

Poison's Friend Plastic Knows Oil, Who's Also Friends with Microplankton  
by Clementine Edwards

I just threw poison down a hole in my living room floor.  
There's been a party going on below me,  
and I broke it up

As long as I've lived in the ground-floor apartment, ten months,  
I've listened to the scuffling  
interestedly  
thinking  
    the rustling to be  
the feathers  
of birds. Not thinking much, perhaps  
knowing they weren't possums so maybe cats

I blamed the smell on a needy tabby  
always pawing at the kitchen door  
the neighbourhood cat  
must have lived there part time,  
and marked with piss the floor –  
cats and their low regard for borders

More recently, I heard a soft cheeping  
How at one I was with nature!

Thrilled at the porousness of my apartment's borders  
I placed my ear to the floor and listened to the small birds' calls,  
imagining their blind eyes  
and beaks wide open in the dark below me:  
the unlikely sweetness of the scene

Days passed and the cheeping became louder  
    my birds were gathering strength.  
I envisaged how I might release them  
when they were ready to fly  
I would open the floor and a tiny flock of great tits would dance about my  
living room

in cartoon colours  
as if I were Bambi. My quarantine kin

I mentioned to a friend that I had a family of birds  
under the house and could hear the mother's  
feathers rustling,  
that she must be nesting

My friend said that perhaps they were rats  
that autumn is an unlikely breeding time for birds  
and below a house an unlikely place to nest.  
I mentioned the cheeping  
they informed me rats make this noise too

So I opened a hole in the floor, lifted up a piece of plywood,  
and was struck  
when I stuck my head below,  
by the rank stench of old piss.

Struck  
by the rat thickened air  
lots of movement  
plenty of faeces  
tails everywhere

I was living among an established village of rats.

They had made their home at my house—

No —

I had made my home at their house  
right above their nest

uncharmed  
and maybe frantic,  
I called the local council  
to enlist their support

To my doorstep,  
a milk-fed man with pink cheeks  
delivered me the goods

Radiating normative good health,  
he assured me the method was  
safe, legal  
and toxic.

Execution was to be easy

Thinking about my research  
into the porousness of the body's borders,  
into chemical exposures and the poetics of plastics,  
their embodied survivals  
and how they queer kinship models,  
I opened up the hole in my living room floor  
and threw down two bags of  
bright blue  
poison pellets

Rat killer  
brodifacoum  
an anticoagulant that kills rats in  
twelve days,  
that blocks blood vessels  
inhibits clots  
and stops blood flow  
to organs  
such as the brain, heart, lungs

On ingestion of the poison,  
the rat dries out.  
During this slow time of desiccation,  
the rat returns to its family nest to die

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In the days after poisoning the nest  
writing this text  
the sound of my typing was frequently punctuated  
by shuffles, swishes and squeaks –  
rats thrashing below my feet

Baby rats. Mother rats  
someone's cousin rats  
rat chiefs, rat families and rat gangs  
I had scattered pellets of bright blue  
their artificial hue  
    disappearing into the dark  
down,  
perhaps, into the rats' gullets

a complex chemical synthesis  
    that traces back to Germany  
    its early industrial capitalist activity  
swallowed whole

I'm thinking here of synthetic emulations of 'natural' forms  
    and their relation to the real  
How coal is associated with  
the red of alizarin  
    the earliest dye to be produced synthetically  
    in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.      Bright blue indigo  
would soon follow  
    and transform the textile industry, according to Esther Leslie

But then the beautiful breakthrough  
of the first plastic Bakelite  
    in 1907  
and what it did for our relationship to oil

Unknowable entities, derived from the earth's archives  
became putty in the hands of 'man'  
majestic natural forms were rendered prosaic,  
    repeatable  
proliferating plastic, wrote Barthes,  
    was 'ubiquity made visible'

'Nature was outbid by chemistry'  
    says Esther Leslie

Plastic gave people had the possibility of  
accumulating a thing  
without its degradation  
and its endpoint says Michael Hardt  
was 'the death of metabolism'

