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‘I’LL MAKE A BROKEN MUSIC OR I’LL DIE’: THEODORE ROETHKE AND ‘THE LONG JOURNEY OUT OF THE SELF’.

Writing about Roethke, makes me look back across ten years of my life, to those grim months when I first discovered his energising verse. I think of all those bleak alcoves that were so much a part of my undergraduate years; cold, stony spaces where vision and sight wrestled with one-another incessantly; dark, companionable corners, where late-adolescent musings upon the joys of love and sex, changed places unpredictably with brief visions of spiritual release. Those were days charged with a deep sense of betrayal; a sense that I had betrayed - and been betrayed by – the higher cause of music and love; a sense of having been cheated by my own imagination. Roethke’s poems showed up, in the wake of a long fascination with Hart Crane. It was around the same time that Yeats and Wallace Stevens became suddenly important to me, amongst other discoveries like Cummings, Williams, Sandburg and Plath ; though the latter four poets seem to have affected me less over the years. It is Yeats, Roethke and Stevens that I feel compelled to return to, every so many months; and I suspect, that this is largely because my view of things has been, since childhood , primarily that of a Hindustani musician; because whenever I read poetry I tend – for good or ill – to instinctively search for the kind of experience that Hindustani music, at its best, offers me. This is tricky ground to tread upon, of course. There is the danger of negating everything that does not offer me the kind of experience I immediately seek ; and the danger, moreover, of assuming that there *is* something like a definable ‘Hindustani’ Aesthetic, with which my personal vision of things co-incides. But be that as it may, the fact remains that Roethke, Stevens and Yeats collectively appeal to a certain – and very important - aspect of my sensibility; an aspect that many poets – recognizably brilliant though they may be – leave largely untouched. One reason why I decided to make this presentation is simply because I am terribly curious about that aspect of my own sensibility. I want to know why certain poems written in the English language strike straight there while others don’t. I begin with the first Roethke poem I remember reading. It is the first in a sequence of four poems entitled ‘Four For Sir John Davies’:

Reading -

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 dance 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 leapt with a wordless song.
Though dancing needs a master, I had none
To teach my toes to listen to my tongue.
But what I learnt 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

At twenty, that poem was an important discovery, a reflection, not only of what I was going through but of the way I longed to feel. It was a year in which I underwent my first major loss of faith in love and music as a way of life. Earlier, it had been clear to me that both involved suffering; but there was also a sense that this suffering lay at the heart of any possible meaning to one's earthly existence. But suddenly, in my twentieth year, music and love of any sort had come to seem like a huge lie I had best stop believing in. The notes didn't turn in my head any more, the beats didn't move, as they had since I was a child. My dejection followed me everywhere I went; but here, singing to me from an open page, was a voice that not only captured my sense of loss, but knew how to leap boldly from the most abject dejection into a superbly controlled fit of self-celebration. I felt that the page was looking up at me with eyes that had learnt to observe chaos steadily; and to leap passionately out of the chaos they were looking at, till they became aware of a deeper continuum in things. In asking if 'That dance' were 'slowing in the mind of man/ that made him think the universe could hum?' Roethke had asked a question I had been asking for months. That dance had certainly been slowing down in my own mind and some sort of radical change was necessary if it wasn't to stop altogether; a flight from the city perhaps, a more reclusive existence, the acquisition of a 'dancing-room'I longed for a sort of self-assurance that seemed possible only in solitude and hoped, before I died, to be able to say along with Roethke, that 'What I learnt there , dancing all alone / was not the joyless motion of a stone.' I thought of all those promises I had made to my ears that were as yet unfulfilled; and it was re-assuring to hear from Roethke, that cyclicity remained something to celebrate – if only in brief, unsustainable moments of vision – to hear that, 'The great wheel turns its axle when it can' . I was also touched by the connection he makes with Yeats. His need to connect

with an earlier poet, to place himself in an ongoing tradition, rather than see himself as an isolated talent, was important to me. I believe personally, that Roethke, at his best, - though he knows that a 'broken music' is preferable to no music - is a poet of continuity; a poet who needs to feel the beat of an ancient, wholesome music pulsing through his verse whenever he is confronted by the immediate moment; a poet, moreover, who refuses to mould himself to the fashions of his time, preferring, by and large, to accommodate his bizarre individualism within a very traditional lyrical structure.

