ROBERT FROST
1874–1963

Although he identified himself with New England, Robert Frost was born in California and lived there until his father died, when Frost was eleven. The family then moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where he taught school. Frost graduated from high school in Lawrence in 1891, and in 1892 he married and married three years later. Occasional attendance at Dartmouth College and Harvard, and a variety of different jobs including an attempt to run a farm in New Hampshire, marked the next years. Frost moved to New York in 1912, taking his family, which included four children, to England. There he worked on his poetry and found a publisher for his first book, A Boy’s Will (1913). Extra Pound reviewed it favorably, excited (as he put it in a letter) by this "VUSEY Amur's talent." Pound recommended Frost’s poems to American editors and helped get his book published. North of Boston, published in 1914, North of Boston was widely praised by critics in America and England and when it appeared the favorable reception persuaded Frost to return home. He bought another farm in New Hampshire and prospered financially through sales of his books and papers, along with teaching and lecturing at various colleges. The success he enjoyed for the rest of his life, however, came too late to cancel the bitterness left by his earlier struggles. Moreover, he endured personal tragedy: a son committed suicide, and a daughter had a complete mental collapse.

The clarity of Frost's diction, the colloquial rhythms, the simplicity of his images, and above all the folkly speaker — these are intended to make the poems look natural, unplanned. In the context of the modernist movement, however, they can be seen as a thoughtful attempt to link modernist forms to obscurity and difficulty. Although Frost’s rural folk and the modernist distance for eroticism, he was writing the kind of traditional, accessible poetry that modernists argued could no longer be written. In addition, he was the New England poet, he rejected modernist individualism and revitalized the tradition of New England regionalism. Besides accepting Frost's persona and his setting as typically American he accepted the powerful myth that New England was the heart of America.

Frost achieved a kind of dynamic in his poems by playing the rhythms of ordinary speech against formal patterns of line and verse and containing them within traditional forms. The interaction of colloquial diction with blank verse is especially central to his dramatic monologues. To Frost dynamic was the essence of poetry, material with which poets responded to Finn and chamber (what, adapting academic terminology, he called "decency") by forging something permanent. Poetry, he wrote, "is one step backward taken, a momentary stay against confusion." The 1920s Frost's poetic practice changed; very little later books including Mountains Interval (1916), North of Boston (1917), and West Running Brook (1923) conveyed the impression he had created in North of Boston. Most of his poems fall into a few years. Nature lyrics describing and commenting on a scene or event — like the "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Ditches," and "After Apple-Picking" — are probably the best known and the most popular. There are also dramatic monologues in blank verse about the griefs of country people, like "The Death of the Hired Man," and poems of commentary or generalization, like "The Gift Outright," which he read at John F. Kennedy's presidential inauguration in 1961. Frost could also be humorous or satiric, as in "Fire and Ice." In the nature lyrics, a comparison often emerges between the outer scene and the psyche, a comparison of Frost in one poem called "outer and inner weather."

Because he worked as poet with conscious strategy, and became he presented himself as a New Englander. Frost is often interpreted as an ideological descendant of the nineteenth-century American Transcendentalists. But he is less affirmative about the universe than they, for whose sake, looking at nature, discerned a benign creator. He saw "expression, nothing to express." Frost did share Emerson and Thoreau, however, the belief that everybody was a separate individuality that collective enterprises could do nothing but weaken the self. Politically conservative, therefore, he avoided movements of the left and the right precisely because they were movements, group understandings. In the 1930s when writers tended to be political activities, he was seen as one whose old-fashioned values were impeccable, even devout, in modern times. Frost deeply resented this criticism, and responded to it with a new horatian, didactic kind of poetry. In the last twenty years of his life, Frost increased his activities as a teacher and lecturer at Amherst, at Dartmouth, at Harvard, at the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in Vermont, and in poetry readings and talks around the country.

The text of the poems included here is that of The Poetry of Robert Frost (1969).

