Theodore Roethke

All the small ochred menials and livestock discreetly in profile, every convenience
Laid on free so that they may survive in the manner to which they are accustomed,
Gracious in granite—this is the life—with their minds made up for ever and the black
Sarcophagus made up ready for the night, they can hide their heads under the gravedothes
And every day in the dark below the desert will be one of both independence and thanksgiving
So they never need worry again as to what may fall out of the sky
But whenever they want can have a Pharaoh's portion of turkey and pumpkin pie.

THEODORE ROETHKE
1908–1963

Theodore Roethke was a poet for whom nature took on the aspect of a vast psychic landscape. Some parts of it were projections of his feelings, some were his transcendences of personality. Roethke's authority for making nature a parable came from his love and intensive study of it. He liked to trace this interest to the fact that his grandfather, once Bismark's chief forester, had emigrated from Prussia in 1870 and then, with his sons, had started some greenhouses in Saginaw, Michigan. The greenhouse, Roethke wrote, "is...my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth." He always felt close to elemental processes and inanimate as well as animate objects: "I could say hello to things." He studies the lives on a leaf in "The Minimal," or in "A Field of Light" declares that he could see, suddenly, "the separateness of all things!"

The sense of participation in nature makes for some of his most extreme, and yet most convincing effects. "I lose and find myself in the long waters," he writes, or, changing elements, "I live in air; the long light is my home," a line from "Her Becoming" which suggests his affinity to Dylan Thomas. Participation is only a short step to transcendence: "I'm wet with another life," or, as he writes in "Snake," "I longed to be that thing, / The pure, sensual form. / And I may be, some time." Mutual possession does not seem a remote possibility in the context of these poems.

Roethke knew this quality in himself, and said in prose, "I have a genuine love of nature. ... I can sense the moods of nature almost instinctively. ... I am influenced too much, perhaps, by natural objects." He is not blinded by sentimental feelings about nature, however, and in some poems takes up less favorable aspects. "Beware Mother Mildew," he warns in "The Pit," and in "The Pure Fury," a poem which expresses that "serenity" which Stanley Kunitz found in Roethke's poems, he concedes, "I live near the abyss." He is less cullogistic about nature than D. H. Lawrence, at if its malign connotations were just as familiar to him as its benign ones.

Roethke was six feet two and weighed over two hundred pounds, but he moves in his verse with great delicacy. Though he was a tormented man, frantic for fame, prey to breakdowns and a victim of alcoholism, he presented himself in his verse as a saint. He had, as he insisted, "a driving sincerity,—that prime virtue of any creative worker. I write only what I believe to be the absolute truth,—even if I must

2. The sense, p. 4.
ruin the theme in so doing. "The sense of a fragile self in a swollen body is pervasive. It reflects a "struggle for personal identity." If only he could "dance with William Blake," he could possess that purity for which he longs and which nature, in certain aspects, appears to model. Nature can represent or, like poetry, expand consciousness.

Roethke was born on May 25, 1908, in Saginaw. He went to the University of Michigan and afterwards took some graduate courses at Harvard. Subsequently he taught at several colleges and universities, lending himself generously to his students and even, at one time, coaching tennis. His longest and last post was at the University of Washington, where his sporadic breakdowns were tolerated. When his first book, Open House, was published in 1941, Roethke won considerable attention, but he longed for more recognition and was humbly eager to make his verse even better. He wrote little, but with great care. His collected poems, still a slender output, appeared under the title Words for the Wind in 1959. By 1963 he was dead.

Sometimes Roethke is boisterous and funny—he was able to write good children's poems—but he is fundamentally serious and intent. He traced his lineage to Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Blake, Wordsworth, and Vaughan. In fact, he does belong with them in his visionary intertwining of his spiritual self with leaves, water, light, and lower creatures.

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E ROETHKE

1963

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"Long Live the Weeds"

Hopkins

Long live the weeds that overwhelm
My narrow vegetable realm!

1. The title is taken from the last line of Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Inversnaid" (p. 106).
Theodore Roethke

The bitter rock, the barren soil
That force the son of man to toil;
All things unholy, marred by curse,
The ugly of the universe.
The rough, the wicked, and the wild
That keep the spirit undefiled.
With these I match my little wit
And earn the right to stand or sit.
Hope, love, create, or drink and die:
These shape the creature that is I.

Cuttings

Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,
Their intricate stem-fur dries;
But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;
The small cells bulge;

One nub of growth
Nudges a sand-crumb loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrilous horn.

