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### Pest Friends

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Let's start with some facts: the average house mouse (*Mus musculus domesticus*) is about 8cm long, with a tail of about the same length. It is usually brown (although it can also be white, grey or black) with short hair and a paler belly. It weighs approximately 20g, and has a high-pitched squeak. In the wild life-expectancy is approximately one year, but pet mice have been known to live for longer – up to five years.

Mice have good eyesight and a powerful sense of smell and, as neurologists T.E. Holy and Z. Guo discovered, males 'sing' to females in 'ultrasonic vocalizations' that are inaudible to human ears. Mice are territorial and a dominant male will live with a number of females. They can run fast, climb, jump and swim. They are also incontinent and can excrete up to seventy times a day.

After the age of about six weeks females can give birth to between five and ten litters a year – and they can breed all year round. Each litter contains on average five or six young which are blind for the first two weeks of their lives and remain in their mother's territory for the first three at which point the young males leave. Young females are likely to stay near their mother. Predators include cats, ferrets, foxes and owls. The rapid rate of reproduction, however, means that, even when a predator is present, a mouse population can quickly recover. By my calculations, without predation, and from a base population of one male and five females of reproductive age, a mouse colony could grow to about 1000 members in less than six months.

The habitat of the house mouse is around humans: in homes but also commercial properties and agricultural environments – particularly in barns containing grain where mice swarms have been known (videos of swarms, with parental guidance warnings, are available on the internet). The house mouse eats the food of humans and other animals (pets, livestock) and contaminates it with a variety of diseases, including murine typhus and tularemia – both of which lead to flu-like symptoms and a rash and can be fatal. House mice have

recently also been found to carry a virus that can contribute to breast cancer in humans.<sup>1</sup>

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My reality – like that of many other people – is that, even though I don't have any pets, I live with non-human beings. I have not invited them into my home in east London, but they come in all the same.



Fig. 1: Kitchen windowsill, 30 August 2009

Most of these creatures I can put up with: they are, like the spider in Fig. 1, simply part of the world I inhabit. I might pick them up and put them outside, or just notice and then ignore them. Not all creatures are quite so easy to disregard, however. And I have a tale to tell of a home invasion that required, and got my attention.

It was in February 2007 that I first realised that I had an uninvited guest in my home. I walked into my kitchen one evening, put on the light, and watched as a mouse raced across the work surface, ran along the back of the draining board and disappeared down a hole in the worktop, where pipes went down from the boiler, to the space behind the washing machine. The mouse had been feasting on the residue of the food preparation that had not been cleared up since supper had been made. What could I do? I cleaned up, taking special care to disinfect the work surfaces. I turned off the light and hoped (prayed) that this was a one-off. It wasn't. The very next night, the same thing happened. There it was, on the worktop. Again, I cleaned

up and wiped down. I also began to leave the kitchen light on, hoping that this would put off the invader. It didn't. Evening after evening the mouse appeared, even when I started washing-up as soon as the meal was finished. It was clear that it lived somewhere within the world that lay beyond the gap between the floor and the wall behind my washing-machine.

It clearly also had the run of the street because a few days after the mouse showed up in my flat one of my neighbours knocked on the door. Could I come round and help? She had walked in on a mouse in her kitchen earlier in the evening and it had disappeared under the hob cover on her cooker and now she wanted to cook but didn't want to burn the mouse and was too afraid to look herself to see if it was still there. Slowly, both of us squealing like fools, I lifted the hob cover. No mouse. It had gone.

Some time soon after this I actually managed to corner and catch the mouse in a dustpan – holding it in place with the back of the brush. For the first time I realised how absolutely tiny it was, and how absolutely terrified. In fact it appeared to be more frightened of me than I was of it. I also realised that, with both of my hands in use (one holding the dustpan, the other holding the brush) I couldn't open the backdoor to put the mouse out. But neither did I want to do that. This was, after all, a house mouse, and I am, after all, a vegetarian. To put the mouse outside might be to kill it. I put the dustpan down on the floor, and told the mouse to go back to its hole. It obeyed.

