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OF MICE AND OTHER COMPLAINTS

First Complaint: Drawn as I am to personal essays, I lose patience with those seductively titled by the subject they purport to address, like “anger” or “art” (the same thing?), when they’re really just an excuse for a writer to talk about herself. It’s a coy trick indeed, sneaking up on the reader like that in one guise, with the writing winking to say, “You know and I know it’s not *really* ‘education’ or ‘solitude’ she has under those clothes”

In defense of personal essays, of course, a form I madly envy, the really good ones are not just self-indulgences, but exposés of all those little holes in the larger fabric of what we call universality. A good essay lets in a little light at a time.

Speaking of holes, there was a summer I discovered we had mice in our cabin in California. This is not at all uncommon in the forest, particularly in a cabin we see only once a year now that we’ve moved to southern Indiana. This was the summer after the summer we’d moved to Indiana, and we were still trying to sort out our West Coast life. We kept our tumble-down place on forty acres overgrown by manzanita and tan oak, and graced with towering sugar pines (the kind one would call majestic) and stands of redwoods, there up the coast on the Sonoma-Mendocino border in Northern California. When we lived in San Francisco, as we did up until three years ago, we would go up for as long as four months at a stretch.

Between our regular comings and goings, along with two now-deceased cats, and the occasional baiting of Have-A-Hart traps, we managed to keep mice at bay. But in our frantic preparations for moving, in our exhausted, packing haste, we gave into inadvertent generosity by leaving behind a virtual smorgasbord: boxes of cereal, packets of seeds, bags of rice and lentils and macaroni. Naturally, the mice knew a good thing when they saw it and took refuge in our cabin that winter.

Occupation by mice is not as innocent as it sounds. You can dispense with Disney-esque visions of singing rodents in aprons tidying up their acorn bowls and rose petal dishes. Their presence is a full-blown occupation. For starters, the stench alone is overwhelming. Picture shelves and drawers stained and strewn with dried and sticky mouse feces, papers shredded, and personal

effects yellowed and reeking of the unmistakable pungent smell of dried urine. Mice aren't particularly modest creatures. Without interrupting their forays, they excrete and urinate prolifically on the run. Silverware, dishes, glasses, clothes and bedding had all been subjected to their rampage.

Worn out from the cross-country drive, we grimly set ourselves to being "philosophical" (after all, the roof hadn't collapsed and the place hadn't burned down), and dutifully set the Have-A-Harts and went to bed. Over the next two nights we caught exactly two mice. Now there is never any such thing as "just two mice," but when the traps turned up empty the third night, I believed such a thing was possible.

Once again, I found myself entranced by two beautiful brown and white creatures patiently awaiting their fates in the cage the next morning. Petersen's Guide helped me identify them as deer mice. The distinguishing though sometimes confusing characteristics involve large brown eyes (very cute), large ears (very cute), and bi-colored tails. Releasing them into the forest, I forgave both for their damage. After all, they were governed by instinct, not malevolent design. I imagined that magically over the next year when we were gone again, mice would somehow make a detour around our cabin.

Monday—My husband left for San Francisco to clean out and re-rent our house in Bernal Heights, and pack and organize more stuff. I stayed behind to tackle the less-than-enviable task of cleaning up over the next few days. I might mention that rural and remote living has its distinct advantages, but this wasn't my thought as I encased my hands in rubber gloves, prepared a dishpan of diluted bleach water, and wielding the vacuum wand, began to go shelf by shelf, drawer by drawer, in what is essentially both a tedious and depressing task.

It was impossible to reconcile the havoc mice are capable of with the lovable little creatures we caught in the traps, not to mention the personified mice of my childhood.

Chester Bartholemew Tucker stands out in particular. When I was seven I strategically stole small amounts of change from my parents over a period of a week until I'd amassed eighty-nine cents to purchase the honey-colored Chester at a local pet store. We had what I believed to be a unique relationship as peers. There existed between us an unspoken understanding, and we spent hours together, perfecting our rapport. It really never occurred to me that I was in control of Chester, doling out food, cleaning the cage on whim,

deciding where we would go. Out of the cage, Chester was free to use me as a living jungle gym, and I didn't object to being urinated and defecated on as my beloved romped over the top of my head, plunked down on my shoulder, and scurried down my arm to my palm where I offered snacks and my own kisses on tiny mouse lips. I admit now to loving Chester beyond reason, keeping the small metal cage next to my bedside, where the whirring of the exercise wheel lulled me to sleep at night. I anthropomorphized my pet with shameless pleasure. If Chester sniffed me, it was a sign of devotion, and if Chester climbed on to my face it was from missing me. In this way, Chester evolved as complex and smart. The only thing Chester couldn't do was talk. To the best of my knowledge, at that time, my own attachment was reflected back in mutual adoration, as if from a mirror, by Chester.

