

# Beasts of the Fields

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## Spring

The rats appeared in late spring when the winter gray 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 that once sheltered the pigs we raised for slaughter. By the time the rats came, though, the barn's only other inhabitants were a dog, an aging cat who slept his afternoons away in faint patches of sunlight, and the mice.

Before that spring arrived, we were used to the skittering of mice in the barn. We listened for the small scrabble of claws against wood, cardboard, and metal scrap as we wrestled rototillers and wheelbarrows from the depths of the barn to ready them for their time in the fields.

When the barn still housed bales of hay my father and uncle cut from the back forty three times a year, there hadn't been any mice. Mother cats would birth their babies deep in the gaps between the bales, and their warm kitten bodies would smell like summer grass long after they grew gangly and began to hunt the mice.

The mother cats and kittens were not gone long before the mice took over. Before that spring, I tried to save the baby mice that would fall from the rafters to the cement floor, their bodies hitting the cement with a sound like splattering rain. When I found them, I'd wrap their bodies 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 from a small 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.

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In Tanzania an organization breeds giant pouched rats and trains them 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 and their ears slicked with sunscreen to protect them while they work. In the mornings, their handlers take them to the fields, and every day the rats cover ground, nimbly stepping over thatches of grass and rocks, quickly clearing fields that people had been too scared to farm.

Our rats are more common, brown rats that were once thought to have spread from Norway in cargo ships filled with lumber and now inhabit almost every continent. These are the rats of our stories, the rats of ditches and drains, the rats of disease and death.

If you see one, there are ten more. If you see one, there are fifty more. This is the threat of the brown rat, that somewhere there are untold numbers hiding, the scope of their presence immeasurable. Though brown rats can live to be three years old, most die within their first year, but in this same year, two rats can become fifteen thousand. This is how they live, by becoming something beyond their own bodies.

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The spring of the rats, my brother barely left his bedroom. The light he bought at a novelty store glowed red from underneath his door like a warning. When we were home alone together, I listened for the sound of his feet scuffling across his clothing-ridden floor. This was how I kept him alive, by listening.

On long, cold days when even his small movements became too much for him, he lay in bed and played music cranked so high the sides of our trailer pulsed with the sounds of death metal. I retreated then to my own room at the other end of the trailer, the music so loud I had to wait until it stopped to reassure myself he was still alive.

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

"He's fine," I said. But how do you explain what lives inside someone, the way I knew a dark and heavy thing wanted to claw its way from his body? The way 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 would have 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. Every week it was the same until the weeds got so thick, we couldn't make out our pathways anymore. Each year, at the end of summer, my father would say that the next time we'd start out smaller, grow fewer things, manage the fields better. But during 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. By the time planting season arrived, he'd turn over the earth with the rototiller or, on big years, with the tractor, until the garden space grew large enough to accommodate his plans.

The year before the rats, he built a compost bin, an eight-by-eight-foot 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 tall enough it was hard to see the sides of it 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 hit the bin, palms striking rough wood as I quickly shook out the bowl and took off again. I never lingered. This was the place the rats found their meals, and if I listened close enough, I could hear them down in its depths.

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Rats are easy to find if you know what to look for. You can locate a rat by the oily residue it leaves behind on the walls near its entrance. Or by the trails it makes, its feet following the same pathways over and over as

it travels from food source to the safety of its home. Or by the sound of it, the gnawing grate as the rat wears down its teeth on wood and metal.

Brown rats breed heavily starting in the spring and continue through summer, birthing most of their young before cold weather sets in. These rats form families, female rats nestling together in burrows to care for their young. When there are few rats, a male will protect their home, positioning itself as protector of the nests, guarding the small holes the rats use as entrances to the tunnels. They form a community of their own, these rats. Still, over millions of years they've become commensal, their population growing alongside humans, always dependent on what we leave behind, the care we forget to take in securing the things we love.

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My brother tried to kill himself for the first time that summer. He clambered toward the roof of the trailer and 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 for the sound that would alert me to where he'd hidden himself. That morning, after our parents had gone to work, I heard him leave. The door slamming 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. But 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 cared for him, opening the starlight blue first-aid kit and wrapping my brother's arms in silence. This is how we cared for ourselves: the amber sting of Betadine, the rolls of pristine white gauze, the tight pull of medical tape.

## Fall

In 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, and briefly our old, weathered barn, looked new again, the siding still bright with the shine of fresh wood. He nailed the siding 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. With just one elderly tabby, the hole had become a rat highway, funneling them from the wide-open fields into the safety of the dark barn.

Despite these efforts, the rats still came. Along New York's Canadian border, winter comes swiftly. October means thick winter coats over Halloween costumes and snow boots by November. The rats of this borderland know to prepare early, and they began readying for winter. Starting at dusk, they foraged for food and stockpiled their finds.

