After Lunch, An Encounter

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It's not every day that you see a rabbit in the wild. At least not around here, and in four years I can't remember ever having seen one before, though I've been told they're all over campus. But just the other day there was one sitting around that I'd almost mistaken for a particularly large squirrel before I saw its ears, and now there is one right here, having had the audacity to intrude upon my walk back from a leisurely off-campus lunch. Maybe it's a seasonal thing.

After all, it is summer in Virginia, and the heat is second only to the humidity in its intensity. We have each stopped in our respective tracks, the rabbit and I. Both shielded, temporarily, from the sun on a span of ground shaded by the looming trees behind me. Also behind me is the steep climb up that I have just made; ahead is yet more sun. The baby breeze coming through the woods brushes my sweat-soaked shirt against my back, and I hunker down on the ground, maintaining eye contact with the terrified animal that I, returning from my nicely satisfying meal, have just interrupted in the middle of its own lunch.

The rabbit is small and brownish-gray, utterly nondescript as rabbits go, at least to my untrained eye. If I could look more closely, I might see a few patchy white spots, some scars, or perhaps a five-toed paw. Not that I would know what to make of that. How many toes do normal rabbits even have, anyway? All I know is that it's a rabbit, it's remarkably conspicuous, and I am tired and hot and see no reason not to be squatting on the path, being remarkably conspicuous myself, staring down a tiny rabbit. I also see no reason not to talk trash to it, which I do, although in a somewhat hushed tone. Hey. You. Rabbit. What do you think you're looking at, huh? Yeah, s'right. Go on and twitch your nose at me, you fuzzy, big-eared nose-twitcher.
A rabbit's stare is surprisingly penetrating for something coming from a furry bundle of muscles and nerves with a brain the probable size of a really impressive walnut. Later on, there will be nothing to stop me from claiming that I was pondering the symbolism of the staredown between nature and modernity, or something equally abstract and high-falutin'. If that's what I want people to think I was thinking about. The possibility of doing that is kind of comforting, even if it would be a little misleading.

Actually, it is a huge lie, because all I'm really thinking about is how terrified this tiny, quivering thing must be, and how long I can keep it pinned down, and if I am agile enough and intelligent enough to maneuver it into letting me catch it, perhaps from some clever combination of intense eye contact and careful sidestepping. What would I do with the damn thing if I caught it? I don't freaking know, I just wanna catch it!

And, because I am five years old at heart, there is also an undercurrent of "Bunny! BUNNY!" running through my head.

With an extremely cautious eye, the rabbit nervously extends its head for a fear-flavored bite of clover. Since I'm not a complete jerk, I allow it to swallow before putting my capture plan into action. It works surprisingly well, at least until I trip an invisible perimeter alarm that sends the rabbit bounding away. Since rabbits are not really what we would call tactical experts, I manage to corner it again. We continue this stare and dance several more times before the arrival of a family (human) down the hill distracts me for a moment, and the rabbit darts off into the safety of a clump of prickly bushes before I can follow. The family looks up the hill at me curiously, and I straighten up and wave at them, feeling somewhat silly.