

The title for this image (fig. 1) reads: MOUSE BEHEADER. A sweet little guillotine framed with darkness at the edges, an unsuspecting rodent. The sharp razor blade hovers in the air, waiting to sever a neck, held up by two pencils and wire. The caption reads: "The trap did not behead this mouse—it was rigged so it wouldn't work. Since Brenner's mouse-trap would be almost as hazardous for the housewife as for mice, the world is not going to beat a path to his door."

There are animals that have lived in our house alongside us, or on the fringes of the house: a raccoon in an open eave beneath the roof; unidentified creatures in the crawl space; a mouse that emerged bewildered from a hole behind the stove; soft, pungent skunks. When we moved in, the front and back doors had been left open to the screened porches, so that the house felt slightly wild already, with overgrown beds out front and a thick layer of dust inside. We moved in a hurry — the application submitted the morning after we viewed it, found through Craigslist with five blurry pictures and one line of text — and didn't notice the missing window in what's now my office until after we had set up our bed beneath it. At first we didn't notice the gas leak either: a small whiff every time we came back to the house, faint enough to doubt. When I finally called it in, the gas company chastised us for not calling sooner; a small valve behind the stove, older than either of us, was leaking. The plumber left a hole when he replaced the valve, and a mouse crashed through with the sound of a gift being torn open. We called the new property manager, who had just taken over handling the house the week before, and he suggested we shoot the mouse.

We did not shoot the mouse; we do not own a gun; it is not prudent to shoot a bullet at a gas line; the mouse scampered back out through the hole, which we patched with steel wool, and maybe died beneath the house. Years later, when the owners finally replaced the defunct floor furnace, men pried the covers off the crawl space and went beneath the floorboards to heave the furnace up into the dining room. It was massive. The men did not cap the valve for the furnace's gas line, and it leaked into that damp air beneath the house for two more years, when it was accidentally discovered alongside a handful of other leaks within the walls.

