

ANIMALIS

Ricky Ray

for Rosmarie Waldrop

I woke up this morning feeling fur, asked myself
what I was dreaming. A certain silkiness to the touch
denied dog, felt feline even if the skin underneath
was human. My tongue went to my teeth but they

felt like my old nubs. I took a breath and my nostrils
whistled their usual deviations. Arched my back,
and *that* felt too good for a spine so ruptured and wrong,
so I put off the mirror, put off the inevitable collapse

into person, walked back towards the darkness, told
the mind to be quiet—shhh, we're asking Egyptian slits
what it takes to awaken claws in the fingers, to restore
the tail as rightful rudder, to call us back to the animal

we never left. The answer I got was a hiss and a purr,
a hum in the belly that played along the body like
a reconfiguration of the ribs. A reminder: to stay low,
remember all fours, feet that know the earth and never

wonder how to walk it; to sniff first and listen hard,

haunches coiled with instinct when prey can be
felt ahead in the bushes; to swallow with neither
guilt nor glee, just one life consumed, and then,

if luck stays with us, another; to chew grass
when something spoils and the stomach needs
to be purged; to chew cornhusk for no reason other
than it's good and bears repeating, and remembering

in the limbs, where many things are remembered:
the trees of old properties, mice holes of apartments;
the kittens who went walking and never returned;
the smell of dumpsters and oceans that could break

this nose open; the feel of sunlight in the desert
where once we were gods, parting the sands as our
footsteps left water, unafraid of our shadows, unafraid
of our powers, unafraid of the earth's insistence

that we live nine times to protect her heart.