Compounding this affection for rodents was of course my introduction to the well-known literary rodent protagonists in *Stuart Little* and *The Wind in the Willows*, not to mention *Charlotte's Web*, featuring that lusciously selfish and corpulent pack rat, Templeton. Very few of my friends and none of the adults in my life shared my love of rodents. In fact, many people spoke of nasty encounters with rats and mice that struck me as just short of libelous.

Once Chester escaped on a family visit to my aunt's eighteenth-century farmhouse in Maryland, a place full of endless nooks and crannies and hiding places. Panicked, I begged my aunt to take up all her mouse traps, which she grudgingly agreed to do, but only until the following morning. I was given twenty-four hours to get Chester back safely before the traps would be re-set, baited temptingly with peanut butter and cheese. I spent a sleepless night staring at the moonlight streaming in across the ceiling, making deals with God for Chester's return. As fortune had it, Chester did indeed return intact, and was sitting on top of the cage the next morning, briskly washing. Three weeks later, timed precisely to the disappearance, and much to my surprise, Chester delivered a litter of eight little gray house mouse babies, proving she was not at all who I'd thought she was. The arrival of the babies, however, only endeared her to me even more. Chester the alchemist, Chester the trickster. Pride raged uncontrollably in me.

Our family's summer trip continued on to the urban home of my Ohio grandparents where my testy grandfather peered with disgust into the cage and pronounced my little darlings "dirty sewer rats." My mother ordered the cage put on the back porch. That night temperatures dropped unexpectedly, the water bottle leaked, and three babies froze to death. No one seemed to

care. I was heartbroken and appalled by the callousness of adults. Viewed their intolerance as a character flaw, and assumed these relatives whom I was dearly fond of were sadly limited.

This affection for rodents has followed me into adulthood (though I no longer believe in keeping caged animals of any kind), and I still subscribe to the philosophy that you don't kill mice, spiders, and other small living creatures, mosquitoes and flies being the only exception.

Complaint Two: I have a strong aversion to "nature writing," and react violently to the anthropocentric hubris, masking itself as meditation and observation, that seeps from so many nature essays I've read. Maybe what annoys me most is the combination of smugness and didacticism in "look what you insensitive louts accustomed to clomping pavement are missing out on; if you'd only look closer at the natural world, instead of fixating on the acquisition of material goods, you'd find redemption in the center of an amanita." There are a few readable essayists on the subject of nature: Edward Abbey, for one, who is sufficiently irreverent and irascible. But I rebel against the Thoreau model with its dreamy romanticization of nature, nature as a sketchbook for the writer's personal contemplations and reminiscences, nature offered up as psychic backdrop. It's such a cheap trick. And so exclusive of those of us who simply don't have access to such bucolic leisure, too busy stuck behind desks and assembly lines in order to pay the mortgage.

And yet here I am writing an essay that purports to take as its subject matter an element of the natural world. I did, after all, title this "Of Mice," and I've also been describing what it's like moving from one end of the country to another, and how it feels to live in a cabin in the woods, not to mention just how dog tired I got from cleaning. I am writing shamelessly about me.

After scrubbing shelves and drawers, laden with the leavings and general destruction of mice, I began to feel resentful. Those two little bastard mice I'd rescued were off somewhere asleep under a mossy leaf while I scoured away at their hardened feces, and gathered up all the loose confetti of papers they'd destroyed for nests.

I vacuumed with a vengeance. Outside the sun shone alluringly, the blue sky framed in the skylight overhead, and I was stuck inside. When I shut off the vacuum, there was the relief of silence. I stopped to drink a cold beer, but before I'd popped the cap I heard an odd sound of high-pitched mewling. For

a moment I thought we might have a nest of baby birds hidden in the rafters. I followed the direction of the sound, which was emanating from one of the drawers I hadn't yet gotten around to scrubbing. I yanked it open to discover a beautifully architected nest teeming with one, two, three, four, five, six baby mice, the size of small shrimp-colored Tootsie rolls. "Seething" would have also been an apt description.

I stared in disbelief. Looking like a cross between a baby salamander and a miniature blind puppy, one bumbled out of the nest and crawled with bulldozer tenacity, feet splayed, across the drawer, crying as he went. How foolish to assume the grown mice we'd trapped were childless. The irony of *only two mice* rang in my head. I watched the bold mouse press his blunt nose again and again against the wooden side of the drawer, in search of his mother. His head was more fully developed, his body fuller and rounder than the others'. I stood, observing them with an odd mixture of loathing and affection.