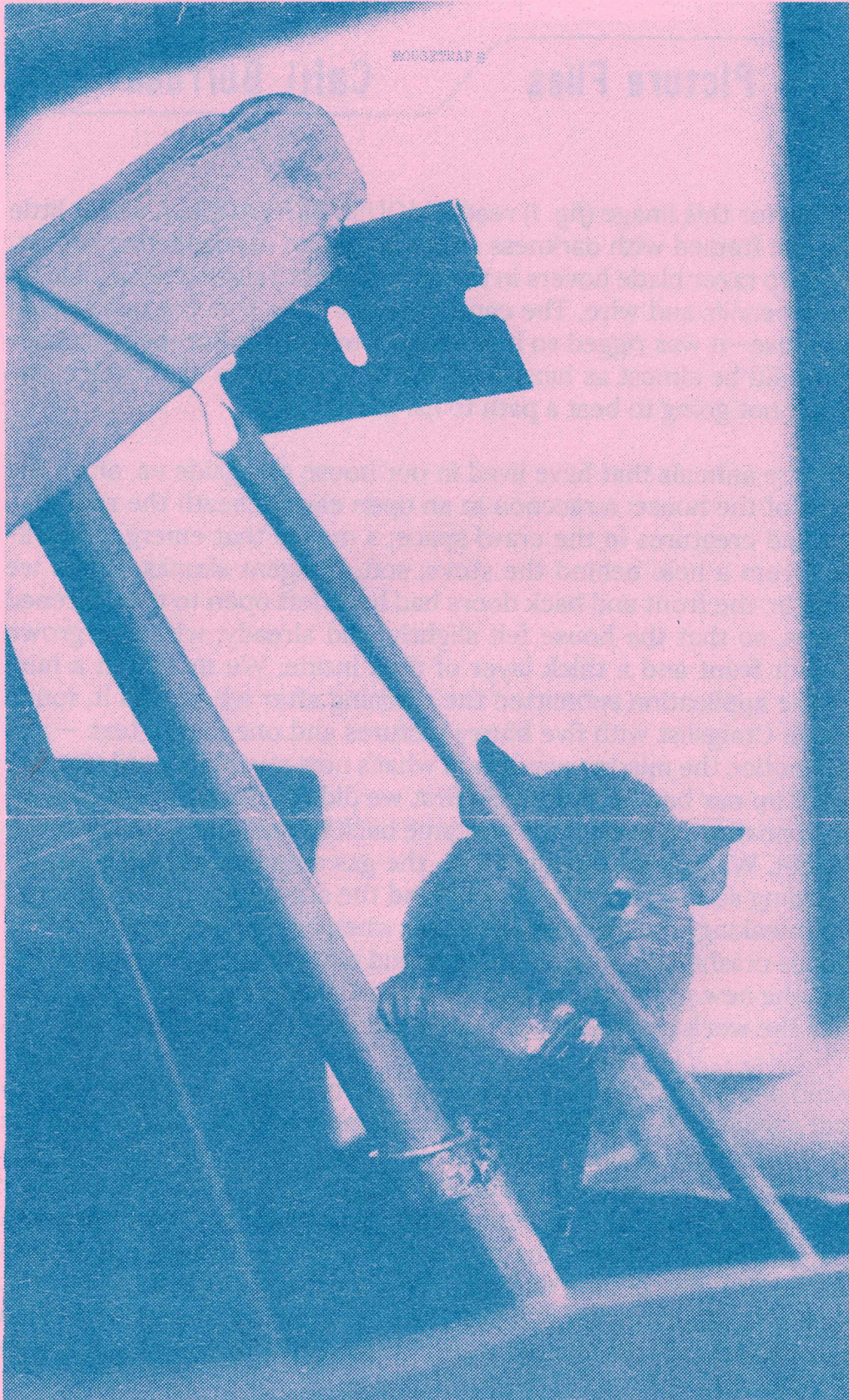


fig. 1

An animal claws into the floorboards from beneath us and scurries around, following our footsteps. I kneel on the bathroom tile and can hear it below me, on the other side of a thin membrane, moving fast and pausing and skittering. I press my ear to the tile, which is warm, and record the sound. The property manager sends out a squirrely man with long fingernails to poke around beneath the house. He shows up without warning and yells in the general direction of the front window to announce his presence, and he does not accomplish much, so we ask the next door neighbors what they've done. Their compost bin lives beneath our bedroom window and attracts skunks every night. My neighbor sends me the number for a man she calls Rat Guy.

I find my partner and Rat Guy in the neighbor's yard, Rat Guy drilling mesh into the ground while Jeremy looms above him. *I was telling your husband*, Rat Guy says to me, or *your beloved*, *that the compost has to stay away from your windows*. He carefully shovels dirt back on top of the mesh. A green fig beetle dawdles in circles around us. The men move the compost bin across the yard. None of us want to be doing this except maybe Rat Guy, who tells us that he doesn't get off by catching animals. He sits in the shade on our front step as he writes out the receipt for two hundred and forty five dollars and looks up at me. *You should get married*, he says, looking first from me and then to Jeremy. *It's a nice thing that people do*. Then he looks at Jeremy and says, *I'm sure he doesn't want to hear that*, and we both laugh. We assure Rat Guy that we're becoming domestic partners and will get married later, and he shakes his head and says, *However you want to do it*. Later that night, a skunk sprays in front of our house. Jeremy frets. I think the skunk couldn't attempt his usual hole and hid beneath a car, got scared by a dog, sprayed: the oils aren't strong enough to make my skin itch, only my eyes. *It can be much worse*, I tell him.



When a raccoon nests in the eaves of the roof, the property manager refuses to call in an expert. We can hear it from inside the living room, pacing in the open tunnel that the eaves create. The property manager is a short mean man who drags over the neighbor's recycling can and stands on top of it, jamming a pole wherever he can, banging it against the metal. He dents the neighbor's can with his weight and he does not successfully evict the raccoon. Neighborhood dogs stop and their ears twitch. I douse a rag in vinegar, which raccoons are supposed to hate, and throw it on the roof. The raccoon is undeterred.

MOUNTAINEERS TO MOVING PICTURES – 1970

The summer before last, there was the threat of a hurricane. The museum closed for the day, and mostly it rained. In my neighborhood, at the top of a hill, there was no flooding, but there were ants. First the ants came through the front window and nestled themselves around my dying houseplants. Then they poured out of an outlet in the kitchen at the back of the house, streaming from the holes and into the cabinets. They were an ecosystem; they moved together. We threw out all the food and bought airtight containers, and we bought gel and piped it along the windowsills. We lined the outlet that gave them access. To this day, it remains covered in black electrical tape. I remember thinking maybe they were trapped in there, that they might start a fire.

One of the ants fell from the ceiling and into our bed; Jeremy slept on the couch, and I slept in my office. He and I argued a version of the only argument we have; a failed hurricane angered the palm fronds outside our windows, and a displaced ant colony sought refuge inside our walls, and at the end of the conversation, we decided to get married. We didn't tell our families. Two months and four days later, at the courthouse, we held hands. I wrote my vows the night before; my friend Emily came over to do my hair. My mother called while I was sitting in front of the mirror, just as Damien arrived to take our pictures. I hurried her off the phone, lying to her about what we were doing. Going to the ocean, I think I said, *just because*.

Marriage is not much different than what came before, although it legitimizes the partnership to others in a way I didn't anticipate. We avoid the terms *husband* and *wife* unless in medical settings, or when I call Geico to get a discount on the car insurance, ostensibly because married people are more stable than single people. Dubious! Three months after we married, I had a psychological breakdown that ultimately led to the beginning of this newsletter. But the breakdown was unrelated to the marriage. During the psychological breakdown, which lasted maybe a year (the edges have softened), I thought about jumping into the fountain in Balboa Park. I quit my job. I testified to a judge about my former employer. I considered moving back to New York by myself. I considered marriage-sanctioned affairs. But there was a second animal in the house: there was myself, feral, and my spouse, waiting for me.