I now move to part 4 of the same sequence, which embraces the poet's vision of a shared and at least seemingly less solipsistic sort of ecstasy.

Reading-

THE VIGIL

Dante attained the purgatorial hill,
Trembled at hidden virtue without a 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.

Though everything's astonishment at last,
Who leaps to heaven in 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 shards of me;
I thought that once, and the thought comes round again:
Rapt, 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.

I remember feeling, when I first started reading Roethke, that I had suddenly made contact with an overpowering lyrical personality; one who seemed dangerously close to me and who could take over my life, any time, if I let him. I can see now, why the 'I' of

his poems then seemed so much a reflection of myself. We were just worried and happy about similar things, trying to go about things in a similar way, often asking the same questions; though, of course, his way of asking those questions was greatly more adept than mine, his handling of symbolism far more mature. They were questions that rose from the constant war between matter and energy, self and soul; and I have often felt like asking myself those questions in his words. What gets me is the tension between thought and tone; the philosophical question or proposition, hurled with an intensity of feeling, clearly defined by rhythm and cadence, the sudden alternation and occasional togetherness of the sensual and the cerebral:

‘Was I the servant of a sovereign wish
Or a ladle rattling in an empty dish?’

‘What’s madness but nobility of soul/ At odds with circumstance?’

These are questions I love to throw at the universe every now and then, not so much because I hope to be answered, or even because I think this is a particularly ‘useful’ way to ask them, but because of the urgent tone in which those questions have been asked and the rhythmic precision with which they have been framed.

It is strange how, over the years, the personality that emerges from Roethke’s poems has come to haunt me less; whereas the musical forms which his poems assume, continue to affect me deeply. I guess his taut rhythms and strongly self-contained, end-stopped lines had been playing upon me surreptitiously back then; though I was less acutely aware of the effects that certain tonal and rhythmic formulations can have upon the reader’s mind. I am less preoccupied by Roethke’s personality now, though his music continues to play a significant role in my life. This has a great deal to do, I think, with my own growth as a reader. It means that I had been seduced by Roethke’s music before I knew it, though I thought at the time, that it was the person singing to me that I was drawn towards, rather than the *way* he sang. That ‘person’ played a part in many choices I made at the time. A few months after reading ‘Four for Sir John Davies’ I found myself leaving Bombay to stay in a little settlement outside Poona, with few companions but a shelf of books, a small, portable Bavarian harp and a huge mosquito net. I had found ‘a place to sing, and dancing room’ and ‘though dancing needs master I had none/ to teach my toes to listen to my tongue.’ Two years later, I found myself on a train to Calcutta - where I was to audition before one of the finest sarod – players in the country. I remember opening Roethke’s collected works and stumbling upon the following verse:

Reading –

IN EVENING AIR

A dark theme keeps me here,
Though summer blazes in the vireo’s eye.
Who would be half possessed
By his own nakedness?

Waking's my care –
I'll make a broken music, or I'll die.

The night before the audition I discovered yet another faith-booster; a poem that reaches out for faith in music, from the worst depths of despair:

Reading –

THE DYING MAN

1. His Words

I heard a dying man
Say to his gathered kin,
“My soul's hung out to dry,
Like a fresh-salted skin;
I doubt I'll use it again.”

“What's done is yet to come;
The flesh deserts the bone,
But a kiss widens the rose;
I know as the dying know
Eternity is Now.”

“A man sees, as he dies,
Death's possibilities;
My heart sways with the world.
I am that final thing,
A man learning to sing.”

That last couplet was an extremely strong one to have at the back of my head while singing to Sharan Rani. Roethke's personality was a source of strength; but I wonder now, in retrospect, if that strength came more from the sheer brevity and directness of the lines, or from the comforting but hugely debatable notion that some-one, somewhere in the world had gone through what I was going through. I prefer to believe, now – though this was not the case then – that the musicality of those lines has wielded greater power over me than the personality it is so closely bound up with. Either way, it was relieving, after the audition was over, to comfort myself with the following poem; one that takes a comic look at the impulse to sing, and at the sense of futility that often goes hand-in-hand with that impulse.

