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Beasts of the Fields

Family heartache on the northern New York border, and the creatures that bore witness to it.

By Aimée Baker





Spring

The rats appeared in late spring, when winter had yet to shake itself loose from our northern New York valley and everything smelled of rain and mud. They came in from the fields and took hold of our barn, which once sheltered the pigs we raised for slaughter. By the time the rats came, though, the barn's only inhabitants were a dog, an aging cat who slept his afternoons away in faint patches of sunlight, and some mice.

Before that spring, we were used to the skittering of mice in the walls. As we wrestled rototillers and wheelbarrows from the depths of the barn, readying them for their time in the fields, we'd listen for the small scramble of claws against wood, cardboard, and metal scrap.

Long before the rats, I would try to save the baby mice that fell from the rafters, their bodies hitting the cement with a sound like splattering rain. When I found them, I'd wrap them in rough-cut pieces of blue gingham flannel and make them beds from cardboard matchboxes. The babies would last for a day,

maybe a bit longer if they were unfortunate, as I tried to feed them droplets of milk with a straw. Someone had to do it, I thought: care for the living creatures who didn't know they were dead yet.

I would have done the same for the rats, those large-bodied beings with their scaled tails that birthed their babies in the walls and steadied themselves among the rafters. But these rats didn't need anyone to save them.

* * *

In Tanzania, giant pouched rats have been trained to detect the smell of explosives in landmines. They're shipped to countries where war has left its mark deep in the earth. The rats are fitted with harnesses, their ears slicked with sunscreen to protect them while they work: covering ground, nimbly stepping over thatches of grass and rocks, quickly clearing fields that people had been too scared to farm.

Our rats, though, were more common. Brown rats, the kind once thought to have spread from Norway in cargo ships, which now inhabit almost every continent. The kind that multiply rapidly, whose singular presence holds the threat of untold numbers hiding. These are the rats of our stories, the rats of ditches and drains, the rats of disease and death.

* * *

The spring of the rats, my brother barely left his bedroom. Some long, cold days, even small movements became too much for him. When we were home alone together, I listened for the sound of his feet, scuffling across his clothing-ridden floor. This is how I kept him alive, by listening.

Other days, when he was angry, he lay in bed and cranked music so high, the walls pulsed with the sounds of death metal. The light he bought at a novelty store glowed red from underneath his door like a warning. I retreated, then, to my own room at the other end of our trailer, the only one with a working lock. I'd brace my body against the door, let it vibrate in time to the music playing, so loud I'd have to wait until it stopped to reassure myself he was still living.

"What's wrong with your brother?" friends asked on the days he attended school. We'd watch as he skulked past, his eyes cast down and the thick chains attached from his waistband to his wallet slapping against his jeans.

"He's fine," I'd say. How could I explain what I knew? That a dark and heavy thing wanted to claw its way out from his body. That I'd begun to crave silence.

Summer

Summer dawned hot the year the rats came, so hot I closed my bedroom curtains tight before the sun had a chance to get too high. During the day, I would sweat in the heat of my room, a single fan whirring constantly in the window. In summers before, I retreated to the barn, sat myself down on the cold and dirty concrete, a sweating glass of water in my hand. But that year, I stayed away, too nervous to be alone out there.

Still, there was work to be done. Weeds to pull. Rocks to pick. Potato bugs to flick into empty tin cans. This is how we spent our weekends, my brother and I, pacing the rows of strawberries, tomatoes, beans, potatoes, and peas while my skin turned red and blistered under the sun. "Here, I'll get that," he'd say occasionally, taking the can filled with bugs from my sweaty hands. I'd hope for this offer every time, wanting to let him do the killing.

Every week it was the same until the weeds got so thick that we couldn't make out our pathways anymore. My father would say we'd start out smaller next time, grow fewer things, manage the fields better. But during the winter, when the seed catalogues arrived in the mail, green and full of promise, my father would forget his vow and begin planning, sketching out rows and rows of vegetables to plant.

He had built a compost bin the year before the rats, an 8'x 8' wooden structure we threw our food scraps and leaves in. The bin sat on the edge of the field, in the space where the grass would grow so tall it became hard to see as the summer trudged on.

"Here, bring this out to the compost," my mother would say after dinner, handing me a metal bowl filled with the day's leavings: potato peels, bits of banana, unfinished cereal.

I'd run from the house until I reached it, my palms striking its rough wood as I quickly shook out the bowl and took off again. I never lingered. The bin was where the rats found their meals, and if I listened close enough, I could hear them, down in its depths.

* * *

A rat is easy to find, if you know what to look for. It leaves an oily residue behind on the walls, and a trail where it walks: its feet follow the same pathways over and over, from food source to the safety of its burrow. And there's the sound of it, the gnawing grate of teeth on wood and metal.