The rat trail led directly from the barn to the compost bin, a pile of easy helpings. The bin had yet to yield fertile soil like my father had hoped, its size too large to adequately move the contents about, the mix of leaf matter to food waste never quite right. But the idea of it had been there, a means to turn our rocky, dry soil into something more magical, something that would help us produce more food than weeds.

"Here," my father said one late fall day while handing my mother, brother, and me the nearest heavy gardening tools. My mother with a shovel, me with a flat hoe, and my brother with a spade, all with their blades rusted from being left out in the rain too often. We stood between the trailer and the bin, instruments of death ready, while my father took the tractor to the wooden container. Bucket raised, he lifted and then tilted the frame over, the movement of the structure enough to send the rats fleeing for safety. And then, we swung our tools close to the ground, the shovels and hoes thumping against bodies.

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Brown rats originated along the plains of Mongolia and northern China where they began to live beside human settlements. Though their bones have been found medieval German towns, it's said that they only took hold in Europe after hordes of them swam across the Volga River and into Russia, fleeing an earthquake that struck that region in 1727. Then

they made their way into the rest of the continent and filled the streets and sewers. Invaded homes and pits and barns.

For most of recent history, the rats have been there. 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. And then there's the story of a mine closed off for a season, the shaft filling with so many rats that when it reopened, a careless worker who slipped down into their masses was consumed within minutes.

And just as the rats fight to live, we fight to see them dead. In New York City there were so many rats, men threw them in pits illuminated by gas lanterns and bet on how long it would take for dogs to kill them, the dogs taking the rats between their jaws and shaking them until they were dead. Now terriers and dachshunds patrol those same city streets with their owners looking for a kill, shaking the rats they find just like the pit dogs once did. Every rat killed a victory.

But brown rat colonies are hard to erase. Even with complete eradication of their numbers, rat populations will return and grow within two years. If rats are reduced by any other percentage, their population growth will be slow at first and then hit a period of rapid expansion before reaching peak numbers within a matter of months. In other words, rats are made for survival.

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That fall, my brother stopped 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 pulled across my skin like a knife.

On days he stayed home, though, it was the silence that gnawed at me. My father had nailed a screen over the roof vent hole. "To keep out bugs," he said, as though insects were making inroads to our house through the openings and down through our layers of roofs. 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 home, running a blade across his arms

again. How can you count on someone to be alive if you're not there to listen for the breath entering and leaving their lungs?

## Winter

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

Where the compost bin had been was just a blank, dark spot by the field, the imprint of the wooden sides still visible on the ground. These were the only signs that the bin was once there, the rats inexplicably gone as well. Perhaps terrified by the sound of the tractor, their disappearing food source, or the sight of the slaughter of some of their own, 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 stood next to me, breath puffing into the cold, evening air. "Not sure," he said.

"Do you think they'll be back?" I asked. He didn't respond. Whether or not they would survive the winter and return was not a question that had an answer.

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The only things brown rats need to survive the cold are shelter and a steady source of food. These rats 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.

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

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 will often say of them. So, that night, when the phone rings, I am ready, just as I always am, for disaster. There's a particular sensation to being prepared for emergencies. It's a full-body tingle and a hardness in your gut. The feeling like you can't get enough air. And for me, a grin and harsh burst of laughter, the kind of sensory response that's unwelcome and suspicious but there nonetheless.

From this night's events, I won't remember what my parents say to me as they leave. I know my brother is in danger somewhere, and it's dark when they both leave in a flurry. I'm left, for the first time, home alone at night. I wait for news in the same way that I will always wait for bad news in the future. Curled stiffly on the couch, frozen with the inability to move. I leave a twenty-four-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. In a small neighborhood filled with single story ranch homes built in the 1960s, he's lying on someone's lawn, not moving. He has mixed some blend of drugs and drank as much cold medicine as he can stomach, the combination of which he hopes will kill him. It's cold out, the type of night where people settle deeper into their coats, tug on their gloves, and with tears crystalizing on their eyelashes declare the night "bitter" before sliding into their warm cars. This is the kind of night where cold can kill, and my brother is alone on that lawn, no coat or gloves to protect 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 with a body on the front lawn. Perhaps the music is turned down then, or the curl of nervous whispers makes its way through the crowd. In truth, most of his friends are so drug rattled they forget him. One is sober enough, though, to call our house, but that's the only one my parents need because it sends them stumbling from our home.

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 already 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 of the local hospital. There's no time to wait for an ambulance to arrive. My mother drives so fast that a state trooper tries to stop them, his lights and siren signaling for them to pull over to the side of the road. 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 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, I think, the dull task I've taken up as though caring for something else 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 walls as I sidle away from him, his fingers pinching across my skin, 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. Or one I can begin to fill with my own steady breath. The air no longer ratcheting through my lungs, the burn of it like unshed tears.

"He's alive," my father says and even through the phone line 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 again before hanging up the phone, settling the receiver into its cradle with a dull click. The answer is already there. Not this time.