinny kid, poised with one foot still in the air, like he's
 in a cartoon
 One of those ones where somebody walks off a cliff — like he'll just
 keep hanging there
 until someone notices him
 So I waggle my fingers at him like a suburban housewife seeing a
 neighbor at the mall
 He comes sauntering up, striding sideways, his big man's coat flapping
 out from his puny legs
 He's maybe sixteen, but there's no life to read behind the round dark
 lenses of his glasses
 The kid has a jittery manner and a cleft palate
 but he hands the white rat over so smoothly, so naturally, that the
 small animal isn't anxious
 and it's only now that I notice how his hands are burnt
 They have ridges and ripples, swirls of brown, white, and pink flesh,
 like Neapolitan ice cream
 But there is something astounding. About the rat. How perfect it is

It has some ultimate surreal adolescence and smells subtly of cedar
The early sun shining through the fine ghostly membrane of its ears is
 an unearthly rose
Its nose is pink. Its paws are pink. Its claws
are tiny, pale crescents hooking into my palm with youthful rat
 assurance
My husband chucks the rat lightly under the long fine chin and goes
 back to his paper
I can only hand the rat back to the kid, my fingers still thrilling with
 the gloss of its fur
He asks where we're from and I tell him
"Oh, America," the kid says knowingly, "we're gonna go there some
 time," he says
gesturing with the rat. "Disney World, you know?"
The kid sighs and slips the rat down his dirty shirt to nestle against
 his belly
It's only as I turn to go that I can finally think of anything to say.
 "Hey," I say
as I see him slipping into the bright stream of the crowd
"How long have you had the rat?"
"Since Yesterday." he says