



The Ax-Helve

I've known ere now an interfering branch
Of alder catch my lifted ax behind me.
But that was in the woods, to hold my hand
From striking at another alder's roots,
And that was, as I say, an alder branch.
This was a man, Baptiste, who stole one day
Behind me on the snow in my own yard
Where I was working at the chopping-block,
And cutting nothing not cut down already.
He caught my ax expertly on the rise,
When all my strength put forth was in his favor,
Held it a moment where it was, to calm me,
Then took it from me—and I let him take it.
I didn't know him well enough to know
What it was all about. There might be something
He had in mind to say to a bad neighbor
He might prefer to say to him disarmed.
But all he had to tell me in French-English
Was what he thought of—not me, but my ax,
Me only as I took my ax to heart.
It was the bad ax-helve someone had sold me —
“Made on machine,” he said, plowing the grain
With a think thumbnail to show how it ran
Across the handle's long-drawn serpentine —
Like the two strokes across a dollar sign.
“You give her one good crack, she's snap raght off.
Den where's your hax-ead flying t'rough de hair?”
Admitted; and yet, what was that to him?

“Come on my house and I put you one in
What's las' awhile—good hick'ry what's grow crooked.