PILOT GLASSES

When I put them on the sky turned bluer than it was, and the hills, as if suffused with gold, glowed like an Old Master’s oil.

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We were driving back from Montpelier where we met our California e-mail friends. It was the first time I’d seen them in their real bodies, instead of the bodies of words lofted across a continent. I knew them and didn’t know them. What is added when we see a thing we have only touched with language? Patrick handed his glasses to me.

I put them on, and in those tinted lens, the mountains turned to topaz, emerald, garnet.

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Once, at my old job in an ugly city, the receptionist came back from the cellar where she’d gone to store files. Talking high and fast, she said she’d looked through the basement window into the storm drain outside, which was covered at ground level with an iron grill. At the bottom of the drain, lying there, was an impossible animal: two-headed, pink and beige. We didn’t, of course, believe her.

One after another, we went down into that place of moldy dampness, into the dust. But each returned with the same strange story: two heads, pink and beige.

I was last.

I went down into the dust and dim, and found my way to the window that was the one light, and looked through it.
And looked again.
In truth,
the creature was pink fur and beige fur.
It had two heads
and both were sleeping.

What is it we see when we see?
Whatever held me to that perception
lifted, and I saw
not one, but two of them, one tan—one white,
their small tails curled around their small bodies—
tame creatures whose gone-wild mother
had gone off and left them,
lying one across the back of the other,
asleep and unaware.

What is it we want to see?
Patrick said I looked good in the glasses.
I kept them on for a long time
as the Green Mountain autumn
flew, heightened and sharp-edged, by us,
and the sky with its brilliant and irregular
triangles of turquoise stayed steady
between the clouds. That illusion—I held
on to it for a long time,
because there was nothing confusing then—
nothing that was not beautiful.