But more on plastic in a moment –  
for now I want to stay with the poison

To poison a thing is to believe that it can be removed  
from one's life  
that one's life is apart from that which one poisons  
And that, therefore,  
some pristine condition may be achieved  
simply through a thing's removal

This metaphor is a fallacy  
but appears across contexts.  
Contaminates dreaming, intoxicates thought  
and governs property law

What I learned from putting poison below my toes  
is that toxicity (following Davis and Murphy)  
knows  
no borders  
that there is no such thing  
as a spatial 'outside'  
into which we might deposit materials – rat guts included

What I learned from putting poison below my toes  
is that  
I needed the rats. Like the most  
self-aware aggressor  
I knew  
they agitated me  
lent my life in quarantine friction  
my thinking about them was like an addiction

What I learned from putting poison below my toes  
is that  
I was seeing myself only in the forms of their rat shadows  
    So  
        for fear of being consumed by what I loathed  
I decided I would go down to meet them

Into the living room floor I would climb,  
    below the plywood  
looking for the blue poison  
to retrieve it  
    and to find them, my rats,  
    to see how they were doing.  
I could no longer kill them

So I opened the hole in the floor,  
stuck my head below  
    and let my body follow.

Down I dropped  
my phone as torch to guide me  
into the rank stench of old piss  
and  
    as far as the eye could see through the darkness  
        below the house  
a dank cereal of  
white plastic insulation  
chunks of the stuff  
polystyrene  
    gnocchi-shaped pale puffs  
    a tidal surface smattered yellow-y brown

this polymer playground once crawling with vermin  
was now, for the time being,  
silent

*Rattus norvegicus:*

I learned recently that  
the average rat eats 10 per cent of its body weight per day

and that rats eat plastic insulation

Now I share with you a primary school maths equation:

Say

there are 300 rats living on my block

and of these cosmopolitan vermin

30 live below my house

If the common brown rat weighs

230 grams

it needs to eat

23 grams a day

times that by 30,

for the 30 rats,

by 304 for the days I've been in the house,

and that means in the months I've been home the rats have eaten

210 kilos of polystyrene insulation that keeps me warm at night

How hot my heart must be.

Down there in the dank dark I felt it skip a beat.

Overcome by the possibility that my possibly not-yet-poisoned rats

had been dining

on poison's old friend plastic

How hot my heart must be.

How atmospherically warmed

by the geological persistence

of plastic

and it's never-to-be-digested proximity

pumping through tiny intestines

enrobed in fur

quivering somewhere near me

If plastic, following Heather Davis,

is the bastard child

of humans

made of the earth

via fossilised life  
but outside of its biological cycles  
Then these rats –  
    bellies and bloodstreams full of polystyrene –  
these rats must be my half-plastic progeny  
my beloved and toxic kin

I'm wondering, following Mel Chen,  
yet again,  
if this is how toxicity's  
    intimacies summon queer love

In the rat-thickened air  
    down below the house,  
I searched out my loved ones

I shimmied through a low concrete arch  
    came to a clearing  
encountered details through  
    the adjusting dark  
such as a long yellow pipe  
along which the rats must sometimes march

I tried to stand.  
Waist deep in white puffs  
I sensed rats wriggling below me  
So,  
thinking of the deadly poison pellets  
    of my retrieval mission  
and with  
    the pink-cheeked man's voice to guide me  
I pinched my nose, closed my eyes  
    and slid down into the white puffs

Suddenly, I can see.  
    I'm with Dionne Brand's poetry:  
She says,  
    'The touch of everything blushes me...'

And now

    drenched as I am in the synthetic matter  
I'm thinking here of the poetics of the inorganic  
    of the toxic  
    and the plastic  
and the blue pellets  
and the piss puffs that the rats have snacked on  
    that I'm now submerged in  
and the waste sites and Pacific gyre  
and how does it feel to be coextensive with the world?  
is it safe, legal and toxic?