Reading –

THE SERPENT.

There was a Serpent who had to sing.
There was. There was.
He simply gave up Serpentine.
Because. Because.

He didn't like his Kind of Life;
He couldn't find a proper Wife;
He was a Serpent with a Soul;
He got no Pleasure down his Hole.
And so, of course, he had to Sing,
And sing he did, like Anything!
The birds they were, they were Astounded;
And various Measures Propounded
To stop the Serpent's Awful Racket:
They bought a Drum. He wouldn't Whack it.
They sent, - you always send, - to Cuba
And got a Most Commodious Tuba;
They got a Horn, they got a Flute,
But Nothing would Suit.
He said, "Look, Birds, all this is futile:
I do *not* like to bang or tootle."
And then he cut loose with a Horrible Note
That practically split the Top of his Throat.
"You see," he said, with a Serpent's Leer,
I'm serious about my Singing Career!"
And the Woods Resounded with many a Shriek
As the Birds flew off to the End of next Week.

These last two poems differ from the others I have read aloud so far, because the 'I' of the earlier poems is replaced in these poems by fictional characters; In 'The dying Man' Roethke claims to be reporting words he has heard some-one else speak. In 'The serpent' he is clearly putting words into the mouth of a character of his own confabulation. This is not to suggest that the speaker of his first-persona poems is *not* wearing a mask. The 'I' of those poems is adept at brisk alternations between the act of self-effacement and that of self-display. There are times, however, as in the last two poems, when Roethke needs to make it clear to us that he *is* wearing a mask. This is one of the many stances he adopts while coming to terms with the lyrical side of his own personality. It is not Roethke the man, as such, but Roethke the singer that emerges through the voice of the

serpent and that of the dying man. Both characters are charged with the impulse to sing; beings determined to follow that impulse, irrespective of other people's perceptions of them and of the perils into which that impulse might lead them. Had I been asked to say in one line what Roethke's work was about to me, I would probably say that it was about the tension between song and personality. If I had begun to feel long back, that Roethke's personality was something I needed to outgrow, Roethke himself seems to have been feeling this throughout his career. His verse seems fired by the urge to outleap personality into 'pure' song; and yet his personality is all over the song he makes. This is a tension that gets reflected in his attitudes to poetic form, in his choice, on the one hand of the oddest turns of phrase and thought and his delight, on the other, in the most traditional of rhythmic patterns. I like to believe – and it is purely a personal preference – that this urge to out-leap personality is something all the great bards of the world have shared since ancient times, and that the oddness of Roethke's verse is *him*. This, I suspect has a great deal to do with my personal understanding of the aesthetics of Hindustani music, with the need, in particular, to accommodate the intensest individualism, within the mould of formal assumptions that are established and commonly shared. I think it likely that Roethke – for good or ill - would have felt and understood that need more than most of his contemporaries would have.

Roethke's most stunning stance is that of the visionary-seeker who speaks in the first person. But that is by no means the only strategy he employs. He is happy to play comedian, playschool-entertainer and drunkard, all of which he enacts with admirable control and detachment. Self-projection, however, remains a very important concern, except on very rare occasions, when he assumes the role of a detached observer, a person whose speech is focused solely on what he sees before him. We see this side of him in the following poem, which is one of the few poems in his work that lacks the pronoun 'I'; and which seems to be about a more 'real' animal than the last poem was.

Reading – The heron

The heron stands in water where the swamp
Has deepened to the blackness of the pool,
Or balances with one leg on a hump
Of mush grass heaped above a musk-rat hole

He walks the shallow with an antic grace.
The great feet break the ridges of the sand,
The long eye notes the minnow's hiding place.
His beak is quicker than a human hand.

He jerks a frog across his bony lip,
Then points his heavy bill above the wood.
The wide wings flap but once to lift him up.
A single ripple starts from where he stood.