Cuttings

(later)

This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
Cut stems struggling to put down feet,
What saint strained so much,
Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
In my veins, in my bones I feel it,—
The small waters seeping upward,
The tight grains parting at last.
When sprouts break out,
Slippery as fish,
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.

My Papa’s Waltz

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

2. Of this poem Roethke said, “I think old Hardy looks down from heaven on this” (Selected Letters, p. 168).
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We romped until the pans
Slip from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then Waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Dolor

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,
Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper-weight,
All the misery of manilla folders and mucilage,
Desolation in immaculate public places,
Lonely reception room, lavatory, switchboard,
The unalterable pathos of basin and pitcher,
Ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma,
Endless duplication of lives and objects.
And I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,
Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica,
Sift, almost invisible, through long afternoons of tedium,
Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,
Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces.

The Minimal

I study the lives on a leaf: the little
Sleepers, numb nudgers in cold dimensions,
Beetles in caves, newts, stone-deaf fishes,
Lice tethered to long limp subterranean weeds,
Squirrels in bogs,
And bacterial creepers
Wriggling through wounds
Like elvers in ponds,
Their wan mouths kissing the warm sutures,
Cleaning and caressing,
Creeping and healing.

3. Sadness.
4. "I try to suggest the relation between the visible and invisible reality by a meeting of sound and imagery" (Selected Letters, p. 114).
5. Small elks.
6. Strands that tie the edges of a wound together.
Theodore Roethke

Four for Sir John Davies

1. The Dance

Is that dance slowing in the mind of man
That made him think the universe could hum?
The great wheel turns its axle when it can;
I need a place to sing, and dancing-room,
And I have made a promise to my ears
I’ll sing and whistle romping with the bears.

For they are all my friends: I saw one slide
Down a steep hillside on a cake of ice,—
Or was that in a book? I think with pride:
A caged bear rarely does the same thing twice
In the same way: O watch his body sway!—
This animal remembering to be gay.

I tried to fling my shadow at the moon,
The while my blood leaped with a wordless song,
Though dancing needs a master, I had none
To teach my toes to listen to my tongue.
But what I learned there, dancing all alone,
Was not the joyless motion of a stone.

I take this cadence from a man named Yeats,
I take it, and I give it back again:
For other tunes and other wanton beats
Have tossed my heart and fiddled through my brain.
Yes, I was dancing-mad, and how
That came to be the bears and Yeats would know.

2. The Partner

Between such animal and human heat
I find myself perplexed. What is desire?
The impulse to make someone else complete?
That woman would set sodden straw on fire.
Was I the servant of a sovereign wish,
Or ladle rattling in an empty dish?

We played a measure with commingled feet:
The lively dead had taught us to be fond.
Who can embrace the body of his fate?
Light altered light along the living ground.
She kissed me close, and then did something else.
My narrow beat as wildly as my pulse.

I’d say it to my horse: we live beyond
Our outer skin. Who’s whistling up my sleeve?

7. English poet (c. 1565–1609). In his long poem, Orpheus, which Roethke had been reading, the title implies that the universe moves in harmony, and Davies adds a further metaphor of the dance.
8. Yeats’s poem “Among School Children” (p. 167), which Roethke echoes in the second stanza, the perfection to which lovers, poets, mothers, and the paws all aspire is imagined in terms of a dance. “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance. / How can we know the dancer from the dance?”
Four for Sir John Davies

I see a heron prancing in his pond;
I know a dance the elephants believe.
The living all assemble! What's the cue?—
Do what the clumsy partner wants to do!

Things loll and loiter. Who condones the lost?
This joy outleaps the dog. Who cares? Who cares?
I gave her kisses back, and woke a ghost.
O what lewd music crept into our ears!
The body and the soul know how to play
In that dark world where gods have lost their way.

3. The Wraith

Incomprehensible gaiety and dread
Attended what we did. Behind, before,
Lay all the lonely pastures of the dead;
The spirit and the flesh cried out for more.
We two, together, on a darkening day
Took arms against our own obscurity.

Did each become the other in that play?
She laughed me out, and then she laughed me in;
In the deep middle of ourselves we lay;
When glory failed, we danced upon a pin.
The valley rocked beneath the granite hill;
Our souls looked forth, and the great day stood still.