By my own hand, I had orphaned them. Their mother now roamed the forest, irretrievable. In that act lay some responsibility. They were all covered in soft, downy fur, though their undersides were still smooth and pink. Judging by my recollections of Chester's babies, I gauged them to be probably a week old, close to opening their eyes.

I considered the options. (1) Drowning them, but an outhouse seemed like a bad way to go, and I imagined their tiny bodies floating on the surface of that watery pit for days to come. (2) Releasing them. They were much too young and would die a terrible, lingering death, from cold or starvation. The lucky ones might be gobbled up by an alligator lizard or a snake. (3) Bopping them on their heads. Then what? I ran through "Three Blind Mice" to myself to remember what it was the farmer's wife did. You can see:

I was stuck.

Third Complaint: As a child I was a sucker for animal stories. I devoured the saccharine canine heros of Albert Peyson Terhune, and the likes of Old Yeller, Black Beauty, and Beautiful Joe with relish. I read *The Incredible Journey* a dozen times at least, and saw the film at least half as many. Animals with a consciousness. Animals who were people in fur suits. It's only fitting that as an adult I began to resent sappy animal stories, in the same way I resented representational paintings of posed animals. I turned to slightly more cynical tales like May Sarton's *The Fur Person* and Colette's erotic *The Cat*. I owned cats and witnessed with my very eyes their "catness," which cannot be faithfully described in human terms.

What changed? Maybe adulthood hardened me. Maybe I realized that the animal world is every bit as cruel as the one we human beings inhabit, and that the fox eyeing the rabbit is not about to pass out party invitations for a bash back at his den. It wasn't really until I went backpacking with my husband in the Trinity Alps in California, I had a chance to glimpse wild animals outside of zoos. Virtually left alone by human beings, they went about their animal business without our interference. Not to romanticize the struggle of surviving the wilds, the disease, the predators, the sudden shifts to inclement weather, extinction, poachers, and hunters, but it occurred to me as I stopped to rest for a moment how undomesticated animals had—well, an enviable dignity. They managed to exist in spite of humankind. Guided by instinct, they persisted. A weasel wending his way up the slope from a riverbank in the cool of the evening after hunting for dinner, seemed to me to be, by virtue of his independence, better off than a domestic dog whose whole existence is one of slavish dependence. Even if the weasel had not been successful in his efforts, it seemed to me that the option would be to pervert his nature the way we have done with domestic animals for whom we have created a forced dependence we call love. We cage, box, and leash animals in order to love them. Love is a form of possession, after all, a kind of containment. I'm not knocking it, but I do question it.

Saying all this, I found myself relocating with cautious fingertips the six baby mice, nest and all, into a small bucket and drove them down three miles of gravel road, made the right, and proceeded another fifteen miles up Highway 1 to the closest vet just across the Gualala River. And there, dear reader, I bought *formula*. Mother's milk replacement. Some concoction full of vitamins and minerals necessary to the development of baby animals. I paid for the can and two packages of powder, as well as a small plastic cage with a hinged and slotted top, and tried not to think about all the hungry and neglected human children in the world, the orphans chained to beds in Romania, the emaciated street children of India, the infant victims bayoneted to death in war-ravaged Rwanda, the one-fifth of all American children who do not receive proper nutrition and live below poverty level. I would like to say I was avoiding feelings of guilt, but it would be too simple. There was nothing to rationalize, because life's problems do not offer themselves up with any sort of symmetry. Instead, I experienced one of those moments in which we realize just how overwhelming the human condition is, how impossible our problems are, and ultimately how unsolvable. Our essential narcissism is probably what saves us from extinction.

On the way home, I parked along the coast side of the road, and there in the car, with the surf crashing in the background, I tried my best to feed the hungry mice on the spot, making a mess of things, slopping formula all over them and onto the car upholstery. If I say they showed displeasure, I am guilty of anthropomorphizing. But I think it's fair to say I was not living up to their standards.

Back home, I tried a second feeding. No one could tell me how much to feed mice. The pamphlet of instructions was vague and focused mostly on squirrels and rabbits, asserting cryptically that one learns through practice, that baby animals will let you know when they'd had their fill.

Feeding was—well complicated. To begin with, handling miniature, fragile, and squirming creatures is a daunting task. Their flimsy limbs and bodies seemed destined to squash at the softest pressure. And as there was no discernible space between their noses and mouths, the formula dripped down tiny esophagi, causing them to choke and sputter.

