

## Mice and Elephants

Creative Nonfiction • Sarah Dusek

I heard the pastor talk about mice and elephants for the first time when I was eight. It was during evening church, where I got to wear jeans and a sweatshirt instead of a dress because it was more casual than morning church. The pastor spoke from a pulpit on the ground instead of the one elevated ten feet above. The service was shorter unless there were an extra twenty minutes for communion tacked on the end. Sometimes my parents even let me bring a book.

That night they didn't.

In and out between drifting asleep and wondering what would happen if I turned into a dog, the pastor's pendulum voice knocked into my brain.

There's an allegory people like to use when they try and disprove the existence of the Christian God. It's called the mice allegory. It goes that there is an elephant standing in a field, surrounded by mice. None of the mice know what it is, and all they can examine is whatever is in front of them. One sees a giant foot and says, "It surely is a giant trunk." Another sees its trunk and says, "No, it's a tail...."

*(Sarah is a dog! A Siberian Husky that's dashing out the front door and running away!)*

...But then one perched on a tree stops and says, “No, everyone, it’s an elephant!”

This is where the story is flawed.

He gave a wry smile.

It makes the assumption that some people can see the whole picture and therefore have figured out what God is. Someone is perched upon the tree and sees what the others don’t, which counters the story’s very purpose.

At the time, the argument made sense to me. It was another echo from the white, stone-columned crib I had grown up in. Kids catechism booklets, choir robes, powdered donut holes, velvety pew cushions, old women’s perfume. That stuff was real. I saw, tasted, felt, and heard them every week.

In Sunday school, the lessons became more academic as we got older. We had to memorize verses and adult catechisms. The teacher would have us fill out worksheets, the kind that didn’t have pictures. They told us about things like original sin and how everyone is born sinful. They told us that because we were sinful and God was perfect, he couldn’t be with us when we died and that we would have to go to Hell. In Hell, there’s a lake of fire. Mice had no business studying elephants.

The stuff they taught was real too. I heard it, didn’t I.

Twelve years later, the hymns intermingle with a cacophony of voices and a speaker’s buzz. We’re in an apartment, dark save the white archaic light humming from the kitchen. There is no air, only sound, skin, and the stringent haze of liquor. Sandpaper couch in the corner, crystallized ruby puddle on the tile floor, waving pizza boxes, denim and lace stretching over my body like a second skin. The plastic cup squeals beneath my fingers as my grip tightens and I ladle myself more punch.

Your eyes poke the back of my neck, make my ears burn.

It’s inevitable.

We’re in the bathroom now, the door sealed behind us. A white mausoleum, two bodies pressed against its wall trying to insulate the music outside. But the lyrics snake through the crack, the catechisms the hymns the sermons.

*(Sarah is ruining herself! She’s an abomination barreling towards the lake of fire!)*

I cup my hands over your ears, your mousy hair tickling the tops of my palms. Your breath tastes like tuna. Black dots sway across my vision, the bathroom is a soup. I keep telling myself this is real. *This is real this is real.*

This is how I would write the mice allegory.

The mice are in a field, but this time they are blind. Their little naked

tails are tethered by a thin piece of twine to something massive. They scurry about, try to find their way, but can't seem to shake the mysterious thing that looms over them. Sometimes they try to touch the thing they are attached to, either to discern what it is or pull away. But the texture is a texture they can't quite recall and it is constantly shifting, but its shape is oddly familiar yet its constantly squirming into something else, and it smells like a pleasant, familiar smell but sometimes it smells repugnant and accusative. They know deep down it's vital to discover what it is, but none of them can quite agree, and most are wary of their own perceptions, and some listen to the loudest voice because that's easiest.

There are no trees.