

Not Here


By Jane Kenyon

Searching for pillowcases trimmed
with lace that my mother-in-law
once made, I open the chest of drawers
upstairs to find that mice
have chewed the blue and white linen
dishtowels to make their nest,
and bedded themselves
among embroidered dresser scarves
and fingertip towels.

Tufts of fibers, droppings like black
caraway seeds, and the stains of birth
and afterbirth give off the strong
unforgettable attar of mouse
that permeates an old farmhouse
on humid summer days.

A couple of hickory nuts
roll around as I lift out
the linens, while a hail of black
sunflower shells
falls on the pillowcases,
yellow with age, but intact.
I'll bleach them and hang them in the sun
to dry. There's almost no one left
who knows how to crochet lace...

The bright-eyed squatters are not here.
They've scuttled out to the fields
for summer, as they scuttled in
for winter—along the wall, from chair
to skirted chair, making themselves
flat and scarce while the cat
dozed with her paws in the air,
and we read the mail
or evening paper, unaware.



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