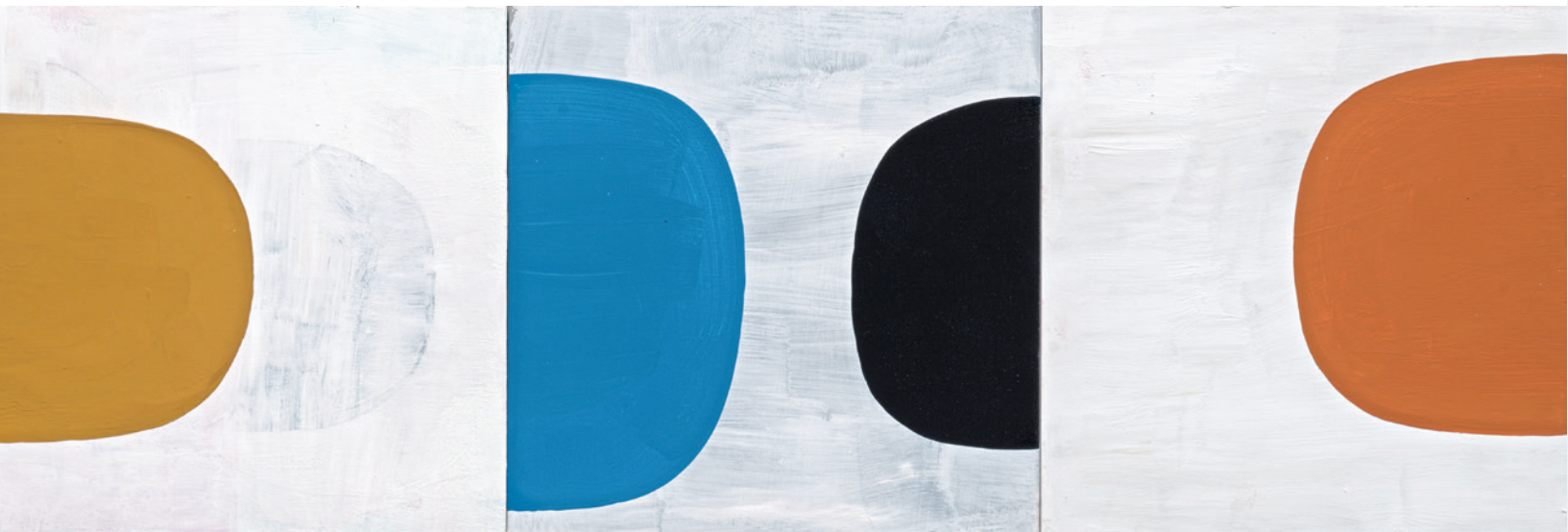


TERRI ROLLAND

Raw Sienna, 2016
Acrylic on panel, 8 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JENNIFER MURVIN

Hippo

The zoo is quiet midmorning on a weekday, today the first warm day in months and maybe the only warm day in months to come, and so Carol has taken her granddaughter, Sofia, to see the hippo. It is the little girl's favorite animal; at home there is a stuffed hippo with large teeth, children's books featuring child-hippos struggling to go to sleep, shirts with patchwork hippos, and a jacket with hippo faces imprinted in fleece on the elbows.

"Hippo?" little Sofia asks. It is one word of only a few available to her—someone who didn't know her might even call her a baby—thus carrying an exaggerated importance.

There is no hippo in the shallow water. It is winter in the small Missouri town, and often Carol has wondered how the giraffes and elephants fare here. She feels more comfortable watching the deer, the geese, the snakes in the snake house, logical animals.

They are standing on a small platform above the hippo's keep, where zoo guests can look down onto the hippo's wide back, watch his ears as they snap and dance. (Carol imagines the hippo, so very large after all, as a male.) Often the hippo is floating in the pool where the concrete edges rise like street curbs; other times he is crouched into the mud pit on a small sloping hill. Carol has never seen the hippo walk. She imagines he might simply disappear from the pool and reappear in the mud.

"Hippo?" Sofia asks again, her voice increasing in urgency. The grandmother remembers something about little children and object permanence, their inability to understand that even though Mommy has gone behind the corner, she has not left the house. This seems important.

"I don't know where the hippo is, darling," Carol says. There is a small opening above the water, but it is much too small for a hippo to fit through. Sofia is bright enough to understand this. Sofia is brighter than Carol's son, Sofia's father, was at this age. Carol sometimes wishes she could see more of her son in the girl. As an infant, it was easier. She does not tell anyone about the times she held the baby to her breast and imagined it was her son again, herself young, breasts full, all that love rushing over her in the way it used to before her son could say cruel things, could make mistakes, could hurt her, ignore her, leave her. But she knows it is only that he has grown up.

To make up for this, Carol offers her granddaughter an ice cream cone from one of the zoo vending machines.

“Hippo,” Sofia says, shaking her head. It is a demand: produce the hippo.

“Sweetheart, I don’t know where the hippo is,” Carol says. The water in the shallow pond is murky but not murky enough to pretend a hippo where there is no hippo.

Sofia bursts into sobs and Carol sighs as several mothers look over. They do not stop as they push their jogging strollers; they are tiny in their yoga pants, these women. They do not look old enough to have children. Carol has always looked old, and because of this, she has not seemed to age.

The zoo’s office doubles as a gift shop, and here a young woman in a khaki shirt explains that the hippo is probably inside his house due to the cold weather. The woman has an open face with attractive freckles across her cheeks. It is easy to imagine this woman holding a monkey on her arm, explaining the difference between a chimp and an orangutan.

“But she is so upset,” Carol explains, gesturing to her granddaughter, who is still crying.