There was a body, and it cast a spell,—
God pity those but wanton to the knees,—
The flesh can make the spirit visible;
We woke to find the moonlight on our toes.
In the rich weather of a dappled wood
We played with dark and light as children should.

What shape leaped forward at the sensual cry?—
Sea-beast or bird flung toward the ravaged shore?
Did space shake off an angel with a sigh?
We rose to meet the moon, and saw no more.
It was and was not she, a shape alone,
Impaled on light, and whirling slowly down.

4. The Vigil

Dante attained the purgatorial hill,
Trembled at hidden virtue without flaw,
Shook with a mighty power beyond his will,—
Did Beatrice deny what Dante saw?—
All lovers live by longing, and endure:
Summon a vision and declare it pure.

9. In the Purgatorio, Dante describes Purgatory as a mountain on which he encounters repentant sinners; having reached its top, he is met by Beatrice, his beloved, who is now one of the spirits of Purgatory and is his guide there. In this capacity she corrects many of Dante's false perceptions about the other world.
Though everything's astonishment at last,
Who leaps to heaven at a single bound?
The links were soft between us; still, we kissed;
We undid chaos to a curious sound:
The waves broke easy, cried to me in white;
Her look was morning in the dying light.

The visible obscures. But who knows when?
Things have their thought; they are the shards1 of me;
I thought that once, and thought comes round again;
Rupt, we leaned forth with what we could not see.
We danced to shining; mocked before the black
And shapeless night that made no answer back.

The world is for the living. Who are they?
We dared the dark to reach the white and warm.
She was the wind when wind was in my way;
Alive at noon, I perished in her form.
Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall:
The word outleaps the world, and light is all.

The Waking

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near,
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

1. Broken fragments.
Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartzz

Gone the three ancient ladies
Who creaked on the greenhouse ladders,
Reaching up white strings
To wind, to wind
The sweet-pea tendrils, the smilax,
Nasturtiums, the climbing
Roses, to straighten
Carnations, red
Chrysanthemums; the stiff
Stems, jointed like corn,
They tied and tucked,—
These nurses of nobody else.
Quicker than birds, they dipped
Up and sifted the dirt;
They sprinkled and shook;
They stood astride pipes,
Their skirts billowing out wide into tents,
Their hands twinkling with wet;
Like witches they flew along rows
Keeping creation at ease;
With a tendril for needle
They sewed up the air with a stem;
They teased out the seed that the cold kept asleep,—
All the coils, loops, and whorls.
They trellised the sun; they plotted for more than themselves.

I remember how they picked me up, a spindly kid,
Pinching and poking my thin ribs
Till I lay in their laps, laughing,
Weak as a whippet,
Now, when I'm alone and cold in my bed,
They still hover over me,
These ancient leathery crones,
With their bandannas stiffened with sweat,
And their thorn-bitten wrists,
And their snuff-laden breath blowing lightly over me in my first sleep.

I Knew a Woman

I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,
When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them;
Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:
The shapes a bright container can contain!
Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,
Or English poets who grew up on Greek
(I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek).

3. Roethke's father was a prominent florist in Saginaw, Michigan, and as a boy the poet played around the greenhouses. The employees included the three women of the title.
3. Small, young, or unimportant person (probably from "whippet," a small dog).
Theodore Roethke

How well her wishes went! She stroked my chin,
She taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and Stand;
She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin;
I nibbled meekly from her proffered hand;
She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,
Coming behind her for her pretty sake
(But what prodigious mowing we did make).

Love likes a gander, and adores a goose:
Her full lips pursed, the errant note to seize;
She played it quick, she played it light and loose;
My eyes, they dazzled at her flowing knees;
Her several parts could keep a pure repose,
Or one hip quiver with a mobile nose
(She moved in circles, and those circles moved).

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
I’m martyr to a motion not my own;
What’s freedom for? To know eternity.
I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.
But who would count eternity in days?
These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
(I measure time by how a body sways).

Wish for a Young Wife

My lizard, my lively writher,
May your limbs never wither,
May the eyes in your face
Survive the green ice
Of envy’s mean gaze;
May you live out your life
Without hate, without grief,
And your hair ever blaze,
In the sun, in the sun,
When I am undone,
When I am no one.

The Far Field

I

I dream of journeys repeatedly:
Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel,
Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula,
The road lined with snow-laden second growth,
A fine dry snow ticking the windshield,
Alternate snow and sleet, no on-coming traffic,
And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror.


