



Alan Dugan

(1923-2003)

Funeral Oration for a Mouse (1961)

This, Lord, was an anxious brother and  
a living diagram of fear: full of health himself,  
he brought diseases like a gift  
to give his hosts. Masked in a cat's moustache  
but sounding like a bird, he was a ghost  
of lesser noises and a kitchen pest  
for whom some ladies stand on chairs. So,  
Lord, accept our felt though minor guilt  
for an ignoble foe and ancient sin:  
the murder of a guest  
who shared our board: just once he ate  
too slowly, dying in our trap  
from necessary hunger and a broken back.

Humors of love aside, the mousetrap was our own  
opinion of the mouse, but for the mouse  
it was the tree of knowledge with  
its consequential fruit, the true cross  
and the gate of hell. Even to approach  
it makes him like or better than  
its maker: his courage as a spoiler never once  
impressed us, but to go out cautiously at night,  
into the dining room;--what bravery, what  
hunger! Younger by far, in dying he  
was older than us all: his mobile tail and nose  
spasmed in the pinch of our annoyance. Why,

then, at that snapping sound, did we, victorious,  
begin to laugh without delight?

Our stomachs, deep in an analysis  
of its own stolen baits  
(and asking, "Lord, Host, to whom are we the pests?"),  
contracted and demanded a retreat  
from our machine and its effect of death,  
as if the mouse's fingers, skinnier  
than hairpins and as breakable as cheese,  
could grasp our grasping lives, and in  
their drowning movement pull us under too,  
into the common death beyond the mousetrap.