This was the beginning of the relationship that has persisted to this day. The mouse usually appears between January and April when I assume food is scarce and the easy pickings of the human interior tempting. When I see him (I am not sure why I decided he was male, but I did – a residue of *Tom and Jerry* cartoons?), I order him back to his hole and *he always goes*. It is, on this basis, a relationship of order and I am the holder of authority. On one occasion, in fact, he was so surprised by my arrival in the kitchen that, instead of running along the back of it, he skidded into the sink. He ran around in it squealing. I had to fish him out – using a close-at-hand plate – and set him back on the work-surface. Once I even managed what I thought would be impossible: I got a photograph of him. I walked in on him and he tried to get out of sight and hide behind the plate rack on the draining board. So terrified was he that, when I moved the plate rack, he froze, giving me time to grab my mobile phone and take pictures (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: The mouse, 19 January 2010.

He looked scared and did not want to move, believing, perhaps, that stillness meant invisibility. I had to move all obstacles out of the way and clear his passage to the pipes - his escape route - and step back before he would depart. And then he ran, fast.

I don't always need to see him to know that he's around. Sometimes I find his calling cards: excrement and piss. On other occasions I find different tell-tale signs: the corner of a packet of crackers on a high food-shelf nibbled, for example. My responses: disinfect, put food in airtight containers. I can do no more, I am a vegetarian. Indeed, the Vegetarian Society's advice is not to harm 'pests' but to 'persuade them to leave our property'. They advocate 'humane traps' that capture but don't hurt the mouse. Once a mouse has entered the trap it needs to be carried a quarter of a mile away from the house before the animal can be released apparently, as any nearer and it will find its way back home. Bringing in predators, like cats, is also suggested.<sup>2</sup>

The Vegan Society, like the Vegetarian Society, advocates humane traps (and notes that glue traps, i.e. strips of glued paper that mice stick to, sometimes gnawing off their own limbs to escape, are '**not** a humane method of pest control'). Its website also notes that preventing access to food and blocking 'entry points' are important ways of discouraging mice.<sup>3</sup> Heeding their advice I attempted to block the gap between floor and wall behind my washing machine, at to close off their escape route with wire wool. It hasn't worked.

But I no longer lose sleep over my domestic situation. I now live with a mouse with equanimity (and a bottle of disinfectant). My method is a

simple one. I have given this mouse a name. At the time when the mouse first appeared in my life in January 2007 I was reading Charles Dickens' novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and in that novel there is a very sweet character called Tom Pinch. This was the name I chose for my mouse. Whenever I see him, I say 'Tom Pinch, get back in your hole!' and he always does as he is told. As I said, it is a relationship of order.

Now, I am not a stupid person. I do see the problem here. If an average house mouse's life-expectancy is about a year to eighteen months, and I first encountered Tom Pinch in February 2007, then there is a strong possibility that the mouse who turned up in my kitchen this January (2010) was not, could not be, Tom Pinch. And if a mouse colony can grow to over 1000 members in less than six months and I know that mice have been around the wall cavities of mine and my neighbours' flats for at least three years, then the chances of the same mouse being the only one to come into my kitchen over any length of time are negligible. But, of course, the mouse who entered the kitchen in January 2010 *was* Tom Pinch *because all the mice who come into my kitchen are Tom Pinch.*<sup>4</sup> This is my version of pest control. The way I co-habit with mice is by turning the pests into a pet. This may sound foolish, but it makes total sense (even if it doesn't deal with the question of disease).