More formula coursed over their bodies, crusting on necks, faces, unopened eyes, etc. The instructions said, "Keep the babies clean." How do you clean a mouse? The mothers would lick them with efficient maternal briskness. Clumsily, I mopped them up with cotton balls, stunned over and over by their flailing fragility.

Tuesday—I was restive all night, following the thread of worry into the labyrinth of full-blown anxiety. Along the way, I imagined that the rising humidity back in Indiana was going to destroy all the books I hadn't had time to unpack, that our house down in the City would never get rented again and we'd have to eat a mortgage we could no longer afford, but mostly I worried that the baby mice were starving. Their cage sat next to my bed. Each time I checked they appeared to be sleeping soundly. Too soundly. Their bodies looked like corpses. When I prodded them, they stirred and mewed, but not with any passion. I assumed this was a good sign, that they were well fed and sleepy, though the pamphlet had not explained this part, and I was left with the immediacy of my own doubts.

Though the mice were distinctly different, in features and movements, I began conveniently to refer to them both collectively and individually as "buster." It made life simpler. Besides, I didn't want to get attached. They weren't Chester, and I wasn't seven anymore. Chester had been a childhood concoction of material mouse blended with much imagination and desire, and

subsequent lore. Certainly I had ascribed to her special talents and instincts, particularly as evidenced in her conscious avoidance of my aunt's mouse traps (how clever!), and her return to my room (good sense of direction) in that huge old rambling house. In essence, Chester had set out on her adventure with a clear design. She had set a course, met up with a handsome house mouse (I imagined him twirling his whiskers), and embarked on a brief adventure.

Past and present collapsed. I would awaken disoriented trying to remember which house I was in, what state, and which of the many lives I was currently inhabiting, and where I had put what. On this most recent cross-country trip we'd driven through the Rockies, then into Southern Utah. The clarity of the desert frightened me. I had never seen anything like it. Nothing was concealed, and yet it took a while for my eyes to adjust to the awesome expanses and make sense of the shapes. No trees, no greenery, no shade. No place to hide. I inhaled too much dry air and red dust. My nose bled. My sinuses dried up like scorched paper. Days later, I was still clearing dust from my lungs. With temperatures around a hundred and twenty, I sank into a kind of lethargy. I might as well have been on the moon.

A friend phoned from San Francisco to say I was insane to be playing around with mice. Hadn't I heard about the lethal Hanta virus carried by mice that was killing people in California? I scoffed, taking her comments as an unspoken judgment about my folly. But after, I was sure I could feel the virus taking root in my bloodstream.

With virus-ridden eyes, I stared at the little creatures I'd been handling with such insouciance. Was that a fever I felt coming on? Nausea? Suddenly their writhing bodies signaled toxicity, tiny perpetrators of my rising temperature, my bloated tongue, my glazed eyes, my slow paralysis. I admit I broke down and made some anonymous phone calls: the vet, the health clinic, public health, and finally an environmental specialist who assured me with statistical confidence that I had more chances of being run over by a bread truck than contracting the virus. But he did urge me to "take precautions." Unable to imagine what those might be exactly, I chose denial.

Maternal functions being what they are, intimate for starters, I was in skin to skin contact with the little beasts constantly. Feedings became a little more manageable (perhaps, as the pamphlet had predicted, I was learning), but the babies appeared to be hungry all the time. They had become tyrants, dictating their demands in a volley of squeaks and mews that were heart-rending.

My old washer/dryer combo on the back porch of the cabin makes a similar squeaking sound when the motors turn. Each time I washed and dried clothes, I imagined I was hearing the harmony of hungry mice demanding another feeding.

Okay, so I took off for walks and tried to clear my head, but was plagued by weariness, unfinished tasks, dislocating thoughts about my new job, the new house left behind in chaos and disrepair, an IRS audit that we'd had to reschedule because we'd misplaced our receipts somewhere along the way, our old cars that needed repairing, etc.

For months I'd been imagining our cabin as an oasis of relaxation, but the year of neglect was in full evidence, and there was brush to be cut and cleaning to be done, and the outhouse was ready to fall over. Not to mention the damage of the invading mice, the evidence that my old life was not over yet, that one can't simply pick up and leave a place without being confronted by the detritus of the past.