Mowing

I am going out to clean the pasture spring; I'll only stop to rake the leaves away (And at my age I have more time to sit And watch the water and catch the sun) Then clamber up and down the hillside

1913

There was never a sad beside the but one, And that was my long scythe whistling to the ground. What was it was whispering to the earth. Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun, Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound — And what it was that whispered and did not speak. It was no dream of the gift of idle hours, Or easy gold at the heart. Anthing more than the truth would have seemed too weak To the earnest low that laid the wide awake, Not without a slightly pointed of flowers (Pale orchids), and scared a bright green shade. The fact is the sweetest that love knows. My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

1913

1. Ginsberg in a nearby novel**
Mending Wall

Nothing there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after born and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on one stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill,
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are Recreationares of nearly bales
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
Where there is it we do not need the wall.
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him,
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down. I could say "Elves to him," but it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He say it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in the darkness as it seems to me.
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."
The Death of the Hired Man

Which showed how much good school had ever done him.
He wanted to go over that. But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay—

"I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He handles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself."

"He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different."

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Draggling the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning glory strings.
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves.
As if she played unheard some tenderness
That wrount on him beside her in the night.
"Warren," she said, "he has come home to die;
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home," he mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by borne.
Of course he's nothing to us, any more
Than was the bound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn upon the trail."

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in."

"I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve.
Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back
And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.
"Silas has better claim on us you think
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles

"But little."

"Anything? Mary, confess
He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me."

"Warren?"

"But did I? I just want to know."

"Of course he did. Want would you have him say?
Surely you wouldn't gudge the poor old man
Some humble way to save his self-respect.
He added, if you really care to know,
He meant to clear the upper pasture, too.
That sounds like something you have heard before?
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look
Two or three times—he made me feel so queer—
To see if he was talking in his sleep.
He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember—
The boy you had in buying four years since.
He's finished school, and teaching in his college.
Sillas declares you'll have to get him back.
He says they two will make a team for smother
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
The way he mixed that in with other things,
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft
On education—you know how they fought
All through July under the blazing sun,
Sillas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on."

"Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot."

"Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.
You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger!
Harold's young college-boy assurance piqued him.
After so many years he still keeps finding
Good arguments he sees he might have used.
I sympathize. I know just how it feels
To think of the right things to say too late.
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.
He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
He studied Latin, like the violin.
Because he liked it—that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong—
As the road winds would bring him to his door.
Silas has walked that far no doubt today.
Why doesn't he go there? His brother's rich,
A somebody—director in the bank."

"He never told us that."

"We know it though."

"I think his brother ought to help, of course."
I'll see to that if there is need. He ought of right
To take him in, and might be willing to—
He may be better than appearances,
But have some pity on Silas. Do you think
If he had any pride in claiming kin
Or anything he looked for from his brother,
He'd keep so still about him all this time?"

"I wonder what's between them."

Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anybody. Worthless though he is,
He won't be made ashamed to please his brother."

"I can't think Si ever hurt anyone."

"No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge."
You must in and see what you can do.
I made the bed up for him there tonight.
You'll be surprised at him—how much he's broken.
His working days are done. I'm sure of it."

"I'd not be in a hurry to say that."

"I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself."
But, Warren, please remember how it is;
He's come to help you ditch the meadow.
He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.
He may not speak of it, and then he may.
I'll sit and see if that small sizzling cloud
Will hit or miss the moon."

It hit the moon.
Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her.
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.
"Warren?" she questioned.

"Dead," was all he answered.

Home Burial)

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
So she took a doubtful step and then unfolded
To raise herself and look again. He spoke
Advancing toward her: "What is it you see
From up there always—for I want to know."
She turned and sank upon her slits at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull.
He said to gain time: "What is it you see,"
Mounting until she cowered under him.
"I will find out now—you must tell me, dear."
She, in her place, refused him any help
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see.
But at last he murmured, "Oh," and again, "Oh."

"What is it—what?" she said.

"Just that I see."

"You don't," she challenged. "Tell me what it is."

