

PAMELA CARROLL

Three Quarter Time, 2013
oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in



credit: Winfield Gallery

ELLEN BASS

Rats

Last night after the poetry reading,
a man told me about his life's work:
how he places each rat in its own glass box
and for 30 seconds he plays it music.
In the last 3 seconds, he shocks the rat.
Then 90 beats of silence.
And he begins again.
As I stood there, my heavy leather purse
weighing down my shoulder,
I couldn't help thinking
this sounds too much like the human condition—
only more orderly. One minute
Louis Armstrong's singing *I see trees of green*
and the next...
some fever or curse, some impossible mistake.
And you sit holding a spoon,
unable to lift it to your mouth,
unable to put it down.
This strain of rats descends
from a circus in the 1800s. Their ancestors
swung on satin-ribboned trapezes
and leapt through tiny rings of fire.
Now none of that can save them.
And here's the thing:
a rat who only watches
freezes too. This is empathy. Feeling
what someone else is feeling.
But the witness must be struck once
to know that panic in his veins
when the solo sax ascends.
And maybe we are like this too.
Maybe it's unreasonable
to expect the average person to inhabit
the strange pain of a foreign heart, that clogged
drain matted with hair and slime.
Once in a particular despair,
I asked a lover, *Just take an hour*
and imagine this is happening to you.
She looked straight ahead
and said, *I don't want to.*
The scientist explained
the rat's response was crude, not volitional.
But I would have welcomed
even the quivering of a rodent,
its toy-sized muscle pumping hard
in its covert of ribs.

Ellen Bass's books of poetry include *Like a Beggar* (Copper Canyon, 2014), *The Human Line* (Copper Canyon, 2007), and *Mules of Love* (BOA, 2002). She coedited *No More Masks!* (Doubleday), one of the first major anthologies of poetry by women. Her work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New Republic*, *Ploughshares*, and *The Kenyon Review*. She teaches in the MFA program at Pacific University. www.ellenbass.com