Brown rats breed heavily in the spring and summer, birthing most of their young before cold weather sets in. Females nestle together to care for their babies; males will often guard the burrow, positioning themselves outside the small holes they use as entrances. They form a community of their own, these rats. Still, over thousands of years, they've become commensal, their population growing alongside humans. They're always dependent on what we leave behind, the care we forget to take in securing the things we love.

* * *

My brother tried to kill himself for the first time that summer. He clambered toward the roof of the trailer—he wedged his body through the vent hole that gave access to a cramped attic of sorts, a space between the old tin roof and the new one that would heat up quickly in the summer sun. There was little room up there, with only small pockets between the rafters to hide in. But it was there that my brother slit his wrist with a blade taken from my father's pack of disposable razors, running it horizontally along the skin in lines so straight they looked like they'd been drawn with a ruler. He stayed in his hideaway while blood began to rise up and flow down his arms.

Below, inside the trailer, I waited and listened. That morning, after our parents had gone to work, I heard him leave. The door slammed shut behind him, quick and hard like a bullet, before his feet clomped out over the deck. Then, for hours, nothing.

By the time my parents got home, the silence felt like lead, a weighty thing pulling me down through the dirt. Before dusk settled over the fields, he abandoned his den and made his way inside, hiding his wrists behind his body while drops of blood fell to the floor. It was my father, a former army medic, who bandaged him, opening the starlight blue first aid kit and wrapping my brother's arms without words. This is how we cared for each other: the amber sting of betadine, the rolls of pristine white gauze, the tight pull of medical tape.

Fall

In the fall, my father started sealing any holes he could find in the barn. There were too many between the slatted sides, so he nailed large sheets of texture 1-11 to the exterior. He even covered over the cat door, a small square we'd cut in the broadside of the barn so the cats could come and go as they pleased. But there was just one elderly tabby that year, and the hole had become a rat highway. Briefly—when the siding was bright, with the shine of fresh wood—our old, weathered barn looked new again.

Still, the rats came, and began to prepare for winter. We lived along the Canadian border, where the freeze comes swiftly, by Halloween. In early autumn, the rats began foraging for food at dusk, stockpiling their finds.

One late fall day my father started handing out the heavy gardening tools. “Here,” he said, as he passed my mother a shovel, me, a flat hoe, and my brother a spade, the blades all rusted from being left out in the rain. We stood between the trailer and the compost bin, where the rats had been helping themselves. Composting had yet to yield much for us, but my father’s hope remained that it would someday turn our rocky, dry soil into something more magical, something that would help us produce more food than weeds. We waited, instruments of death ready, while my father took the tractor to the wooden container; he lifted and then tilted the bin over, sending the rats fleeing for safety. We swung our tools close to the ground, shovels and hoes thumping against bodies.

* * *

Brown rats did not actually originate in Norway. They come from the plains of Mongolia and northern China, where they began living beside human settlements thousands of years ago. Hordes of them are said to have swum across the Volga River and into Russia, fleeing an earthquake that struck the region in 1727. Then they made their way into the rest of Europe, filling the streets and sewers. Invading homes and pits and barns.

They are industrious. Men of the Paris slaughterhouses told stories of fallen horse carcasses picked clean by rats in the night, not a shred of flesh left on the bones. There was another tale of a closed-off mine, filled with so many rats that when it reopened, a careless worker who slipped down into the shaft was consumed within minutes.

Brown rat colonies are equally hard to eradicate. A single breeding pair can result in 15,000 rats within a year. And even if a rat population is significantly reduced through human intervention, it can return to peak numbers within a matter of months. For the most part, rats are made for survival.

* * *

That fall, my brother avoided going to school. He’d ride the bus with me for a day or two, before skipping four or five days in a row. Over and over, a repeated pattern. When he was there, it felt like his body took up more room than the school could hold. The dusty scent of his cheap cigarettes clinging to his clothes, the oiliness of his long, unwashed hair. The sound of his boots on the tile floor. The sharp slice of his laughter. All of it filling my throat and lungs until I choked.

Still, school meant a measure of safety. If I could find his name on the attendance sheets after first period, I would track his movements through the school, place enough students between his rage and me. By checking that list, I could reassure myself that his body was whole, that his body was breathing, that his body was not bleeding—and keep my own safe, too, from the pinch of his fingers on my skin, or the pressure of them around my throat.

At home, my father had nailed a screen over the roof vent hole—"to keep out bugs," he said, as though it were insects making inroads on our home. That screen barrier, we all knew, was too flimsy to offer any security, and so I imagined my brother back up there when no one was around, running a blade across his arms again. If you're not there to listen—to hear the breath entering and leaving their lungs—how can you count on someone to be alive when you return home?

Winter

The growing season was short and inconsequential that year. We pulled up tangles of cucumber vines after the frost killed them off, the plants gone yellow with bursts of early cold. The tractor's plow turned under the rest, fields of vegetables and weeds disappearing down into the dirt.