My impulse was to flee. I could get in a car and start driving. I have fled a lot in my life. Chosen new places, relieved by the motion of travel. And it was true, I was too distracted to get any real work done, and yet I had staked out this time for just that purpose. The weather turned unexpectedly gloomy, and with appropriate pathetic fallacy, I'll mention that the fog rolled in early evenings and wasn't clearing until late the following afternoon. Suddenly it was all terribly depressing, this "living the rustic life": keeping firewood handy, boiling water for washing dishes, lighting the outdoor shower which my husband had jerry-rigged to the garden hose (which involves switching the couplings if you want to do laundry), making night-time jaunts to the mosquito-infested outhouse, etc. I found myself staring out at the overgrown yard and paths, choked by impenetrable brush and manzanita, remembering the summer we actually had a flourishing vegetable garden and a view of the tree-lined canyon below us. There was a larger issue at stake here: the forfeiture of my entire rambling, adult life on the West Coast, and the advent of my new life as a professor in Indiana. Indiana with its subtropical summers had tricked me briefly into forgetting just how brown and dry California gets that time of year. There is the constant danger of fire, and when you live in a forest, three miles down a gravel road, with thick underbrush and lots of crowded overhang, you know for a fact that no volunteer fire crew in their right minds are going to make that trip down into a flaming forest, across a railroad car bridge, and up to the next ridge to save your ass.

After one of my walks, I was cutting back through what we call “the meadow” to our cabin, nerves on edge, anxious to see how the mice were, momentarily connecting their fate to mine. Yes, they were cute, and yes, I did feel a bit of a thrill when the first little one finally gripped the “nipple” of the syringe with his little teeny lips and braced his paws around it for support. The pamphlet indicated that when the babies began to suck at the formula, “the battle to their survival is half-won.” It sounded so positive and upbeat. I invented the future narrative in my head, the one that I could tell all those doubting Thomases and Thomasinas at dinner parties about the time I saved half a dozen baby mice. Let them laugh! It would be a triumph.

Having gotten this far, I invested in making the little critters a nest that would be worthy enough. The mother mouse had been very clever. I had to admire her handiwork, instinct or not. She had snatched the bottom fourth of a plastic bread wrapper, taking advantage of its natural bowl shape, and lined it with kleenex, toilet paper, dust, and insulation from our wall, all woven together into a little basket. Mine was cruder, messier. The blind babies kept getting tangled and lost. The pamphlet explained that the mother mouse would dutifully return straying babies to the nest. I figured out this was not merely a statement of fact, it was an imperative. I now had to keep the mice from wandering off.

Wednesday—I discovered the hard way that baby mice have no internal way of warming themselves and rely solely on heat from the mother’s body. With the change from hot days to nights that brought with the damp chill of coastal fog, I should have known to put a lamp above the plastic cage to keep them heated. I woke up about three in the morning to find their bodies cold and lifeless. Stricken, I laid them out on the kitchen counter, where they remained still, as if drugged. They had turned ugly and sick, their little pink salamander paws stiffening in the air, eyes sealed shut by a thin gray membrane. But there was the almost imperceptible breathing that let me know every one of the six was still alive.

I used my only reading lamp with the 60 watt bulb to warm each one of them, one by one, in my hand. Little by little, the bodies began to come alive. They grew active and cried for food. While I warmed up the last couple mice, their siblings flailed about on a piece of paper towel on the kitchen counter, wanting to be fed. I served them with the syringe, again missing their tiny mouths and striking their noses where the formula bubbled and dripped down, and the little mice choked. I cursed myself for being clumsy and I cursed them for being so small and helpless. It all seemed like such a foolish waste of time.

During the day I continued to clean and bleach, increasingly sickened by the endless procession of adult rodent droppings and the accumulation of fetid smelling urine which had hardened in corners and coated jar tops and shelves with its shiny, smelly veneer.

I admit I was secretly worried sick about catching the mouse diseases, but figured it had already happened and I was now in the last throes. There was a relief in yielding to the inevitable. The environmental specialist had started to list the dreaded possibilities for me, beginning with bubonic plague, and then paused and said philosophically, "You know, you really don't want to know." And he spoke again of odds and law of averages, and I took refuge in the notion that ignorance is bliss. I mentally rattled off all the other dire disaster statistics I knew: car accidents, plane crashes, earthquakes, and now Midwestern tornados. Could a disease from mice be any worse? So long as it was quick. Delirium would set in. I'd simply fade out.

There is a character to helplessness that is both appealing and revolting, and while my affection waxed toward my new little charges, I was simultaneously repelled by their amorphous little shapes and their inexhaustible needs. I've often thought about the fine line between pity and disgust. At what point do you cross over? Once, on a congested, smoggy street in Bangkok, I saw a starving man catch a live rat in his bare hands. I didn't have to look long at his emaciated body to know he was desperately in need of food. Our eyes met briefly. I saw not only hunger, but greed. And along with that was a plea. He was asking me not to stare. Hours after he'd vanished down an alley, I wasn't able to eat, but when I finally did, I stuck to rice and greens, things I could identify easily, and make no mistake about.

It was a little that way with the mice. I kept worrying that in my weariness I was eating one of them, instead of a grape or an apple, or whatever I had in my hand. I lost my appetite during this time. I snacked on things that came out of packages, things with clear shapes and substance—saltines, tortilla chips, cookies.

This same mixture of pity and disgust I have felt when seeing newborn human babies as well, though not my own, of course, because through a number of bittersweet failures I have managed to arrive well into my adult life without any children of my own.

And this is the Fourth Contradiction: I am quite fond of other people's children, but it is a sharp, rough knowledge that these children, no matter how

much I love them, are not replacements for the ones I always assumed I'd have. I've never sentimentalized children, and treat them pretty much the way I do adults. As a child, I had many adult friends, and trusted in them to give me straight answers about the world. Now I have nieces and nephews and the children of friends to claim, but they are not really mine, they are borrowed, and for short times I live someone else's life vicariously. I am alternately philosophical about and grieved by my losses. In fact, it was the last miscarriage that launched me east, and confirmed my thought that I'd better go on with my life and a career. The last one was the worst, occurring in a quick and painful hemorrhage on a public street in the Embarcadero district of San Francisco where I had just finished teaching a writing seminar to professional adults. Ironically, I was en route to my prenatal appointment when it happened, and it was this irony that really set me off. Before I could get to the parking lot where I'd left my car, I was forced to my knees by violent cramps. It was humiliating to sit there soaked in blood, sobbing uncontrollably over "the baby," while passersby either ignored me, or asked what was wrong with worry so keenly etched on their foreheads that I felt profoundly sorry for them and ashamed of myself. There is a clarity in moments of crises, and I was able to step back and consider just how ridiculous I must have looked, sitting on the cold pavement in my half-attempt at business attire, surprise and anger written on my face, a woman who sobbed but refused to say why, and wished the world around her could have vanished at that moment, since grief really should by all rights be private.

Thursday—Two baby mice died. When I woke up, they were dead. In a way it was a relief. By this, I mean that they hadn't suffered long, and I could now focus my attention more fully on the healthier four. I wrapped the two in a napkin and carried them out and buried them in the dirt. Amazing how quickly they went cold and hard. They seemed to have shrunk in death and lay with their legs curled under them like the legs of shrimp. It was creepy and I was glad they were gone.

I threw myself with gusto into cleaning. There was the endless discovery of feces and urine. I threw away all open boxes. The sharp stench of mice lingered in my nose. I burned some sage, but it didn't help much. I was invited to a dinner party several properties over from ours. In preparation, I filled the fire box with kindling and lit the outdoor shower. I stood on the deck looking out over the forest while the water warmed. Then I jumped under the shower head and scrubbed myself with Dr. Bonner's peppermint

soap, while the sun lowered itself over the treetops. I put on a fresh pair of jeans and tee shirt and walked through the woods several parcels away to my friends' in the twilight, carrying a bottle of red wine I dug out from under some boxes in the kitchen. It was a relief to be in someone else's house, and I realized I'd been alone too long with my own thoughts. I was feeling downright civilized when someone asked me what I was up to, and after a while we got to talking about mice, and I sheepishly admitted what I was doing. People were kind, I give them that. No one admitted openly to thinking I was out of my mind. One acquaintance who subscribes to New Age philosophies suggested sweetly that I was "showing what it means to be in touch with the universe." It sounded soothing and noble, and I went along with it, while the discussion politely turned to personal anecdotes about the destructiveness of rodents. The stories came out: mice chewing through electrical cords and starting house fires, destroying plastic plumbing, and, of course, carrying all those serious diseases. Everyone agreed I should get a cat, but I reminded them I wouldn't be around for the next year to feed the cat, and no one offered to do it for me. The only other option, consensus decreed, was a trap or Decon, if I didn't want to see our cabin completely wrecked. Someone described having gone away for a while, only to return to destroyed bedding (heirloom quilts shredded), and clothing (silk blouses too stained to clean).