"The wonder is I didn't see at once."
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wanted to it—that's the reason.
The little graveyard where my people are!
So small the window frames the whole of it.
Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?
There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill. We haven't to mind those.

1. The title refers to the rural custom of burying members of the family on the home property.
But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child's mound——

"Don't, don't, don't," she cried.

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
"Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"

"Not you—Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.
I don't know rightly whether any man can."

"Any! Don't go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs."
He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
"There's something I should like to ask you, dear."

"You don't know how to ask it."

"Help me, then."

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

"My words are nearly always an offense.
I don't know how to speak of anything
So as to please you. But I might be taught
I should suppose. I can't say I see how.
A man must partly give up being a man
With womenfolk. We could have some arrangement
By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you're a mind to name.
Though I don't like such things twist those that love,
Two that don't love can't live together without them.
But two that do can't live together with them."

She moved the latch a little. "Don't—I don't.
Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there.
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.
I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it you brought up to think it the thing
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So incomprehensibly—in the face of love.
You'd think his memory might be satisfied——"

"There you go sneering now!

"I'm not, I'm not!

You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it's come to this.
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead."

"You can't because you don't know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dog
With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air.
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought. Who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it."

"I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed,
I'm cured. God, if I don't believe I'm cured."

"I can repeat the very words you were saying:
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best brickfence a man can build.'
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had it long when it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was it in the darkened parlor?
You couldn't care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave.
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!

"There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.
The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up?
Am! There's someone coming down the road!"

"You—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you——"
"If-you-do-doe!" She was opening the door wider.
"Where do you go to? First tell me that.
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will..."

1914

After Apple-Picking

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples. I am drowning off,
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking. I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spilt with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth,
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

The Wood-Pile

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
I paused and said, "I will turn back from here.
No, I will go on farther—and we shall see."
The hard snow held me, save where now and then
One foot went through. The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall slim trees
Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here
Or somewhere else. I was just far from home.
A small bird flew before me. He was careful
To put a tree between us when he lighted,
And say no word to tell me who he was
Who was so foolish as to think what he thought.
He thought that I was after him for a feather
The white one in his tail, like one who takes
Everything said as personal to himself.
One flight out sideways would have deceived him.
And then there was a pile of wood for which
I forgot him and let his little fear
Carry him off the way I might have gone,
Without so much as wishing him good-night.
He went behind it to make his last stand.
It was a cord of maple, cut and split
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.
And not another like it could I see.
No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.
And it was older since than this year's cutting.
Or even last year's or the year before.
The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.
What held it, though, on one side was a tree
Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
These latter about to fall. I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handywork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ar.
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where a bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grayer and more worn;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to day,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

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1916

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.

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.
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 his words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

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1916

Birches

When I see birches bend in the breeze,
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy has climbed the trees,
And is sitting in a nest at noon

As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them
loaded with ice after winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the sun cracks and creases their crown.

Soon the snow'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 innererce of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered branches 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 trunk arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw the hair
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 cow—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summertime or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he shushed his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to compare. 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 noise
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 swift
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
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
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having leaped 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
And half grant what I wish and much 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 flinging birch tips,
And climb black brooches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
"Out, Out—"

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran fight, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand,
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!"
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart
Little—less—nothing—and that ended it,
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

1. From Shakespeare's Measure (5.3.23-24): "Out, cut, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow.

Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire:
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf,
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
And miles to go before I sleep.
Departmental

An ant on the tablecloth,
Run into a dormant moth
Of many times his size.
He showed not the least surprise.
His business wasn't with such.
He gave it scarcely a touch,
And was off on his duty run.
Yet if he encountered one
Of the hive's tiny squad
Whose work is to find out God
And the nature of time and space,
He would put him onto the case.
Acts are a curious race.
One crossing with hurried tread
The body of one of their dead
Isn't given a moment's respite —
Seems not even impressed.
But he'd not report to any
With whom he crosses ant's name,
And they no doubt report
To the higher-up at court.
Then word goes forth in Formica,
"Death comes to Jerry McCrory,
Our selfless brave Jerry.
Will the special Janitor
Without office is it to bury
The dead of the community
Go bring him home to his people.
Lay him in state on a sepulchre.
Wrap him for show in a petal.
Embalm him with tew of silvery tcheller.
This is the word of your Queen."
And presently on the scene
Appears a solemn mortician,
And taking formal position
With feelings calmly subdued,
Seizes the dead by the middle,
And heaves him high in air,
Carries him out of there.
No one stands round to stare.
It is robbery else's affair.
It couldn't be called ungentle,
But how thoroughly depauperial.