By November, the spot where the compost bin had stood was just a blank, dark spot by the field, an imprint on the ground the only testimony of my father's exhausted hope for a better farm. Without their food source, the rats had gone as well. Our barn was once again the home of mice and the occasional chipmunk.

"Where do you think they've gone?" I asked my father, eyeing the tree line where the fields gave way to sumac and grape vines before continuing on into dense woods.

My father's breath puffed in the cold evening air. "Not sure," he said.

"Do you think they'll be back?" I asked. My father didn't respond. Whether they would survive the winter and return was not something he could answer, and as we watched the wind pull through the dead grass in the fields, I thought about all of the other questions he didn't have answers for. How would my brother make it into the next year? What does it take to stop loving someone?

* * *

The only thing brown rats need to survive the cold are shelter and a steady source of food. They do not hibernate, and their metabolisms are too fast to use fat as a food store. Instead, they continue life much as they do during every other season: finding food, storing food, even breeding in the winter chill.

During particularly cold winters, weaker rats will not make it through. Unable to find warmth and too exhausted to try, they will freeze to death in the night. In cities, people find their bodies frozen on sidewalks, their corpses rigid with both rigor mortis and the plummeting temperatures. But in rural regions, their bodies disappear beneath winter-weathered grasses or tucked behind wood piles. It's harder to find the ones that perish.

* * *

One winter night, my brother is gone. Not missing, exactly, but away from home when he shouldn't be. He's with friends, I know, those dark creatures who slink around the hallways at school. "They're trouble," my father often says of them. So, when the phone rings, I am ready—just as I will always be—for disaster. There's a particular sensation that accompanies emergencies. It's a full-body tingle and a hardness in your gut, a feeling like you can't get enough air. And, for me, a grin and harsh burst of laughter. The kind of involuntary response that's unwelcome and suspicious, but happens nonetheless.

I won't remember what my parents say to me as they leave in a flurry. I know my brother is in danger somewhere, and it's dark already. I'm left, for the first time, home alone at night. I wait in the same

way that I will always wait for bad news in the future: curled stiffly on the couch, unable to move, with a 24-hour news station playing on the television, as though the voices of strangers will offer comfort. They don't, and I keep track of time by the hard ticking of the clock on the wall.

What is happening elsewhere is that my brother is dying. He's lying on someone's lawn, in front of a single-story ranch home twenty-five minutes from ours, not moving. He has taken some blend of drugs and as much cold medicine as he could stomach, a combination he hopes will kill him. It's cold out, the type of night that forces people to settle deep into their coats—to tug on their gloves, and, with tears crystalizing on their eyelashes, declare the weather “bitter” before sliding into their warm cars. This is the kind of cold that can kill, and my brother is alone on that lawn, no coat or gloves to protect him. Not his skin, or his organs, or his heart that is struggling to beat.

His friends leave him there and return to their party, teenagers uncertain of what to do. Perhaps the music is turned down then, or the drift of nervous whispers makes its way through the crowd. In truth, most of his friends are so drug-rattled that they probably forget him. One is sober enough, though, to call our house, sending my parents stumbling into the night.

When they arrive, my brother is still on the lawn in the snow, and when they gather him into the car, they think for a moment he's dead, his body gone cold and stiff. My father holds him in the backseat, trying to revive him, while my mother drives to the emergency room so fast that a state trooper tries to stop them. Instead, my parents gesture from the car, their movements frantic enough that he pulls in front of them, lighting the way to the hospital.

By the time my father calls home, I've settled into my brother's death. The empty house—filled only with the ticking clock and the steady drone of the television—is my vision of what the future holds. *There will be no listening for him anymore*, I think, the endless task I've taken up as though keeping him alive is what I was meant to do. Without him, there will be no jolt of adrenaline when a door slams or when his fist connects with a wall. No clatter of my own body against the trailer as I sidle away from him, his fingers mottling my arms, legs, and stomach with dark bruises. No hiss of my own breath when he wraps his fingers around my throat and whispers, “I can kill you if I want.” No crying out as he tugs my hair until strands of it rip from my scalp and he asks, “Are you still a virgin?” In their place will be an empty space, one I can fill with silence. One I can begin to fill with my own steady breath.

“He's alive,” my father says, and even through the phoneline I can hear the relief in his voice. The relief that says, *not this time*, as though in prayer. Beyond him, somewhere in the hospital, doctors and nurses are pumping my brother's stomach, forcing him to throw up again and again so that he might live for another night. Live for another day.

“He didn't die?” I ask. I don't listen for my father to say the words before hanging up the phone, settling the receiver into its cradle with a dull click. The answer is already there. Not this time.



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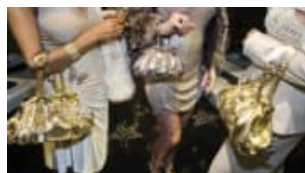
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