I began to realize what a ridiculous position I'd put myself in. Saving mice who would later return as adults to be bumped off by poison. More or less convinced, I wanted to know what Decon actually did. *You never see them, you know. It's painless, someone said. It's actually an easy death.* Nods all around. *It makes the mice thirsty and they go outside to die.* There was a pause. *No, it's a desiccant, it dries them up, and they bleed internally, you know, hemorrhage.* Someone else remarked, *It can take up to two days for them to die.*

Fifth Complaint: I generally hate epiphanies, and am not religious and do not usually trust figurative explanations for natural phenomenon, such as the hand of God at work, even when faced with the grandeur of the fire-red sandstone canyon walls in southern Utah, or the tiniest, fragile orchid blooming in a California redwood grove. The world is a random place, as far as I'm concerned, like the turn of a kaleidoscope. I adore hardwood forests, redwood forests, ocean, beach, tide pools, and the creatures that populate them, and have kept faithful track of my wildlife sightings over the years, two of the

most recent best being a mountain lion crossing a road in front of us at twilight in Colorado and a beautiful black bear rearing up from behind a boulder on a remote trail in Northern California.

Even without God, the natural world is miraculous anyway, evolving in its own way even with all of humankind's efforts to control and decimate it. Frankly, when I looked at those baby mice, suckling away at the end of the syringe, their tiny paws wrapped around it, I couldn't help but think of them with amazement about what people call life force. Amazement because they were doing what they were supposed to do, without instruction, without question, and in spite of me. What is the will to live?

Encouraged by their mousey willingness to put up with my clumsiness, I began to look for ways to improve my feeding methods. Inspired, I wrapped each mouse individually in a square of cotton, the kind you use for cleaning your face, and made a "little mouse sandwich." This was my joke. The cotton kept them from flopping around, and seemed to calm them. It also prevented the drips of formula from coating their bodies. There was nothing I could do to replace the warm, kinetic body of their mother. They seemed to keep searching for her, nuzzling one another, sucking at each other. I was a poor substitute, but we'd reached an understanding. It was Chester all over again.

The smell of mice was global: the acrid, nasty smell of the adult mice who had invaded, and now the warm, sickly sweet, milky smell of their babies. Each time I passed their cage I smelled them. I would pause and gently stroke them, trying to keep them stimulated. When they went to sleep, they slept like the dead.

Friday—Another mouse died in the morning, and two others were looking worse for the wear. I'd begun to count on losing four. It seemed to me the two strongest ones had been that way from the beginning. And, if truth be told, I subsequently learned that wild mice, unlike their domestic counterparts, are born with fur, so that they hadn't been a week old at all, but most likely newly born. Right then and there, another one ceased breathing. His chest expanded and then collapsed. After I'd buried them, one of the two strong ones died as swiftly as if he'd been struck by lightning. He was breathing one minute, and the next he turned cold and lifeless. How quickly they went.

I was now left with the one mouse who had tempted me from the beginning, by boldly proclaiming his hunger in the drawer as he struggled to go in search of food and mother.

I decided to drive into Gualala and pick up more supplies, and on the way back take a walk on the bluffs above the beach. The weather had cleared, the sun was out, and the ocean spread out blue before me. I am always annoyed when people say that water “sparkled like a jewel.” There is no apt metaphor for sparkling water. And a jewel is static, whereas an ocean is all motion. I kept thinking to myself, “the ocean sparkled like water.” Metaphors be damned! There is no better comparison than something being fully itself. There is nothing like saying straight out that loss hurts.

I thought a lot about the remaining mouse, wondering if I would return home to find him dead as well. I thought what a waste of time it all was, but tried to reassure myself with what others were saying: “You gave it your best shot,” “that was a noble undertaking,” “you can’t expect baby mice so young to live,” etc. None of it was particularly comforting, even though it may have been right. I was thinking how I’d failed at my small, foolish mission. Four days that should have been writing days I’d spent trying to save baby mice.

Ultimately, it wouldn’t matter if the little mouse lived or died. Cute beyond belief, a tiny bonzai, a perfect scrimshaw, whiskers, nose, paws, tail, eyes, etc. But so what?

Upon the advice of my friends, who were right, I have to admit that while in town I stopped at the hardware store and bought two large boxes of Decon. A drawing of a large unpleasant looking rat, the epitome of destruction, standing on hind legs decorated the front. I tried out some synonyms—*pest, plague, blight, scourge*. I recalled a rat I once saw that was almost the size of a cat, what folks like to call “ghetto rats,” in an alley near the home of a college friend, and how I stopped for a moment, mesmerized, while my friend took off running. And as this bloated creature waddled in the snow past a row of overflowing garbage cans, I tried to imagine awakening in the night to see one of those creatures ambling across my bed, which is what had happened to my friend.