“We can’t control what the animals do,” the young woman says patiently. She bends down to Sofia. “I’m sorry, sweetie, but the hippo needs to be inside. He’s cold.” She wraps her arms around herself and gives an exaggerated shiver.

“You should fix this,” Carol says. It is unusual for her to complain; she is a person who eats the potpie even though she has ordered the club sandwich. She accepts her daughter-in-law’s use of cheap toilet paper.

“I’m sorry?” The young woman cocks her head, maybe as a parrot would.

“It’s cruel for the children. Do you understand? There are expectations.”

“We can’t control the animals, ma’am.”

“The door is too small. The children can’t understand how the hippo could be inside when the door is so small.”

“There is a larger opening underneath,” the young woman says. She is the kind of young woman whom, decades ago, a mother might have wished for her son, one who seemed to spell out good breeding, loyalty, a strong back.

“But you can’t see the opening under the water. There should be a larger opening on top,” Carol says. It is a crime, she thinks. A crime against the children. They should know what has happened to the hippo; the zoo should be designed to help the children understand that when the hippo is missing, in fact he is not missing at all.

“There’s no way to fix the door.”

“There should be a sign, then.” She could write it herself. *Don’t worry, children. There is still a hippo. He is safe. He is inside sleeping. He is warm. He is dreaming sweet dreams of Africa.*

The young woman is practical. “How would we know when he was in or out? He can come and go as he pleases.”

Carol is unable to articulate to the woman how ludicrous this is. They are in a zoo. “A permanent sign,” she says. “Just in case. An explanation, that’s all I’m asking for.”

Her granddaughter has quieted; she has found the rack of stuffed snakes. It is a certain sting that there are no stuffed hippos to be found.

“I’ll be sure to mention it to my manager, ma’am,” the young woman says. She is even kind. She leans down and pulls a sticker out of her pocket and gives it to Sofia. “Come back and see us.”

At her son and daughter-in-law’s home, Sofia naps hard, exhausted from grieving the hippo. She could be right, Carol thinks. Why should they trust the young woman that the hippo is sleeping cozily inside his house? She dials her husband, who answers without a word; he has been unable to speak since his stroke almost fifteen years ago. Sometimes she dreams the sound of his voice as her father’s. Sometimes his face startles her, how old he is!, his mouth mute as dust. Eyes pleading. Carol wants to lie down with Sofia in the dark room with the noise machine, fancy monitor, fan, diffusor of essential oils. Sofia! Carol’s love for her is overwhelming, like she is being sucked under water.

“We’re having a wonderful day, my love,” she says into the phone. “I’ll stop by the store on the way home to get the steaks for dinner.” After a moment, she hangs up.

* * *

Years later Carol will take her granddaughter to a going-away party at the zoo in the dead of summer; the hippo is being moved to California, into a multimillion-dollar habitat with a bigger pond, a wider yard, a more reliable sun. The hippo’s new habitat will have underwater viewing. There’s a chance the hippo will be featured in a movie. The hippo is only middle-aged; he has a long life ahead of him in the Golden State.

The zoo’s party includes face painting, crafts, cupcakes decorated like hippo butts. Sofia—Sofie, she wants to be

called now, or Sof—wants to leave. It’s hot, she’s bored, Sof wants to go swimming with “the girls.” The paint on her face—a butterfly—has been smeared. Sofia is looking away when a zookeeper feeds the hippo a watermelon; he throws it into the hippo’s mouth, and the hippo crushes it in one bite, his teeth effortless. Juice runs from his mouth, pulpy. The zookeeper does it again with a cantaloupe. This, the hippo doesn’t appear to chew. Carol has never seen such a thing in her life. Horrified, she wipes sudden tears from her eyes.

“Grandma!” Sofia is so strong, pulling on her arm. Carol knows this will leave a bruise.

“Let’s go,” Carol agrees. Behind them, the crowd yells as the hippo devours more large fruit. A mango, she thinks, would land like a mint on the hippo’s tongue. A peach like nothing at all, a plum even less. His great tongue would not register a kumquat. His strength is consuming.

On their way to the pool, she thinks of the difference between not speaking and silence, hippos missing or moved. Sometimes, Carol finds herself holding an empty glass. Standing outside in the garden, or on her knees, like she has been digging. Praying? Begging. On her walls, there are photographs of Carol with a man she doesn’t recognize. There had been singing, once. Often she wakes up, thinking the singing is coming from the kitchen. Her husband has been dead four years. Had he remembered her name? The noise he made when he died was the absence of noise. And she thought it had been silent all those years! Foolish Carol. Who had drunk the juice from her empty glass? What would happen should Carol climb into a hippo’s mouth? Would it echo like a cave? How many bites would it take?

When they arrive at the pool where “Sof” will meet “the girls,” Carol can still taste frosting from the cupcake on her tongue as she opens the door for her granddaughter, tells her to wear sunscreen, be careful, stay in the shallow end. Carol will sit in a plastic chair, she will watch her granddaughter’s black hair bob among the other children in the pool, she will stand up and remove her clothes, she will enter the pool, she will sink until only her eyes show, she will open her mouth, she will swallow everything whole. Carol will disappear into the magical place hippos go when they are cold and tired of being seen.

Jennifer Murvin’s stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *CutBank*, *Indiana Review*, *Post Road*, *American Short Fiction*, the *Sun*, *Mid-American Review*, the *Cincinnati Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Phoebe*, the *Baltimore Review*, and other journals. She was recently the winner of the 2015 American Short(er) Fiction Contest, judged by Stuart Dybek. Murvin teaches courses in fiction writing, memoir writing, comics, literature, and theory at Missouri State University and is recurring faculty for the biannual River Pretty Writers Retreat. She holds an MA in English from Missouri State University and an MFA in creative writing from Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon.