

My Rat

by John Riley

Today I'll make the call
to exterminate
the rat that lives
behind the white plaster
of my warehouse office.
She's here in the morning
when I flip the switch
and catch a glimpse
of her nose as it fades
into her black space.
Once there was a flash
of five-digit claws,
slate, soft stomach,
slim tail, finely scaled;
a face that slopes
from wide, proud brow,
down an aristocrat's nose.
Late in the day I hear
the hungry squeaks
of her blind young.
Nights, she wanders
searching for food
throughout this old mill
where long-dead weavers
once wove cheap fabric;
where I spend my hours
behind stacks of books
on an assortment of subjects:
Cortés and Montezuma,
the St. Bart's Day Massacre,
a few on diseases
my rat will outlast.

We have shared our time,
two lives, one phantom.
I exited the night,
she entered the day,
in a dance we danced
on feet that fell
small on the earth.