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An animal that is classed as vermin is an animal that is neither livestock nor pet. It is an animal that, in fact, is outside of the categories that group animals by their utility to humans. Because of this such an animal has one fate. As the historian Mary Fissell puts it, 'Vermin are animals whom it is largely acceptable to kill.' Her use of 'whom' here is interesting. A more orthodox sentence might read 'Vermin are animals *that* it is largely acceptable to kill.' The 'whom', like the vermin themselves, challenges classification. Is this being animal or human; 'that' or 'who'? The reason Fissell emphasises this border-crossing capacity in the word 'whom' is because this is what she found in late seventeenth-century ideas about vermin. For these earlier writers, vermin (which at this time included not only mice and rats, but creatures such as kingfishers and otters) were believed to be complex beings: clever, able to communicate and band together to the extent that 'The communal actions they undertook at times made a disturbing mirror image of human society.'<sup>5</sup>

We may not imagine such possibilities for vermin nowadays – although anthropomorphism is central to my relationship with Tom Pinch. Rather the apparent ‘cleverness’ of these animals (which is usually figured in their capacity to undercut human order and defy human attempts to control them) is presented as something else. Thus, on its website, the British Pest Control Association warns of house mice that:

These nibbling nuisances have a compulsive need to gnaw in order to keep their incisor teeth worn down to a constant length. Electric cables, water and gas pipes, packaging and woodwork may all be seriously damaged by mice – many instances of electrical fires and floods have been attributed to them.<sup>6</sup>

The apocalyptic horrors – fires and floods - caused by these animals are not because they are evil – intent on the destruction of *Homo sapiens* - or because they are messengers from the Almighty (as in a plague of *Mus musculus domesticus*). They are accidental by-products of ‘compulsive’ (i.e. instinctive) animal behaviour. It would seem that they can’t help their actions, but we can control them.

Fissell recognises that the categories into which we put animals – whether livestock, pet or vermin – are historically constructed; that is, that the meaning of the categories changes over time. What is vermin for us may not be the same as it was in the seventeenth century (think of how we now conceptualise otters and kingfishers). The modern meaning of ‘vermin’ attempts, I think, to demonise the animals, not because they are dangerously like us (the early modern reading that Fissell has uncovered), or because they bear supernatural meaning (the plague of locusts of the Old Testament), but because they are dangerously destructive of human ways of living which ways are revealed, through the presence of such creatures, to be not so much the dominant order of the world as very fragile. As the Rentokil website warns: ‘If not treated, an infestation of mice can quickly take hold.’<sup>7</sup> When confronted with vermin what becomes visible is the fact that we seem to live on a precarious precipice of infestation, with our potential destruction brought about by creatures the size of our thumbs; that our human worlds are not only human after all.

Thus mice, like all vermin, do not only infest the home as a building. They also pester – overrun – our structures of order as well. Fissell’s ‘whom’ is one sign of the history of this, and another – contemporary –

version can be found in Huw Griffiths, Ingrid Poulter and David Sibley's study of feral cats in Hull. Feral cats are clearly not the same as verminous mice – for one thing, there is a fantasy, as Griffiths et al show, of re-homing, taming, saving in relation to the cats, whereas there is no discourse of domestication in relation to mice. However, both classes of animals – feral and vermin – are perceived as breaching the boundaries 'between civilisation and nature, or between public and private, [because they] do not stay in their allotted space.' And this breaching is particularly visible in urban environments where attempts have been made to remove 'the wild'.<sup>8</sup> Violations, like the appearance of foxes in human homes,<sup>9</sup> cause fear which is expressed in an increased need for 'boundary maintenance and surveillance'. But, the desire for orderliness that sits at the heart of such 'boundary maintenance and surveillance' is destined always to fail: Griffiths, Poulter and Sibley write, 'The realisation of an ordered city, like removing bodily odour or staying young, is an impossible project.'<sup>10</sup> In her study *Reordering the Natural World: Humans and Animals in the City*, Annabelle Sabloff is a little more optimistic: 'People yearn for order,' she writes, 'precisely because it is not a given but presents itself, and then only intermittently, as possibility.'<sup>11</sup>

In these terms, vermin is disorderly; or rather, it is destructive of human attempts at order. The designation of areas – private / public; domestic / wild – that is central to the structuring of an urban environment is undone by the beings that move between domestic and wild: by those that are untamed but live in our homes. And it is this violation – perhaps more than that presented by the groups of feral cats who inhabit *outside* spaces in cities – that takes uncertainty into what should be the most stable place of all: the home.

