

Its fur so shining-smooth

We couldn't bear to kill it in the end,  
the bright-eyed rat that hid,  
all unhygienic, in the walk-in robe,  
sleeping in amongst our clothes  
and, one night, in a shoe.

Our foolish cat had chased it from the wild  
and lost it in that crowded human space  
headlong up the walls,  
its narrow whiskered snout so ratty-cute,  
its fur so shining-smooth,  
its cunning tiny paws  
gripping the smooth sheer paint  
in rodent terror.

Our cat watched for the small beast  
through one long night,  
his blue eyes shining eerie  
in the dark. Sometime round three,  
he even knocked the shoe the rat hid in  
down to the floor, but lost his prey again  
amongst too many scarves.  
I spent the next few days and nights  
of splintered sleep piling up  
great heaps to wash and disinfect  
once the poor beast was gone.

It's all been wiped with disinfectant now,  
or washed and hung in sunshine and fresh air.  
I'd never pitied Herakles before.  
The problem in the wardrobe wasn't  
so much Augean filth;  
Ratty's small spoor was a sprinkling  
of needles in a haystack.  
It's harder than you think,  
to wash a whole haystack.

The cat was less than helpful,  
sulking beneath the king-sized bed,  
useless as vain Achilles pretending  
not to care.

At last, I caught the rat  
(inside another shoe)  
under a basket.  
Success; but Ratty  
was a neighbour now.  
The tiny beast had lived too close to us,  
too long, scuttling up blank walls  
and dropping into shoes.

It knew all our clothes.

Even the sudden merciful blow  
from the heavy brick was not acceptable.  
We could no more bear to kill the rat  
than kill the silly cat who'd brought it here.

This one had won its freedom.

It twitches long whiskers and scuttles  
up bulrushes, now, in the small wetlands  
that pass for the Elysian Fields around here.

Live long and prosper, little rat.