Desert Places

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.
The woods around if they were it — if th'irs.
All animals are smothered in their hair
I am too absent-minded to count.
The loneliness inclines me unwares.
And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less —
A blanket whiteness of heighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.
They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars — an stars where no human race is.
I have it in me to much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

1936

Design

I found a dainty spider, fat and white,
On a white head-lily,3 holding up a moth
Like a white piece of tragic twin cloth —
Assorted characters of death and night
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of witches' broth —
A snow-drop spider, a flow'r like a froth,
And dead'ns wings carried like a paper kite.
What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent head-lily?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then stared the white moth finger to the night?
What but design of darkness to appall —
If design governs in a thing so small.

1922, 1930

1. Acid entitled by saw.
2. Truncate Turkish infirmary visitors.
3. Common wildflower whose blossom
Neither Out Far Nor In Deep
The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn their back on the land.
They look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass
A ship keeps raising its hull;
The wetter ground like glass
Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
But wherever the truth may be—
The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

Provide, Provide
The witch that came (the withered hag)
To wash the steps with pull and rag
Was once the beauty Abishag.

The picture pride of Hollywood.
Too many fall from great and good
For you to doubt the likelihood.

Die early and avoid the fate.
Or if predestined to die late,
Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own;
If need be occupy a throne,
Where nobody can call you crone.

Some have relied on what they knew,
Others on being simply true.
What worked for them might work for you.

No memory of having stared
Atones for later disregard
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down digested
With bountied friendship at your side
Than none at all. Provide, provide!

The Gift Outright
The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people. She was ours
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
But we were England's, still colonials,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by.
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves.

We were withholding from our land of living,
And withdrew with found salvation in surrender.
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced.
Such as she was, such as she would become.

Directive
Back out of all this now too much for us,
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,
There is a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm
And in a town that is no more a town.
The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you
Who only has at heart your getting lost,
May seem as if it should have been a quarry—
Great monolithic knees the former town
Long since gave up pretense of keeping covered.
And there's a story in a book about it;
Besides the wear of iron wagon wheels
The lodges show lines ruled southeast-northwest,
The chisel work of an enormous Glacier
That braced his feet against the Arctic Pole.
You must not mind a certain coolness from him
Still said to haunt this side of Panther Mountain.
Nor need you mind the serial ordeal
Of being watched from forty cellar holes

1. A beautiful maiden brought to comfort King David in his old age (1 Kings 1:2-4).
As if by eye pairs out of forty finks.  
As for the woods' excitement over you  
That sends light rattle ruses to their leaves,  
Charge that to unspart inexperience.  
Where were they all not twenty years ago?  
They think too much of having shaded out  A few old pecker-freted apple trees.  
Make yourself up a cheering song of how  Someone's road home from work this once was,  
Who may be just ahead of you on foot  Or cracking with a buggy load of grain,  
The height of the adventure is the height  Of country where two village cultures faded  Into each other. Both of them are lost.  
And if you're lost enough to find yourself  By now, pull in your ladder road behind you  And put a sign up COUNTRY to all but me.  
Then make yourself at home. The only field  Now left's no bigger than a harness galls.  
Five there's the children's house of make-believe,  Some shattered-dishes underneath a piece,  The playthings in the playhouse of the children.  
Weep for what little things could make them sad.  
Then for the house that is no more a house,  But only a bellfaced curlar hole,  Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.  
This was no playhouse but a house in earnest.  Your destination and your destination's  A brook that was the water of the house,  Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,  Too lofty and original to rage.  (We know the valley streams that when around  Will leave their eaters hang on barb and thorn.)  I have kept hidden in the instep arch  Of an old cedar at the waterside.  A broken drinking goblet like the Grail  Under a spell so the wrong in's can't find it,  So far off, as Mark says they mustn't.  (I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)  Here are your waters and your watering place.  Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.  