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According to the anthropologist Mary Douglas home is not so much a particular place, as it is space brought under control. By implication, any space (with or without a roof or walls) that is controlled by one individual or a group of individuals can be a home. Thus the Bedouin can be said to have homes even as they are transient people, while a hotel is not a home as, in a hotel the control rests in the hands of other people (the manager, housekeeping staff, etc.). Any attempts to gain control in such spaces are frail and temporary: the 'Do Not Disturb' sign hung on the door is all we have.

Part of the control that is evident in the home, Douglas argues, is made visible in planning: through the provision of a larder full of food, for example, or through the budget which is ‘the main instrument of structuring the collective effort’. Such planning can only work, however, if the members of the household agree to work as a group. Opportunists – those who raid the larder for the fulfilment of their own desires – undercut the shared plans. A meal may be ruined if one person has already eaten the key ingredient, or, as Douglas puts it: ‘individual raids destroy the collective resource base.’ She goes on: ‘Like fairness, coordination is regarded as a public good. How can the home be run if no one knows who is coming and who is going?’<sup>12</sup>

If Douglas is right about the importance of the orderly (planned) endeavour that is at the heart of the home, it is clear that an invading mouse is utterly antithetical to the stability of the home. Such a creature steals, infects, destroys. Indeed, as one website notes under the heading ‘Economic Importance for Humans: Positive’: ‘*Mus musculus* ... has a small role as an insect destroyer, but this is minimal.’<sup>13</sup> This creature adds nothing to the household. However, where a mouse contributes little, it still has an agency to work its own will. Even a child who, like a mouse, may not recognise a budget, can be restrained (‘put that down!’). A mouse is a law unto itself. To be a vegetarian and to have a house mouse, then, might make it impossible to live an orderly and ethically consistent home existence. Humane traps are one solution – but will not end the difficulty. But naming presents another.

By giving the mouse a name I did two things that actually contradict each other. First of all I individualised the mouse. Tom Pinch is distinct from other mice just as one pet cat is distinct from another, and just as, indeed, one human friend is different from another. Second (and in contradiction to the first point), I gave the individual name ‘Tom Pinch’ to more than one mouse and in so doing made it harder to kill the animal(s) because killing Tom Pinch would be a violation of what Marc Shell has called ‘pet-hood’.<sup>14</sup> Thus I removed the concept of group – of swarm, plague, scourge – from my experience of living with the world beyond the washing-machine and replaced it with a form of domesticated, orderly existence. And what might be termed the ‘mouse-ness’ of the mice aided me in doing this. Their wish to avoid humans, their swift movement (apparently they can run up to eight miles per hour<sup>15</sup>), their size, all mean that, apart from exceptional moments – as when I caught one in the dustpan, or when one fell in the sink – I get only glimpses. It could be, always



could be, Tom Pinch. And the photograph, of course, has a status of fixing, stabilising the relationship. This, I announce, to friends, is my mouse. *My* mouse: not *a* mouse, or *one of the mice* that come into my kitchen and shit and piss and eat my food and infect my work surfaces. This is a mouse that has been named, and so has been tamed. I am in control of my environment and my ethics remain in tact. I live with vermin by translating vermin into pet, pest into guest.

This solution was not originally a thought out response to the situation. I did not at any point sit down and think to myself: 'Well, I can't kill it, because that would be a violation of my ethical position. So I have to find a way of managing to live with it that is least unpleasant for me. I will have to treat it as I would an animal that I had *invited* into my home. I will treat it as if it was a pet and then control over the environment seems to return to me.' Life, of course, is not so rationally ordered for most of us. Rather, I think my motivation was more complex and less easy to represent rationally. I named the mouse because it was becoming a familiar feature of my domestic life. When I entered the kitchen during the evening in late winter and early spring there was always a strong possibility that I would see him. Familiarity did not breed contempt, rather it bred acceptance and acceptance bred (on my part at least) acquaintance. I *expected* to see the mouse, indeed, when – in late spring – the visits tail-off, I am a little sad. I expected to see him just as I would expect a pet cat to come in after a night on the tiles. This means that my home is also now perceived as also a home with mice. Paradoxically, it almost seems as if the mouse is not destroying my orderly existence, rather I need the mouse (just the one) to be at home.

