

AN OLD MAN'S WINTER NIGHT

All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
 Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
 That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
 What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
 Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand. 5
 What kept him from remembering what it was
 That brought him to that creaking room was age.
 He stood with barrels round him—at a loss.
 And having scared the cellar under him
 In clomping here, he scared it once again 10
 In clomping off—and scared the outer night,
 Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
 Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
 But nothing so like beating on a box.
 A light he was to no one but himself 15
 Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
 A quiet light, and then not even that.
 He consigned to the moon—such as she was,
 So late-arising—to the broken moon,
 As better than the sun in any case 20
 For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,
 His icicles along the wall to keep;
 And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt
 Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
 And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept. 25
 One aged man—one man—can't keep a house,
 A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
 It's thus he does it of a winter night.

THE EXPOSED NEST

You were forever finding some new play.
 So when I saw you down on hands and knees
 In the meadow, busy with the new-cut hay,
 Trying, I thought, to set it up on end,
 I went to show you how to make it stay, 5
 If that was your idea, against the breeze,
 And, if you asked me, even help pretend
 To make it root again and grow afresh.
 But 'twas no make-believe with you today,
 Nor was the grass itself your real concern, 10
 Though I found your hand full of wilted fern,
 Steel-bright June-grass, and blackening heads of clover.
 'Twas a nest full of young birds on the ground
 The cutter bar had just gone champing over
 (Miraculously without tasting flesh) 15
 And left defenseless to the heat and light.
 You wanted to restore them to their right
 Of something interposed between their sight
 And too much world at once—could means be found.
 The way the nest-full every time we stirred 20
 Stood up to us as to a mother-bird
 Whose coming home has been too long deferred,
 Made me ask would the mother-bird return
 And care for them in such a change of scene,
 And might our meddling make her more afraid. 25
 That was a thing we could not wait to learn.
 We saw the risk we took in doing good,
 But dared not spare to do the best we could
 Though harm should come of it; so built the screen
 You had begun, and gave them back their shade. 30
 All this to prove we cared. Why is there then

No more to tell? We turned to other things.
 I haven't any memory—have you?—
 Of ever coming to the place again
 To see if the birds lived the first night through,
 And so at last to learn to use their wings.

A PATCH OF OLD SNOW

There's a patch of old snow in a corner

35

"Put it on top of something that's on top
 Of something else," she laughed. "Oh, put it where 15
 You can tonight, and go. It's almost dark;
 You must be getting started back to town."

Another blackened face thrust in and looked
 And smiled, and when she did not turn, spoke gently,
 "What are you seeing out the window, *lady*?" 20

"Never was I blackened . . ."

lady
 dy

ady?" 25

s
 nd
 "
 "

re dishpan 30
 1, Joe;

call

dear?" 35

w! You hope

r
 1
 re

40

THE TELEPHONE

"When I was just as far as I could walk
 From here today,
 There was an hour
 All still
 When leaning with my head against a flower
 I heard you talk. 5
 Don't say I didn't, for I heard you say—
 You spoke from that flower on the windowsill—
 Do you remember what it was you said?"
 "First tell me what it was you thought you heard." 10
 "Having found the flower and driven a bee away,
 I leaned my head,
 And holding by the stalk,
 I listened and I thought I caught the word—
 What was it? Did you call me by my name? 15
 Or did you say—
 Someone said 'Come'—I heard it as I bowed."
 "I may have thought as much, but not aloud."
 "Well, so I came."

MEETING AND PASSING

As I went down the hill along the wall
 There was a gate I had leaned at for the view
 And had just turned from when I first saw you
 As you came up the hill. We met. But all
 We did that day was mingle great and small 5
 Footprints in summer dust as if we drew
 The figure of our being less than two

But more than one as yet. Your parasol
 Pointed the decimal off with one deep thrust.
 And all the time we talked you seemed to see 10
 Something down there to smile at in the dust.
 (Oh, it was without prejudice to me!)
 Afterward I went past what you had passed
 Before we met, and you what I had passed.