Care is shared risk, says Christina Sharpe

But the discrete body unravels unevenly  
    in the face of chemical racism, says Michelle Murphy

I'm picturing here  
    the blue of the poison

As

    I drop down below the polystyrene nest  
    beyond the rat's tails

Below the timber  
    and the hand-forged **nails**

Past the building's foundations  
    into the sand and sludge of Rotterdam's unreal earth  
    already reclaimed and reclaimed  
    again  
    from the sea

Shells and sand banks carrying crustacean memories

    my skin dries out  
we desiccate  
our plastic bellies and bloodstreams  
remain

small rib bones mingling with microparticles,  
and microbes

Smashed spectacles through which I spy

below:

traces of eye shadow  
a silicon strap-on named Zoro

an elastic band

and a Nestle glass jar,

returned to the sand

At last.

Along with

the leg of a wooden chair

leaves, moss

debris

shreds of fibreglass, cellophane

rotted pumpkin seeds

pigeon feathers and

PCB-sodden rain

And down I dive

past the orange dildo of Heather Davis

the queer coal of Kathryn Yusoff

a protest banner 'make kin not babies' penned by Haraway

is yellowing beside a vial of hormones from Thirza Cuthand

embedded in clay

another strata down and I'm upon my ancestors

front teeth, sheep's wool, fertiliser

smelling salts

rock quartz struck through with gold

a gavel and a glass diamond

floods of beer, river water, bushland

wiped of life, and compressed

How to tell a white settler story

whose origin is based on genocide and theft?

Do I dare dig through  
my material kinship flows?  
Back to when the rats and I might have shared a ship –  
invaders of another land both?

I feel that for my human kin  
radical reproductive justice  
must be sworn now as oath.

What visions do I have of place?  
What artifice do I skim along  
or conjure  
What kin do I reach to  
and propagate  
to keep myself believing?

Could extraction be my origin myth  
one of fossil fuelled dreaming?

The idea of removal without consequence shuttles colonial thinking  
Extraction, says Leanne Simpson,  
removes all of the relationships that give  
whatever is being extracted  
meaning –  
reducing the world to a resource.

For now, I'm busy with  
an old refrigerator and chipboard flooring  
an inverted astrologer tracing treasure in the trash.  
Below my toes a universe  
and a necessary retrieval of feral stories made here on earth  
Sand crusted and terraformed  
or maybe loamy and rich

Rats live for two years but I might live for eighty.  
In that time they'll continue consuming  
the stuff derived of the earth's archives  
the stuff that keeps me warm

I envisage the space:

no visual trace of insulation.

Covered in a fine film of desiccated plastic rat remains  
and a smattering of blue poison pellets

Years pass:

I'm lying in a clay bed within the earth's crust  
among the polystyrene

we mingle together to plastic speckled dust

then finally

the leaves come

the microplankton joins us

and the oil might form again.

Clementine Edwards' first book, *The Material Kinship Reader* will be published by Onomatopoe in October 2021.

*Choose your own kin: understand it for its often-toxic histories and treasure it regardless.*

*The Material Kinship Reader* expands the idea of an artist's monograph towards a practice of interdependence, with thoughts, theories, and kindred spirits that inform and hold up one's life and artistic practice. In the book, Edwards' sculptural work is framed by essays and excerpts from works of theory, fiction and memoir that transform our ideas about kinship, knowledge-making and engaging in a world of tangible materials. The writing is brought into sharp relief against a backdrop of accelerating climate collapse.

*The Material Kinship Reader* includes contributions from Hana Pera Aoake, Joannie Baumgärtner, Ama Josephine Budge, Heather Davis, Kris Dittel, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Sophie Lewis, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Michelle Murphy, Ada M. Patterson, Michelle Tea, Marina Vishmidt and more to be announced.

The book is edited by Clementine Edwards and Kris Dittel. Designed by Jena Myung.