I think that last line is simply wonderful. A ripple, is for me at least, something necessarily plural in nature; the existence of one, must imply that of another that is a continuation of it; and yet we are told that 'A *single* ripple starts from where he stood' What *is* a single ripple? I confess I really don't know. What I do know is that the adjective chosen – itself a very common one - rescues the most commonplace of visual images from utter desulturiness; and that Roethke's is an eye that seeks a continuum in nature and a oneness between things; a oneness, perhaps that there is often no empirical evidence for, and which may only be experienced through a very delicate simultaneity of sight, vision and faith. It is not an easy thing to have an eye so strongly possessed by the desire to see. Terrible things must be endured, Roethke tells us, in one of his most anthologized poems, in order to fulfil that longing:

Reading –

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 amongst 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 light,
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.

The search for ‘A steady storm of correspondences’ is basic to Roethke’s music. It is a search for a more wholesome vision of the universe and of his own position inside it, for moments when seemingly disparate entities come to share a common energy, a single momentum. It is a music that is constantly moving towards such moments of release, though often enough those moments are not experienced, and his lines grow heavy with a sense of despair and absence. His verses are often about the visionary longing itself, about the desire to perceive rather than what has been seen. It is this longing for a more continuous view of things that establishes, in his verse, a steady rapport between sound and silence, stillness and motion; and between the realm of objects and that of the imagination. He tries very hard to perceive these seemingly opposite states as aspects of one-another, as part of a single, praiseworthy flow of experience, though polarities tend to overtake him at the end of each line. ‘Mid-country blow’, an old favorite of mine, is a poem in which we find him juxtaposing a sense of emotional paralysis against the joy of entering a motion greater than his own – in this case that of the wind;

Reading –

MID COUNTRY BLOW

All night and all day the wind roared in the trees,
Until I could think there were waves rolling high as my bedroom floor;
When I stood at the window, an elm bough swept to my knees;
The blue spruce lashed like a surf at the door.

The second dawn I would not have believed:
The oak stood with each leaf stiff as a bell.
When I looked at the altered scene, my eye was undeceived,
But my ear still kept the sound of the sea like a shell.

I have come to see Roethke, over the years, as a maker of three distinct types of music, and I would like to conclude this presentation with a discussion of the similarities and differences between these types.

The first of these types – probably the kind of music by which he is most widely known – is characterized by a very taut rhythmic structure, by strong, meticulously controlled, end-stopped lines, and a distinctly traditional stanzaic pattern. While he is fond of using off-rhymes, when he is making this sort of music, Roethke only very rarely makes use of enjambment. The self-containment and self-consistency of each line seems deeply important to him, the need to make each line a complete and possibly quotable unit of sound and sense. There are many reasons why a poet might need to impose such restrictions upon his verbal imagination. The need for a traditional form might simply arise from a sense that one’s creative energies are getting dissipated unproductively in all directions, a symmetrical structure might help hold them in place. But I think, in Roethke’s case, there is more to it than this. There is actually a delight in participating in an ancient set of musical assumptions; in making a happy adjustment between the demands of his own imagination and personality, and those of an ancient, ongoing music

that is neither his own, nor anybody else's. I think again of the poem with which I began this essay, of the following lines, in particular:

'I think with pride
A caged bear never does the same thing twice
In the same way; O watch his body sway:
This animal remembering to be gay.'

The equation Roethke strikes between himself and a caged bear is revealing. The sensual side of Roethke's personality, the beast within him, so to speak, seems to need the 'cage' of a traditional form in order to dance; the four walls and closed door of a 'dancing-room'. It is as if the poet needs the visible boundaries of a finite space in order to heighten his own awareness of infinite possibility. There are times when the cage itself becomes a cause for celebration; when it ceases to be a cage at all, but a source of strength and faith in something vastly greater than the poet's personality; though the poet's personality is palpably present in his utterances, acknowledging and rejoicing in the great power that a traditional musical pattern wields over him. We see this triumphant merging of personality and traditional form, in 'The Waking', a poem which puts to a highly individualistic use, a form as prosodically restricting as the villanelle.

Reading -

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 the winding stair:
I wake to sleep and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has yet 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.