HYLA BROOK

By June our brook's run out of song and speed.
 Sought for much after that, it will be found
 Either to have gone groping underground
 (And taken with it all the Hyla breed 5
 That shouted in the mist a month ago,
 Like ghost of sleigh bells in a ghost of snow)—
 Or flourished and come up in jewelweed,
 Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent,
 Even against the way its waters went.
 Its bed is left a faded paper sheet 10
 Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat—
 A brook to none but who remember long.
 This as it will be seen is other far
 Than with brooks taken otherwhere in song.
 We love the things we love for what they are. 15

THE OVEN BIRD

There is a singer everyone has heard,
 Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
 Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
 He says that leaves are old and that for flowers

Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten. 5
 He says the early petal-fall is past,
 When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
 On sunny days a moment overcast;
 And comes that other fall we name the fall.
 He says the highway dust is over all. 10
 The bird would cease and be as other birds
 But that he knows in singing not to sing.
 The question that he frames in all but words
 Is what to make of a diminished thing.

BOND AND FREE

Love has earth to which she clings
 With hills and circling arms about—
 Wall within wall to shut fear out.
 But Thought has need of no such things,
 For Thought has a pair of dauntless wings. 5
 On snow and sand and turf, I see
 Where Love has left a printed trace
 With straining in the world's embrace.
 And such is Love and glad to be.
 But Thought has shaken his ankles free. 10
 Thought cleaves the interstellar gloom
 And sits in Sirius' disc all night,
 Till day makes him retrace his flight,
 With smell of burning on every plume,
 Back past the sun to an earthly room. 15
 His gains in heaven are what they are.
 Yet some say Love by being thrall
 And simply staying possesses all

In several beauty that Thought fares far 20
 To find fused in another star.

BIRCHES

When I see birches bend to left and right
 Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
 I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
 But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay 5
 As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them
 Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
 After a rain. They click upon themselves
 As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
 As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel. 10
 Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
 Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust—
 Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
 You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
 They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
 And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
 So low for long, they never right themselves:
 You may see their trunks arching in the woods
 Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
 Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair 20
 Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
 But I was going to say when Truth broke in
 With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,
 I should prefer to have some boy bend them
 As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
 Some boy too far from town to learn baseball, 25
 Whose only play was what he found himself,
 Summer or winter, and could play alone.

One by one he subdued his father's trees
 By riding them down over and over again
 Until he took the stiffness out of them, 30
 And not one but hung limp, not one was left
 For him to conquer. He learned all there was
 To learn about not launching out too soon
 And so not carrying the tree away
 Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise 35
 To the top branches, climbing carefully
 With the same pains you use to fill a cup
 Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
 Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
 Kicking his way down through the air to the ground. 40
 So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
 And so I dream of going back to be.
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood
 Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs 45
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
 From a twig's having lashed across it open.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.
 May no fate willfully misunderstand me 50
 And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
 Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
 I don't know where it's likely to go better.
 I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk 55
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
 But dipped its top and set me down again.
 That would be good both going and coming back.
 One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

5
pea),

10
ed

imbs.

A TIME TO TALK

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed,
And shout from where I am, "What is it?"
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.

5

10

THE COW IN APPLE TIME

Something inspires the only cow of late
To make no more of a wall than an open gate,
And think no more of wall-builders than fools.
Her face is flecked with pomace and she drools
A cider syrup. Having tasted fruit,

5

She scorns a pasture withering to the root.
She runs from tree to tree where lie and sweeten
The windfalls spiked with stubble and worm-eaten.
She leaves them bitten when she has to fly.
She bellows on a knoll against the sky.
Her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry.

10

AN ENCOUNTER

Once on the kind of day called "weather breeder,"
When the heat slowly hazes and the sun
By its own power seems to be undone,
I was half boring through, half climbing through
A swamp of cedar. Choked with oil of cedar
And scurf of plants, and weary and overheated,
And sorry I ever left the road I knew,
I paused and rested on a sort of hook
That had me by the coat as good as seated,
And since there was no other way to look,
Looked up toward heaven, and there against the blue,
Stood over me a resurrected tree,
A tree that had been down and raised again—
A barkless specter. He had halted too,
As if for fear of treading upon me.
I saw the strange position of his hands—
Up at his shoulders, dragging yellow strands
Of wire with something in it from men to men.
"You here?" I said. "Where aren't you nowadays?
And what's the news you carry—if you know?
And tell me where you're off for—Montreal?
Me? I'm not off for anywhere at all.
Sometimes I wander out of beaten ways
Half looking for the orchid Calypso."

5

10

15

20