

Moles and Mice

by Candice Lin

I had a friend who grew envious when I admitted to him that, embarrassingly, my partner and I had devolved a kind of intimate home way of talking (about the dishes, feeding the cat, or paying the bills and other banal domesticities) in high-pitched 'mouse' voices. 'I want to be a mouse too!' he cried out indignantly. And from that moment on he was a mouse too.

'Hey mouse, do you want to go to Super Stop-n-Shop later today?'

'Mouse! Look mouse, I found a rock that looks like meat. Here, take it, it's for you mouse.'

'What should my new book be called?'

'Anymouse'

'E A M O Y mouse.' (peals of mouse laughs)

Language had become laden with privacy that gave the mice a soft, secret laughter together, and it warmed their respective burrows. Across the grey prairie, across the back of a whale, over a long quiet sea seen from a distance, I text him a message that simply reads 'Oh mouse!' and he replies, 'Mouse, mouse! How are you mouse?' I remember well the many meat rocks he gave me but also the lichen he did not.

In Texas, muskrats line their burrows with found fur and plants sterilised in their urine, and this calcifies into a thin vegetal shell which botanists extract in cross-sections to determine the extinction rate, or at least, the way certain plants are moving to lower altitudes with the changing climate.

I had a dream that a mouse was burrowing into my intestines and when I woke and wrote you, you replied, 'that's strange, I have been having health issues down there, but don't worry, they are mostly past now.' The words 'health issues' takes me 9 months to digest and when I reply it is only to say, 'I'm sorry I have not replied sooner, I have been so busy.' And then... one year later, more frantically... 'How is your health? You are okay, aren't you? No mouse got you?' Mouse becomes code for health trouble, for impending death.

Today I learned that synthetic cinnabar, vermilion, was made from sulfur and mercury crushed and heated together. This was mixed with lizards pounded in a marble mortar. They were still alive and squirming under the pestle as it came down relentlessly with its overwhelming weight (like the heavy bodies of lesbians at queer pagan camp, like how I imagine the hammer came down on the woman's skull in the podcast I listened to earlier) but it did not matter, they were

just like so many 'slugs-with-eyes' that my mom killed with kleenex in our rainy basement. Some were so large that, at last, she felt some remorse: "They were really too big to be killed in that way, with only a tissue between it and my hand".

At the Getty, a screaming child dragged against the hand of her mother, 'I hate you, I hate you, you are killing me.' And I was reminded of our earlier tense drive to the museum where I had said in response to my mother's suggestion that she live with me for a month, 'That might be disastrous.' And she, hurt and quiet, said, 'Oh does this daughter also feel she cannot stand her mother?' and I said, 'No no I love you but...' haltingly... 'I do feel judged all the time and it's... hard to live like that. You are critical you know, you say so yourself.' And she, looking through her purse desperately for what she had forgotten, in a little voice, 'Oh, am I? am I?'

It is the skeleton that creates the sensation of pain, for did you ever hear of a burlap bag without broken glass crying or singing tragic songs? I'm not referring to the hernia you ignored as a child or the ulcer that gives you acne, but the structure, the family, the content that fits sharply but in no possible other way, inside the rough skin you call your own. But this red, reptilian mixture, this fake cinnabar, known as guard chamber, was dotted on the Emperor's concubines to corral their bodies. In theory, the red dot could turn dark bluish-black.

These moles became very fashionable.

Replications of them were made of velvet and mouse.

They were called 'flies' and perhaps the French women of court who wore them were corpses just beginning to rot. These fashion moles in different positions on their face meant specific things: under the nose to the right meant, 'No dear, not tonight' while the one perched loftily on her forehead signalled to another lover, 'I will leave him in four days, wait for me on the edge of the woods'.

In the 1700s the Spanish Benedictine friar Benito Jeronimo Feijoo had a theory that the origin of racial blackness stemmed from 'a tiny black spot on a man's genitals and on the fingernails of both men and women'. This black spot grew larger and larger until it encompassed the whole genitalia, all the fingers, and up the palm to the forearms, shoulders and down the back. I am reminded of my childhood where, during my Chinese indoctrination, I was given Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* to read along with *Wild Swans* and *The Rape of Nanking*. In the story, one mother tells her daughter how she escaped an arranged marriage by making up a story that the black mole on her child-husband's back would grow larger and larger until it swallowed him and all his unborn babies up. I am thinking about my skin flipping back upon itself with a darkness that engulfs. The exterior becomes an interior, a dark cave, and a mole becomes, not a 'fly' or a secret message or a devouring mouth, but simply the animal, blind and groping in a tunnel of dirt.