Like many reader's of Roethke's verse, I find the alternation of those chorus-lines utterly haunting. They are charged uncompromisingly by the impulse to move, an impulse at once ancient and immediate; and I am happy to find the repetitive structure of the poem relieved miraculously by the most unpredictable utterances., the immediate moment bursting forth , yet contained between more general statements about the nature of the poet's existence. I love to shift the stress in the chorus lines for effect, and I think I do it differently depending on the particular mood I am in, whether I want to say-

'I learn by going where I *have* to go'
'I learn by *going* where I have to go'
'I learn by going *where* I have to go'
or
'I learn by going where I have to *go*'

and so on and so forth. Repetitive devices in verse, all too often, culminate in a banal marching of syllables; but here the syllables continue to dance, in spite of – or perhaps because of – the huge restrictions of metre and stanzaic pattern that have been imposed upon them. The next poem is one in which the poet takes unusual liberties with regular stanzaic form, and uses enjambment with great care. I am stirred by the simultaneous presence of a raw sexuality and a sense of holy dread, a feeling that love and sex are a means of communing with the spirit realm;

Reading – 'The Sensualists'

"There is no place to turn," she said,
"You have pinned me so close:
My hair's all tangled on your head,
My back is just one bruise;
I feel we're breathing with the dead;
O angel, let me loose!"

And she was right, for there beside
The gin and cigarettes,
A woman stood, pure as a bride,
Affrighted from her wits,
And breathing hard, as that man rode
Between those lovely tits

"My shoulder's bitten from your teeth;
What's that peculiar smell?
No matter which one is beneath,
Each is an animal," –

The ghostly figure sucked its breath,
And shuddered toward the wall;
Wrapped in the tattered robe of death,
It tiptoed down the hall.

“The bed itself begins to quake,
I hate this sensual pen;
My neck, if not my heart, will break
If we do this again” –
Then each fell back, limp as a sack,
Into the world of men.

If Roethke is a master of the formal poem, he is also the maker of a bizarrely discontinuous ‘Broken Music’. A large portion of his work tries hard to negate the formal principles upon which the rest of it is based. These are poems which come across as isolated fragments, long rambling passages of writing that involve huge leaps in association - or, which I think more likely – the wilful dissociation of one line from another. Apart from the obvious problem as to what ‘sense’ these poems make, there is also a sharp discontinuity in the way they sound, a negligence towards tonal structure, cadence and regular rhythm. Roethke, seems in these poems, to be pushing the ‘each line for itself’- principle to the edge. I am not sure, but I think it was Helen Vendler who called these the ‘mad’ poems of Theodore Roethke and made out a case for them, claiming that they were the truest and most direct expression of Roethke’s personality, unlike the ‘imitation-Yeats’ poems. I still have to check up on what exactly she said. But things like this continue to be said about poetry at a popular level, hailing the stream-of-consciousness way of writing over every other, without accounting for the conscious control that good writing of that sort involves. I personally find the tension between the two ‘Roethke-s’ fascinating. There seems to be a deep conflict between the poet who attempts to accommodate chaos within the most ordered of forms and the one who puts chaos on display in its essential rawness. It is true that lines from his most chaotic verse continue to haunt me, and to seize me unawares, but I think that poetry needs to be, for me, a more integrated and integrating experience. Look at the following passages of writing:

Reading- ‘O thou opening o’

I’ll make it; but it may take me.
The rat’s my phase.
My left side’s tender.
Read me the stream

Dazzle me, dizzy aphorist.
Fling me a precept.
I’m a draft sleeping by a stick;
I’m lost in what I have.

The Depth calls out to the Height
- Neither knows it.
Then close to the ground
-Only stay out of the Wind.

Thrum –thrum, who can be equal to ease?
I've seen my father's face before
Deep in the belly of a thing to be.
The devil isn't dead; he's just away.

Where's Ann Where's Lou? Where's Jock-with-the-wind?
Forgive me a minute, nymph.
I'll change the image , and my shoes.
A true mole wanders like a worm.

There are times when he preserves the formal decorum of the ballad only to talk complete nonsense. I am quite fond, I must admit, of some of these nonsensical utterances but I think they work for me because of the tension between the rhythmic precision and the relative meaninglessness of what is being said:

Reading – 'I need I need'

'I wish I was a pifflebob
I wish I was a funny
I wish I had ten thousand hats
And made a lot of money.'

I often enjoy saying things like this to myself, when I am simply tired of being whatever I am, wishing I were (N.B. Roethke uses 'was') something else - a pifflebob, for instance, if at all a pifflebob is anything but an enticing tri-syllabic noun.

