

Frost Selection for Alumni College

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.

'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 light, 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 him 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.

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 it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
 And having perhaps the better claim,
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
 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.
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
 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.

MENDING WALL

Something 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 them and made repair
 Where they have left not one stone on a 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 loaves and some so nearly balls
 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 out-door game,
 One on a side. It comes to little more:
 There where it is 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 said 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 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.'

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 drowsing 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 spiked 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.

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
 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.
 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
 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,
 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,

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
 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.
 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 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
 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
 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.

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.

RELUCTANCE

Out through the fields and the woods
 And over the walls I have wended;
 I have climbed the hills of view
 And looked at the world, and descended;
 I have come by the highway home,
 And lo, it is ended.

The leaves are all dead on the ground,
 Save those that the oak is keeping
 To ravel them one by one
 And let them go scraping and creeping
 Out over the crusted snow,
 When others are sleeping.

And the dead leaves lie huddled and still,
 No longer blown hither and thither;
 The last lone aster is gone;
 The flowers of the witch hazel wither;
 The heart is still aching to seek,
 But the feet question 'Whither?'

Ah, when to the heart of man
 Was it ever less than a treason
 To go with the drift of things,
 To yield with a grace to reason,
 And bow and accept the end
 Of a love or a season?

MOWING

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
 And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.

What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
 Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
 Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—
 And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
 It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
 Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
 Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
 To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
 Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
 (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
 The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
 My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

THE SILKEN TENT

She is as in a field a silken tent
 At midday when a sunny summer breeze
 Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
 So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
 And its supporting central cedar pole,
 That is its pinnacle to heavenward
 And signifies the sureness of the soul,
 Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
 But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
 By countless silken ties of love and thought
 To everything on earth the compass round,
 And only by one's going slightly taut
 In the capriciousness of summer air
 Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

PUTTING IN THE SEED

You come to fetch me from my work to-night
 When supper's on the table, and we'll see
 If I can leave off burying the white
 Soft petals fallen from the apple tree.
 (Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,
 Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea;)

And go along with you ere you lose sight
 Of what you came for and become like me,
 Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.
 How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
 On through the watching for that early birth
 When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,

The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

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 undeceived 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 sure than this year's cutting,
Or even last year's or the year's 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 handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
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.

STORM FEAR

When the wind works against us in the dark,
 And pelts the snow
 The lower chamber window on the east,
 And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
 The beast,
 'Come out! Come out!'—
 It costs no inward struggle not to go,
 Ah, no!
 I count our strength,
 Two and a child,
 Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
 How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,—
 How drifts are piled,
 Dooryard and road ungraded,
 Till even the comforting barn grows far away
 And my heart owns a doubt
 Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
 And save ourselves unaided.

TWO TRAMPS IN MUD-TIME

Out of the mud two strangers came
 And caught me splitting wood in the yard,
 And one of them put me off my aim
 By hailing cheerily "Hit them hard!"
 I knew pretty well why he had dropped behind
 And let the other go on a way.
 I knew pretty well what he had in mind:
 He wanted to take my job for pay.

Good blocks of oak it was I split,
 As large around as the chopping block;
 And every piece I squarely hit
 Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.
 The blows that a life of self-control
 Spares to strike for the common good,

That day, giving a loose my soul,
I spent on the unimportant wood.

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.
You know how it is with an April day
When the sun is out and the wind is still,
You're one month on in the middle of May.
But if you so much as dare to speak,
A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,
A wind comes off a frozen peak,
And you're two months back in the middle of March.

A bluebird comes tenderly up to alight
And turns to the wind to unruffle a plume,
His song so pitched as not to excite
A single flower as yet to bloom.
It is snowing a flake; and he half knew
Winter was only playing possum.
Except in color he isn't blue,
But he wouldn't advise a thing to blossom.

The water for which we may have to look
In summertime with a witching wand,
In every wheelrut's now a brook,
In every print of a hoof a pond.
Be glad of water, but don't forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath
That will steal forth after the sun is set
And show on the water its crystal teeth.

The time when most I loved my task
The two must make me love it more
By coming with what they came to ask.
You'd think I never had felt before
The weight of an ax-head poised aloft,
The grip of earth on outspread feet,
The life of muscles rocking soft
And smooth and moist in vernal heat.

Out of the wood two hulking tramps
(From sleeping God knows where last night,
But not long since in the lumber camps).
They thought all chopping was theirs of right.
Men of the woods and lumberjacks,
They judged me by their appropriate tool.

Except as a fellow handled an ax
They had no way of knowing a fool.

Nothing on either side was said.
They knew they had but to stay their stay
And all their logic would fill my head:
As that I had no right to play
With what was another man's work for gain.
My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain
Theirs was the better right--agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

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
That shouted in the mist a month ago,
Like ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow)—
Or flourished and come up in jewel-weed,
Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent
Even against the way its waters went.
Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
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 elsewhere in song.
We love the things we love for what they are.

DESIGN

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
 On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
 Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth--
 Assorted characters of death and blight
 Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
 Like the ingredients of a witches' broth--
 A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
 And dead wings carried like a paper kite.
 What had that flower to do with being white,
 The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
 What brought the kindred spider to that height,
 Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
 What but design of darkness to appall?--
 If design govern in a thing so small.

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 it have it – it is theirs.
 All animals are smothered in their lairs.
 I am too absent-spirited to count;
 The loneliness includes me unawares.
 And lonely as it is, that loneliness
 Will be more lonely ere it will be less –
 A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
 With no expression, nothing to express.
 They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
 Between stars – on stars where no human race is.
 I have it in me so much nearer home
 To scare myself with my own desert places.

PROVIDE, PROVIDE

The witch that came (the withered hag)
 To wash the steps with pail 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 simply being true.
What worked for them might work for you.

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

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

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 ledges 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
 As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins.
 As for the woods' excitement over you
 That sends light rustle rushes to their leaves,
 Charge that to upstart inexperience.
 Where were they all not twenty years ago?
 They think too much of having shaded out
 A few old pecker-fretted 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 creaking 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 CLOSED to all but me.
 Then make yourself at home. The only field
 Now left's no bigger than a harness gall.
 First there's the children's house of make-believe,
 Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
 The playthings in the playhouse of the children.
 Weep for what little things could make them glad.
 Then for the house that is no more a house,
 But only a belilaced cellar hole,
 Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.
 This was no playhouse but a house in earnest.
 Your destination and your destiny'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 aroused
 Will leave their tatters hung 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 ones can't find it,
 So can't get saved, as Saint 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.