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We were travelling in Rajasthan, India. We drove through the desert to Bikaner and beyond, to visit the Rat Temple of Shri Karni Mata. According to legend the goddess Karni Mata asked the god of death, Yama to restore to life the son of a severely grieving storyteller. When Yama refused, Karni Mata vowed to reincarnate all dead storytellers, poets and writers as rats, to deprive the evil Yama of feeding on their creative souls in death. After living as rats for a few generations, the poets are reincarnated again as humans.

So these thousands of holy rodents, or Kabas, reside at the temple and are worshipped and looked after by the temple priests and priestesses. They are fed on large bowls of fresh milk and food offerings from devout visitors to the temple. When we were there a wealthy family arrived with offerings of figs. These figs were packed in wooden boxes with the greatest of care, much like expensive cigars. Some figs were taken out and placed on a silver tray beneath the elaborately carved and decorated shrine to be offered as Prasad (holy food offerings) to the goddess. About twenty rats descended on the figs, moving over them, sniffing, nibbling and salivating. Following some prayers and rituals, the tray of figs was offered back to the devotees who ate the leftover morsels with reverence.

My body started to convulse at the sight so I walked out to the courtyard for some fresh air. The rats were scurrying everywhere, occasionally running over my bare toes. Of course there were no shoes allowed in the temple and it was considered a blessing if the holy rodents touched your feet. Another wave of disgust pulsed through me. As the mangy creatures scampered up and down the walls and pillars I was overcome with the feeling that they might leap onto my head, run through my hair and over my shoulders. I needed to get out of there.

At this point some temple priests arrived with large cans of milk, pouring them into shallow brass bowls about a metre in diameter. Hordes of auspicious rats made a dash for the milk, hopping onto the rim of the bowls. Side by side they formed several tight circles while slurping the white fluid.

Perhaps it was the sudden sense of order that drew me towards them. But as I moved closer I started to pick out words—English words.

'I only drink to make my friends more interesting'. I was sure I heard this precise phrase coming from one of the

less mangy looking rodents. It was followed by a smattering of squeaky giggles.

I recognised the words. Only one writer could quip like that. Could this small furry animal contain the spirit of Oscar Wilde?

Just then, coming from the direction of one of the smaller rodents at the milk bowl I heard, in soft rhythmic whispers,

'I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead
I lift my eyes and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head)'

Sylvia?

'A rat is a rat is a rat!'...yelled a voice from the next bowl of milk.

Just then a dark, bushy rodent, fatter than the others, exclaimed,

'America I've given you all and now I'm nothing
America two dollars and twenty-seven cents January 17, 1956
I can't stand my own mind
America when will we end the human war?
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb
I don't feel good don't bother me.'

I was a young teenager when I heard Allen Ginsberg perform *America*, as well as his famous *Howl*, at the Adelaide Town Hall during the Arts Festival. It had changed my life. I was overwhelmed and elated to hear these words again.

Next, one of the rats hopped down off the milk bowl and walked towards me. It looked up and recited a verse from the Sufi poet Hafez.

'If you are entrapped in this snare like me, O, often ruined by wine and cup you'll be. We the lovers, the rogues, the intoxicated will burn the world: Do not sit with us or ill of name you'll be.'

I chose to ignore the warnings of the poet and instead, crouched down to join these wondrous beings, to rave with them about poetry, holiness and madness; occasionally lapping up some fresh creamy milk and tasting the holy Prasad.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Josephine Starrs.