

# The Squirrel Next Door

This week in art class, we created reverse animal portraits with white gouache on black board. Patrick painted his favorite animal, and I painted Collin's.

Everyone has a favorite animal. Mine has been the polar bear for nearly twenty years, when I saw one maneuver through an enormous tank at the Seattle Aquarium with fluidity and grace that defied its species. Patrick has been a loyal fan of the penguin since reading Mr. Popper's Penguins in elementary school.



## *Patrick's painting of a penguin*

Fortunately for both of us, our beloved beasts from opposing poles can be found right here in Baltimore at the Maryland Zoo. I took Collin there this past fall. I was so excited about introducing him to animals from faraway places, especially his favorite at that time, the elephant.

To my dismay, Collin didn't seem interested in looking at or learning about the zoo's exotic residents. Something else had caught his eye.

"Mommy, look at that silly squirrel (pronounced "squway-rul")!" he said, pointing to the aforementioned bushy-tailed rodent as he bobbed in and out of a trash can.

"Collin, we can see squirrels at home," I said. "Now, look at how long the giraffe's neck is!"

Over the next few weeks, Collin told everyone we talked to about all of the squirrels we saw at the zoo. He continued to study the squirrels around the neighborhood and point out the goofy things they did, like run into each other or dangle from a limb like a gymnast.



## *Robyn's painting of a squirrel*

For the first time in my life, I began to notice squirrels rather than ignoring their existence until they run out in front of my car. And Collin was right. Squirrels actually are pretty funny.

The eyes of a child often help us to see life in terms so simple, they are profound.

We seek. We seek. We continue to search for something better. Seldom do we realize that what we're looking for is right before us. It just needs to be seen through other eyes. We can always explore beyond our boundaries, as well, so long as we never lose sight or let go of what's right in front of us.

Patrick and I continue to be penguin and polar bear fans, and will return to the zoo to see them when it gets a little warmer. Collin cannot wait to see the squirrels and their elephant friends again. Frank will probably point at everything, but maybe

he'll teach me something.

One more thing about squirrels: I play a game with my students where you replace the word "girl" in any song with the word "squirrel." For instance: "I've got sunshine on a cloudy day. When it's cold outside, I've got the month of May. I guess you'd say, what can make me feel this way? My squirrel." Hope you have fun playing my game!