But note: this is not a radical gesture on my part. This inclusion of the mice in my domestic space is in reality utterly reactionary. I have not challenged the structures by which we live with the natural world in naming the mice. I have simply used one relationship of order (the human/pet relation) that puts humans in control as a model for my co-existence with a being that is not a pet.<sup>16</sup> The house is still *my* house, and Tom Pinch is present on my terms – even if he is badly trained and breaches them constantly. A truly radical move might be to welcome the mice as a plurality, and to celebrate and encourage the multi-specific nature of my domestic existence. I have to admit I can't go that far. But I have, I think, gone a little way to accommodate the world beyond the washing-machine.

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- <sup>1</sup> These details come from a number of internet sites accessed on 12 August 2010. In alphabetical order:  
[http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Mus\\_musculus.html](http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Mus_musculus.html)  
[www.bpca.org.uk/home.asp?parent\\_id=1](http://www.bpca.org.uk/home.asp?parent_id=1)  
[www.medicalnet.com/tularemia/article.htm](http://www.medicalnet.com/tularemia/article.htm)  
<http://www.plosbiology.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pbio.0030386> (for Holy and Guo)  
[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mus\\_musculus\\_domesticus](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mus_musculus_domesticus)  
A mouse invasion of the offices of The Financial Times and of Lloyds of London was reported in The Evening Standard. The short piece noted that 1700 mousetraps had been brought in to address the issue. 'FT aims to Muscle out Mice', The Evening Standard, 17 August 2010, p.34.
- <sup>2</sup> See [www.vegsoc.org/info/pests.html](http://www.vegsoc.org/info/pests.html) accessed 4 August 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.vegansociety.com/lifestyle/home-and-garden/humane-wildlife-deterrence.aspx>, accessed 12 August 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> Happily, I have only once seen more than one mouse at a time. When I did see two mice together what I decided I witnessed was Tom Pinch and his friend - perhaps a lady friend? - playing in my sugar bowl. As usual, they left when I entered the room.
- <sup>5</sup> Mary Fissell, 'Imagining Vermin in Early Modern England,' History Workshop Journal 47 (Spring 1999), pp.1 and 2.
- <sup>6</sup> [www.bpca.org.uk/home.asp?parent\\_id=1](http://www.bpca.org.uk/home.asp?parent_id=1) accessed 12 August 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> [www.rentokil.co.uk/residential-customers/household-pests/mice/index.html](http://www.rentokil.co.uk/residential-customers/household-pests/mice/index.html) accessed 12 August 2010.
- <sup>8</sup> Huw Griffiths, Ingrid Poulter and David Sibley, 'Feral Cats in the City,' in Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert ed., Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.56 and 60.
- <sup>9</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/jun/07/fox-attack-twins> for the story of twin nine-month old babies attacked by a fox in their cots in East London in June 2010. The hoax film made of urban fox hunting that followed the media response to the attacks is explained on <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/06/urban-fox-hunt-chris-atkins>. Sites were accessed on 13 August 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> Griffiths et al, 'Feral Cats,' pp.60 and 69.
- <sup>11</sup> Annabelle Sabloff, Reordering the Natural World: Humans and Animals in the City (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p.20.
- <sup>12</sup> Mary Douglas, 'The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,' Social Research 58:1 (1991), pp.289, 295, 297, 299 and 300.
- <sup>13</sup>  
[http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Mus\\_musculus.html](http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Mus_musculus.html), accessed 12 August 2010.
- <sup>14</sup> Shell discusses the taboo against eating pets which I take as a parallel to the taboo against killing Tom Pinch. Marc Shell, 'The Family Pet,' Representations 15 (1986), pp.121-153.

[http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Mus\\_musculus.html](http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Mus_musculus.html), accessed 12 August 2010.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of conventional ideas about human/pet relations and challenges to them, see Erica Fudge, *Pets* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008).