To a Mouse
On Turning up in Her Nest with the Plough, November, 1785
By Robert Burns
1785

Robert Burns (1759-1796) was a Scottish poet and lyricist. In the following poem, a speaker come across a mouse while ploughing a field. As you read, take notes on the speaker's feelings toward the mouse.

MODERN VERSION

[1] Little, artful, cowering, timid beast,
Oh, what a panic is in your heart!
You need not start away so hasty
With bickering prattle!

[5] I would be loath to run and chase you,
With murdering scraper

I'm truly sorry man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
And justifies that ill opinion

[10] Which makes you startle
At me, your poor, earth born companion
And fellow mortal!

I doubt not, sometimes, that you may steal;
What then? Poor beast, you must live!

Is a small request;
I will get a blessing with what is left,
And never miss it.

Your small house, too, in ruin!

[20] Its feeble walls the winds are scattering!
And nothing now, to build a new one,
Of coarse green foliage!
And bleak December's winds coming,
Both bitter and piercing!

1. **Cower (verb)**: to crouch down in fear
2. foolish talk
3. unwilling
4. **Dominion (noun)**: control
5. a single grain plant
6. a bundle of grain stalks that are tied together after being cut
7. plant leaves
You saw the fields laid bare and empty,  
And weary winter coming fast,  
And cozy here, beneath the blast,  
    You thought to dwell,  
Till crash! The cruel plough passed  
Out through your cell.

That small heap of leaves and stubble,  
Has cost you many a weary nibble!  
Now you are turned out, for all your trouble,  
    Without house or holding,  
To endure the winter's sleety dribble,  
    And hoar-frost\(^8\) cold.

But Mouse, you are not alone,  
In proving foresight\(^9\) may be vain:\(^10\)  
The best laid schemes of mice and men  
    Go often askew,\(^11\)  
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,  
    For promised joy!

Still you are blessed, compared with me!  
The present only touches you:  
But oh! I backward cast my eye,  
    On prospects\(^12\) dreary!  
And forward, though I cannot see,  
    I guess and fear!

**SCOTS VERSION**

Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie,  
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!  
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,  
    Wi' bickerin brattle!  
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee  
    Wi' murd'ring pattle!

---

8. a white coating of ice crystals  
9. **Foresight** *(noun)*: the ability to predict what will happen or what is needed in the future  
10. **Vain** *(adjective)*: producing no result; useless  
11. crooked, out of line, or wrong  
12. a view or outlook
I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
   Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
   An' fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen-icker in a thrave
   'S a sma' request:
'I'll get a blessin' wi' the lave,
   An' never miss 't!

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,
   O' foggage green!
An' bleak December's winds ensuin,
   Baith snell an' keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste,
An' weary Winter comin fast,
An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
   Till crash! the cruel coulter past
   Out thro' thy cell.

That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,
   But house or hald,
   To thole the Winter's sleety dribble,
   An' cranreuch cauld!

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men
   Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
   For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
   On prospects drear!
An' forward tho' I canna see,
   I guess an' fear!