

ANNA LAETITIA BARBAULD

*The Mouse's Petition*¹*Parcere subjectis, & debellare superbos.*²

—Virgil

O h! hear a pensive prisoner's prayer,
 For liberty that sighs;
 And never let thine heart be shut
 Against the wretch's cries.

5 For here forlorn and sad I sit,
 Within the wiry grate;
 And tremble at th'approaching morn,
 Which brings impending fate.

10 If e'er thy breast with freedom glowed,
 And spurned a tyrant's chain,
 Let not thy strong oppressive force
 A free-born mouse detain.

15 Oh! do not stain with guiltless blood
 Thy hospitable hearth;
 Nor triumph that thy wiles betrayed
 A prize so little worth.

20 The scattered gleanings of a feast
 My frugal meals supply;
 But if thine unrelenting heart
 That slender boon deny,

The chearful light, the vital air,
 Are blessings widely given;
 Let nature's commoners enjoy
 The common gifts of heaven.

¹ [Barbauld's note, 1792 edition] Found in the trap where he had been confined all night by Dr. Priestley, for the sake of making experiments with different kinds of air. [*Dr Priestly* Chemist Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), who discovered oxygen, and who tested the properties of various gases on mice. Barbauld visited him in the summer of 1771.]

² *Parcere ... superbos* Latin: "To spare the conquered and to subdue the proud." From Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.853.

25 The well taught philosophic mind
 To all compassion gives;
 Casts round the world an equal eye,
 And feels for all that lives.

30 If mind, as ancient sages taught,
 A never dying flame,
 Still shifts through matter's varying forms,
 In every form the same,³

35 Beware, lest in the worm you crush
 A brother's soul you find;
 And tremble lest thy luckless hand
 Dislodge a kindred mind.

40 Or, if this transient gleam of day
 Be *all* of life we share,
 Let pity plead within thy breast
 That little *all* to spare.

So may thy hospitable board
 With health and peace be crowned;
 And every charm of heartfelt ease
 Beneath thy roof be found.

45 So, when destruction lurks unseen,
 Which men, like mice, may share,
 May some kind angel clear thy path,
 And break the hidden snare.

—1773

The Caterpillar

No, helpless thing, I cannot harm thee now;
 Depart in peace, thy little life is safe,
 For I have scanned thy form with curious eye,
 Noted the silver line that streaks thy back,
 5 The azure and the orange that divide
 Thy velvet sides; thee, houseless wanderer,
 My garment has enfolded, and my arm
 Felt the light pressure of thy hairy feet;
 Thou hast curled round my finger; from its tip,

³ *If mind... same* Reference to the theory of the transmigration of souls.

10 Precipitous descent! with stretched out neck,
 Bending thy head in airy vacancy,
 This way and that, inquiring, thou hast seemed
 To ask protection; now, I cannot kill thee.
 Yet I have sworn perdition to thy race,
 15 And recent from the slaughter am I come
 Of tribes and embryo nations: I have sought
 With sharpened eye and persecuting zeal,
 Where, folded in their silken webs they lay
 Thriving and happy; swept them from the tree
 20 And crushed whole families beneath my foot;
 Or, sudden, poured on their devoted heads
 The vials of destruction.¹—This I've done,
 Nor felt the touch of pity: but when thou—
 25 A single wretch, escaped the general doom,
 Making me feel and clearly recognise
 Thine individual existence, life,

And fellowship of sense with all that breathes—
 Present'st thyself before me, I relent,
 And cannot hurt thy weakness.—So the storm
 30 Of horrid war, o'erwhelming cities, fields,
 And peaceful villages, rolls dreadful on:
 The victor shouts triumphant; he enjoys
 The roar of cannon and the clang of arms,
 And urges, by no soft relentings stopped,
 35 The work of death and carnage. Yet should one,
 A single sufferer from the field escaped,
 Panting and pale, and bleeding at his feet,
 Lift his imploring eyes—the hero weeps;
 He is grown human, and capricious Pity,
 40 Which would not stir for thousands, melts for one
 With sympathy spontaneous: 'Tis not Virtue,
 Yet 'tis the weakness of a virtuous mind.
 —1825

¹ *vials of destruction* I.e., pesticides.