The third kind of music is one that seems to be much more orderly than the second, and more self-consciously wrought; though it is based on formal principles quite disparate from the first. It is a reposeful, expansive and freer-flowing music, that often begins with a deep, almost meditative brooding and develops slowly into the gentlest of epiphanies. It is a sort of music that requires Roethke to abandon his own virtuosity with tight rhythmic formulations, rhyme, and end-stopped lines, replacing them with uneven line-lengths and carefully sustained clausal patterns. What I find amazing is the way his sense of cadence persists in the absence of a stanzaic pattern; and I believe he achieves, in these poems a more sustained unity of tone and a deeper penetration of theme, than he is able to in his shorter lyrics. Roethke puts aside, in these poems, his obsession with febrile effects, hoping to find in language, a more serene continuum. It is a music I found instantly alluring but which then took me years to get into. When I first read poems like 'Meditations of an old woman' or 'Meditation at Oyster River' I remember feeling

simultaneously allured and depressed by them. It was as if a vast free space lay spread out before me, which I could not enter because of my own need for heightened musical sensation, for a more overtly taut lyricism; a music, which for years, I was afraid of entering, but which was deeply soothing when I finally began to get there. 'Journey to the Interior', a poem which describes a journey of the spirit, while staying largely faithful to the physical reality of a drive through the country – begins with the lines; 'In the long journey out of the self there are many detours'. Over the years, the tension between the title and the first line of the poem has become increasingly important to me. There is a sense that 'the journey to the interior' (which ironically, is a journey not away from but towards the sea) is 'the long journey out of the self', a return to the admittedly clichéd but endlessly rewarding notion that 'the journey in is the journey out'. I will now read part 1 and 3 of the poem.

Reading-

JOURNEY TO THE INTERIOR

1

In the long journey out of the self ,
There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places
Where the shale slides dangerously
And the back wheels hang almost over the edge
At the sudden veering, the moment of turning.
Better to hug close, wary of rubble and falling stones.
The arroyo cracking the road, the wind-bitten buttes, the canyons,
Creeks swollen in midsummer from the flash-flood roaring into the narrow valley,
Reeds beaten flat by wind and rain,
Grey from the long winter, burnt at the base in summer.
-Or the path narrowing,
Winding upward toward the stream with its sharp stones,
The upland of alder and birchtrees,
Through the swamp alive with quicksand,
The thickets darkening,
The ravines ugly.

3

I see the flower of all water, above and below me, the never receding,
Moving, unmoving in a parched land, white in the moonlight:
The soul at a still-stand,
At ease after rocking the flesh to sleep,
Petals and reflections of petals mixed on the surface of a glassy pool,
And the waves flattening out when the fishermen drag their nets over
the stones.

In the moment of time when the small drop forms, but does not fall,
I have known the heart of the sun, -
In the dark and light of a dry place,
In a flicker of fire brisled by a dusty wind.
I have heard, in a drip of leaves,
A slight song,
After the midnight cries.
I release myself for this:
The stand at the stretch in the face of death,
Delighting in surface change, the glitter of light on waves,
And I roam elsewhere, my body thinking,
Turning toward the other side of light,
In a tower of wind, a tree idling in air,
Beyond my own echo,
Neither forward nor backward,
Unperplexed, in a place leading nowhere.

As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning,
I know this change:
On one side of silence there is no smile:
But when I breathe with the birds,
The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing,
And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep.

I would like to end this presentation with an old favorite:

Reading –

THE RIGHT THING

Let others probe that mystery if they can.
Time-harried prisoners of *Shall* and *will* –
The right thing happens to the happy man.

The bird flies out, the bird flies back again;
The hill becomes the valley, and is still;
Let others delve that mystery if they can.

God bless the roots! – Body and soul are one!
The small become the great, the great the small;
The right thing happens to the happy man.

Child of the dark, he can outleap the sun,
His being single, and that being all:
The right thing happens to the happy man

Or he sits still, a solid figure when
The self-destructive shake the common wall;
Takes to him what mystery he can,

And praising change as the slow night comes on,
Wills what he would, surrendering his will
Till the mystery is no more: no more he can.
The right thing happens to the happy man.