1409

The Figure a Poem Makes

Abstraction is an old story with the philosophers, but it has been, like a new toy in the hands of the artists of our day. Why can't we have any one quality of poetry we choose by itself? We can have in thought. Then it will go hard if we can't to practice. Our lives for it.

Granted no one but a humanitarian could have a poem a thing if it is only a sound. The sound is the gold in the ore. Then we will have the sound out alone and dispense with the inessential. We do still make the discovery that the object in writing poetry is to make all poems not sound as different as possible from each other, and the resources for that of vowels, consonants, punctuation, syntax, words, sentences, meter are not enough. We need the help of context—meaning—subject matter. That is the greatest help towards variety. All that can be done with words is soon told. So also with music, particularly in our language where there are virtually two but strict laibung and loose laicung. The ancients with many were still poor if they depended on meters for all this. It is painful to watch our young chymists straining at the point of omitting one short from a foot for relief from monotony. The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless. And we are back in poetry as merely one more art of having something to say, sound or unsound. Probably better if sound, because deeper and from wider experience.

Then there is this wildness where it is spoken. Granted again that it has an equal claim with sound to being a poem's better half. If it is a wild song, it is a poem. Our problem then is, as modern abstractionists, to make the wildness pure; to be wild with nothing to be wild about. We bring up as abstractionists, giving way to undirected associations and locking ourselves from one chance suggestion to another in all directions as of a lost afternoon in the life of a grasshopper. Thence above can steady us down. Just as the first mystery was how a poem could have a tune in such a straightness as meter, the second mystery is how a poem can have wildness and at the same time a subject that shall be fulfilled.

It should be the pleasure of a poem itself to tell how it can. The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulsive, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stage against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was presided from the first image of the original mood—and indeed from very the mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last. It finds its own name and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad—the happy blend of the drinking song.

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise, no wonder, no
surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows. Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing. The impressions must useful to my purpose seem always those I was unaware of and so made me more of at the time when taken, and the conclusion is come to that like gaiety we are always hurrying experience ahead of us to pave the future with against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it for somewhere. The line will have the more charm for not being mechanically straight. We enjoy the straight crookedness of a good walking stick. Modern instruments of precision are being used to make things crooked as by eye and hand in the old days.

I tell how there may be a better wildness of logic than of inconsistency. But the logic is backward, in retrospect, after the act. It must be more felt than seen ahead like prophecies. It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader. For it is to be there that must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relations, and everything but affinity. We prate of freedom. We call our schools free because we are not free to stay away from them till we are sixteen years of age. I have given up my democratic prejudices and now willingly set the lower classes free to be completely taken care of by the upper classes. Political freedom is nothing to me. I bestow it right and left. All I would keep for myself is the freedom of my material—of my condition of body and mind now and then to sum up andy from the vast chaos of all I have lived through.

Scholars and artists thrown together are often annoyed at the puzzle of where they differ. Both work from knowledge, but I suspect they differ most importantly in the way their knowledge is come by. Scholars get theirs with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavi- lery and as it happens in and out of books. They stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields. No acquisition is on assignment, or even self-assigned. Knowledge of the second kind is blind, and free ways of wit and art. A school boy may be defined as one who can tell you who he knows in the order in which he learned it. The artist must value himself as he snatches a thing from some previous order in time and space into a new order with not so much as a ligature clinging to it of the old place where it was organic.

More than once I should have lost my soul to radicalism if it had been the originality it was mistaken for by its young converts. Originality and initiative are what I ask for in my country. For that reason I have always held that the freshness of a poem run in the way I have described: from delight to wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the post with it. Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a petal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.