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# *The Essay Mouse*

Rebecca McClanahan

And it came to pass that the mouse did pass swiftly between my booted feet set squarely on the auditorium floor among hundreds of other booted feet. For it was winter in a wintry town, and those of us gathered to honor our fellow unhonored essayists who have been making their quiet noise for decades now—no, *centuries!* the panelists were saying—are for the most part a practical bunch, prepared for whatever wind might blow.

A calm bunch, too, I might add, unlike those gathered in other halls of that convention hotel—wild-haired poets who squawk and swoon, novelists plotting the best revenge. Which may be why the small brown mouse had chosen this panel, darting quiet as a—well, naturally, quiet as a—through a crack between the closed side doors. What better gathering in which to pass unharmed? Essayists are passionate in our restraint; not one of us squawked or faintly swooned. Yes, some of us gasped inaudibly, some touched our neighbor's arm, and one or two lifted a boot to let the mouse pass in peace, and, because we are a curious lot, we did tilt our heads in unison to follow its swift and errant path.

For what is a mouse without a path? Digression its chief and mightiest power; its grammar a wonder of prepositions. Oh the places one can go, all the outs and ins! Among the boots, between the aisles, along the extension

cord, toward the podium, beneath the tablecloth spread for our panelists' modesty, and now out again, out from under, and back again across the room, while the panelists calmly keep on paneling, noting the essayists long forgotten, the Replliers and Lippincotts, along with the anonymous and pseudonymous and the famed initialed—H.D., for instance, who, according to one panelist, “followed her curiosity,” which led H.D. to essay, among other things, upon the mind-body dilemma.

At which mention, the brown mouse pauses, tilts its head. Mind-body dilemma? The mouse is all ears. Except, of course, for the tail, which to the mind of this particular house mouse—species *Mus musculus*—must seem to have a mind of *its* own. Thus presents a dilemma. Stay or go? Pause and reflect a moment, balance coolly on the long, annulated tail? Or press heatedly on, allowing the whiskers their whiskery feel? “*One thinks by feeling; what is there to know?*” Mus muses an instant on Roethke’s line, which has darted uninvited into Mus’s mind. (All mice admire the villanelle; some genetic strains, namely the spinner and reeler, even emulate its circumlocutory form, weaving and wobbling in circles to their own *inner mouse*.)

But Mus is no poet, wild-haired or otherwise. For Mus, it is not enough to give in to feeling. One must also consider, reflect. Sniff forward, yes, but not without a shoulder’s glance at the hard-earned past. Is this why Mus is shivering so? From my chair near the back of the room, I note the tremor, the engine of the mouse heart pumping. In this pause between go and go again, in the memoir moment of stilled reflection, does Mus catch a glimpse of its early self, pink and naked and blind? And does Mus fear that we have glimpsed it too?

One thing is certain: Mus is caught in the center of eyes. Not a comfortable spot for a creature whose genre is hide-and-seek. Were I positioned closer, I might hear the bruxing chatter of its teeth or the cliché-honored squeak. And if Mus were to lift its tail, I might detect if Mus be buck or doe. And if he be buck, and a ripe doe be near, and if I had the mouse ears of that doe, I might hear the ultrasonic song of as-yet-unrequited love. Which might in time lead to *requited*, a species so rare in novels and poems as to be virtually absent. Once requited, love’s flame is extinguished, its plot undone: *and they lived happily*. In their burrow, their marital chamber, tunnel of domestic lust, nest in which to serenely breed dozens of baby *Mus musculus* and dozens more and. . . .

Thoughts of home no doubt stir the essay mouse, who darts beneath the tablecloth to reconsider its stance on the ongoing mind-body dilemma. But life presses on; applause is building. Above Mus's head, skirts are stirring, satchels snapping, high-heeled boots clicking toward double doors that open to a world Mus has as yet only imagined. Outside, the hawk and weasel gather, but as one panelist earlier noted "nothing essayed, nothing gained," and even a house mouse must surface now and then to blink its eyes against the light, sniff spring's damp beginnings: *I feel my fate in what I cannot fear*. Life is short; should ambition not be longer?