Down on the beach below, a woman, jeans rolled to her knees, and her two naked boys, played tag with the waves as they rolled to shore. The Northern California coastline is one of the most beautiful sights anywhere and people come from all over the world to stand and gape at what I had always taken for granted. The woman began chasing the children and when she caught them, she tossed them back into the surf. They shrieked with delight, and at one point as she turned, the sunlight struck her beautiful dark face, and I thought for future reference, so, if I ever paint a picture, that’s what maternal joy looks like.

When they looked up, I waved to them, and the woman called up something to me, but her voice was lost on the wind. I drove back home through the redwoods. Well, it wasn't home. I was confused. My new home was in Indiana, a place that struck me as foreign as any place I've traveled to in the world. I was exhausted.

When I pulled up in front of our cabin, the place looked sweet and peaceful, the way I'd thought of it over the last year. I'd go in and call my husband down in the City and see how he was faring. I was avoiding the obvious—would the last mouse be dead or alive? I went on in, set my things down, including the boxes of Decon, strolled over to the cage, and peered in. Sure enough, the little mouse was stiff and hard. Rigor mortis had already set in.

I buried him outside as the sun was setting, then went inside and boiled water for pasta. I was hungry for the first time in four days, and experienced a sweet sense of remorse and relief. It was the same feeling of recovering from an illness, when the world once again sorts itself out and presents itself to you in all the familiar trappings. Off in the distance a dog barked. A truck rattled by on the road a quarter of a mile away. I disposed of the last of the formula and dumped the cage out back by the garbage cans, then went back in and wiped down the counter tops. I washed my hands over and over. But even so, they still smelled of sweet, sticky milk.

As night fell, I sat outside on the deck and ate my pasta while darkness slowly dropped down over the trees. A couple years before, a family of foxes had made a den in a hollow, felled tree right next to the shower. Our sudden appearance one weekend up from the City made them so nervous that while one fox protectively paced the log and yapped his high-pitched bark that can best be described as a cross between a geriatric soprano and a chain-smoking castrato, the mother fox spirited the kits safely away into the brush.

Sixth Complaint: A hundred yards up through the meadow I had buried my two cats, Blossom at eighteen and the irascible Theophilus at sixteen. I'd finally had to have Theophilus put to sleep, but it took me three tries to get up the courage. Four months later, Blossom died on her own. I found her one morning stretched out on the bathroom floor in our house in San Francisco, her mouth wide open in a snarl, like a scream, and I wondered if her death had been painful, or if she had simply lost control of her muscles. Loss is a funny and expected thing. And there are admittedly degrees of loss. I resorted to my old mental game of childhood: *"It would be worse if . . ."* It would be

worse to lose a child you'd given birth to than a child you hadn't. It would be worse to lose a child you'd loved for several years than a child you'd known only for a few hours. All in all, I calculated, my losses were small in comparison.

The night was moonless, and I couldn't see more than a couple of feet in front of me. Something rustled out in the manzanita.

I got up finally and went inside to bed. In the night I awakened once to what I thought was the chirping of hungry baby mice. For a moment in my confusion I thought they'd come back, and I was filled with a quick sensation of expectation.

In the morning, I headed down to the City to help my husband finish packing. We'd be back in a few days, but in the meantime I set out a dozen trays of Decon, the aqua-blue pellets every bit as alluring as the frosting on the cake Captain Hook offered the hungry Lost Boys. I closed the cabin door (we have no locks), climbed into the car, and followed the breath-stopping 100 twisty miles to San Francisco. I kept imagining the knowing smile of my aunt, the one who had tried to convince me years ago why she never hesitated to kill mice. My aunt is 80 years old now and she still lives in that same farmhouse in Maryland. Last time I was there, I saw mouse traps discreetly positioned in the corners of rooms.

When I got to Sebastopol, I stopped for gas, and figured I'd arrived at some sort of conclusion, you know, of the "another life lesson learned" variety, but naturally since I also despise stories with morals, I leave it in the reader's hands to make something out of what is here. Let's just say we never did find the papers for our audit, we ended up renting our house to a sex cult (headed by a guru named Arawan and his "eternal concubines"), and at the end of summer, we closed up our cabin for the year, and drove back to Indiana. This time we took the most direct route straight across. We stopped late in the day at the famous "loneliest phone booth in the world" on that infinite and mind-numbing stretch of flat Nevada highway, where you don't see another car for hours. I called the answering machine in Indiana. I started to say "called home to Indiana," but there was still all that space in between and all those miles to drive.