REQUIEM FOR A SQUIRREL

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Today, I unintentionally manslaughtered a squirrel. He ran right in front of my car and froze in fear as I silently urged him to "Squat, Squirrel!" so I could straddle him with my wheels. But he apparently panicked and tried to return to the side of the road. Poor little guy! I was hoping he'd made it, but when I looked in my rearview mirror, I saw his bushy tail waving in the breeze over his flattened body.

It made me wish that I were a kid again and could call on my sisters to help me give him a proper funeral. We were so expert at critter funerals that the four of us should have gone into the business. Not an ant or fly, frog or mouse could expire in our proximity without us holding an elaborate funeral complete with sermon, hymns, tears, flowers, interment and popsicle-stick tombstone.

I well recall our first critter funeral. I was chasing Lesta around the yard one summer day when I landed on a frog with my bare foot and squashed it. In an effort to give him a suitable sendoff, we dumped kitchen matches out of a box and folded the frog into his makeshift coffin. "You murdered him," my tactless sisters reasoned, "so you get to preach." It was my first eulogy and I don't remember anything I said but the oft-repeated tearful refrain, "Poor little froggie."

Dad spared us the sorrow of holding funerals for our deceased stray pets by disposing of them in a very Viking—but environmentally questionable—manner. It took us years to recognize the significance of Dad taking us for an after-dark ride to the country, parking on a bridge over a creek, getting out of the car and opening the trunk. Even though my sisters and I remained in the car with our mother, the big splash should have tipped us off that Neptune was welcoming yet another Henry pet.

This sort of childhood well prepared me for having children of my own whose pets did what pets mostly do: namely, die! Collectively, Ray, Jr. and Greg buried enough dimestore turtles to save hundreds of children from salmonella. Each home we owned had an Animal Rest in a corner of the yard where still lie the tiny bones of mice, gerbils, hamsters, rabbits and more. These critters—though much-loved and well-cared for—were never designed to enjoy long lives. Too late, Ray and I realized that we should have been buying parrots, sea turtles or elephants for the kids.

One of our saddest critter funerals was for Donald Everett McKinley Duckson, a charming little duck who began life as an egg experiment at KU. Donald was stunted and obviously depressed about it because, at the age of two months, he drowned himself in water that barely reached his knees. Ray tried valiantly to save the little duck by giving him fingertip CPR, but balked at administering mouth to bill resuscitation.

I'm astounded that we never had a pet snake go belly-up on us. But we had lots of fish do exactly that. I remember saying to my friend Darlene, as we drove to pick up Greg at school, that I dreaded telling him his beautiful blue and red Beta had died. I needn't have worried. When Greg entered the backseat, Darlene turned around, smiled at him and said, "Greg, your Beta's on the roof." I hope you've heard the "Mom's on the roof" joke because I don't have space to tell it here. Suffice it to say, Greg knew it.

Darlene's son Darren didn't use that line to give her the sad news that, while she was vacationing in Texas, her beloved dog Buffy died. Instead, he inquired via telephone, "Mom, when Buffy has those fits, do her eyes roll back?"

"Yes," said Darlene.

"And do her lips pull back from her teeth?"

"Yes."

"Well then, I guess that's what killed her."

As for the squirrel whose sorrowful demise began this melancholy reverie, I'm hoping that Squirrel Heaven is long on nut trees and short on automobiles.