5. Drain
The Far Field

II

At the field's end, in the corner missed by the mower,
Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden culvert,⁵
Haunt of the cat-bird, nesting-place of the field-mouse,
Not too far away from the ever-changing flower-dump,
Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken machinery,—
One learned of the eternal;
And in the shrunk'en face of a dead rat, eaten by rain and ground-beetles
(I found it lying among the rubble of an old coal bin)
And the tom-cat, caught near the pheasant-run,
Its entrails strewn over the half-grown flowers,
Blasted to death by the night watchman.

I suffered for birds, for young rabbits caught in the mower,
My grief was not excessive.
For to come upon warblers in early May
Was to forget time and death:
How they filled the oriole's elm, a twittering restless cloud, all one morn-
ing,
And I watched and watched till my eyes blurred from the bird shapes,—
Cape May, Blackburnian, Cerulean,—⁵
Moving, elusive as fish, fearless,
Hanging, bunched like young fruit, bending the end branches,
Still for a moment,
Then pitching away in half-flight,
Lighter than finches,
While the wrens bickered and sang in the half-green hedgerows,
And the flicker drummed from his dead tree in the chicken-yard.

—Or to lie naked in sand,
In the silted shallows of a slow river,
Fingering a shell,
Thinking:
Once I was something like this, mindless,
Or perhaps with another mind, less peculiar;
Or to sink down to the hips in a mossy quagmire;
Or, with skinny knees, to sit astride a wet log,
Believing:
I'll return again,
As a snake or a raucous bird,
Or, with luck, as a lion.

I learned not to fear infinity,
The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
The wheel turning away from itself,

⁵. Drain under a road. ⁶. Various kinds of warbler.
786  Theodore Roethke

The sprawl of the wave,
The on-coming water.

III

The river turns on itself,
The tree retreats into its own shadow.
I feel a weightless change, a moving forward
As of water quickening before a narrowing channel
When banks converge, and the wide river whitens:
Or when two rivers combine, the blue glacial torrent
And the yellowish-green from the mountainy upland,—
At first a swift rippling between rocks,
Then a long running over flat stones
Before descending to the alluvial plain, 7
To the clay banks, and the wild grape hanging from the elmtrees,
The slightly trembling water
Dropping a fine yellow silt where the sun stays;
And the crabs bask near the edge,
The weedy edge, alive with small snakes and bloodsuckers,— 70

I have come to a still, but not a deep center,
A point outside the glittering current;
My eyes stare at the bottom of a river,
At the irregular stones, iridescent sandgrains,
My mind moves in more than one place,
In a country half-land, half-water.

I am renewed by death, thought of my death,
The dry scent of a dying garden in September,
The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.
What I love is near at hand,
Always, in earth and air.

IV

The lost self changes,
Turning toward the sea,
A sea-shape turning around,—
An old man with his feet before the fire,
In robes of green, in garments of adieu.

A man faced with his own immensity
Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.
The murmur of the absolute, the why
Of being born fails on his naked ears.
His spirit moves like monumental wind
That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.
He is the end of things, the final man.

All finite things reveal infinitude:
The mountain with its singular bright shade
Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,
The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;

7. Soil deposited by flowing water, as in river deltas.
Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,
A scent beloved of bees;
Silence of water above a sunken tree:
The pure serene of memory in one man,—
A ripple widening from a single stone
Winding around the waters of the world.

In a Dark Time

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
I hear my echo in the echoing wood—
A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
I live between the heron and the wren.
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of soul
At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!
I know the purity of pure despair,
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.
That place among the rocks—is it a cave,
Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!
A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
And in broad day the midnight come again.
A man goes far to find out what he is—
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

8. Roethke has said that the title refers to a dark night of the soul.
9. "Deepening despair, with a hint of approaching death" (Roethke's note).
1. "A derivative epithet at this point in the poem" (Roethke's note).
2. The heron is solitary, the wren sociable, among other differences.
3. The imperfect earth, though Roethke suggests that "tearing" (in contrast to the earlier "tearless") implies pity on the part of nature's forces.

STEPHEN SPENDER
1909–1995

Some poets present themselves effortlessly as assured masters of their medium and of their world. A poet of this kind is W. H. Auden, with whom Stephen Spender, by virtue of their long association, is inevitably compared. Spender, on the contrary, has nothing of the autocrat about him, and when Auden offers conclusiveness, as if by nature, Spender tends towards incertitude or even bewilderment. He is less the