



Theodore Roethke

He won a Pulitzer Prize for his 1953
poetry collection *The Waking*.

Theodore Roethke (1908–1963)

The Waking.



Fate

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.

Roethke, Theodore (1908-1963)

- His lyrical verse is characterized by its startling imagery, especially of plant life.
- Roethke spent much of his childhood in and around a greenhouse that belonged to his father and uncle.
- There he developed a lifelong involvement with all manner of growing things, which became the subject of much of his poetry.
- Roethke won the 1954 Pulitzer Prize for poetry for his collection *The Waking: Poems 1933-1953* (1953).

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- The poem “Root Cellar,” written in 1948, provides a good example of Roethke’s unusual imagery and his ability to put the reader in contact with the natural world as a dynamic, often disturbing place, something more than just a setting for the actions of humanity.
 - “Root Cellar” opens with the lines:

“Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the
dark,
Shoots dangled and drooped,
Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,
Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical
snakes.”

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- Roethke was born in Saginaw, Michigan.
 - Though somewhat disdainful of schooling, he graduated from the University of Michigan and went on to do graduate work in literature at Harvard University.
 - From 1947 until his death, Roethke was a professor of English at the University of Washington.
 - Throughout adulthood Roethke suffered from both manic depression and alcoholism.

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- His first book of poetry, *Open House* (1941), is composed primarily of short, rhymed lyrics that contain intense images of growth and decay. The book went largely unnoticed by critics.
 - His second work, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948), showed greater variety in form and content, exploring the emotional experiences of a young man coming of age.
 - *Words of the Wind* (1958) won both the National Book Award and the Bollingen Prize.

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- Roethke's other volumes of poetry include *I Am! Says the Lamb* (1961), in which he makes an uncharacteristic foray into light verse, and *The Far Field* (1964), which was edited by his wife, Beatrice, and published after his death.
 - *The Far Field* was awarded the 1964 National Book Award for poetry.
 - Roethke's essays and other prose writings are anthologized in *On the Poet and His Craft* (1965), *Selected Letters* (1968), and *Straw in the Fire* (1972). *Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* was published in 1966.

Pickle Belt

- The fruit rolled by all day.
- They prayed the cogs would creep;
- They thought about Saturday pay,
- And Sunday sleep.

- Whatever he smelled was good:
- The fruit and flesh smells mixed.
- There beside him she stood,--
- And he, perplexed;

- He, in his shrunken britches,
- Eyes rimmed with pickle dust,
- Prickling with all the itches
- Of sixteen-year-old lust.

From *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, published by Doubleday

selections from *I Am! Said the Lamb*

The Donkey

I had a Donkey, that was all right,
But he always wanted to fly my Kite;
Every time I let him, the String would bust.
Your Donkey is better behaved, I trust.

The Ceiling

Suppose the Ceiling went Outside
And then caught Cold and Up and Died?
The only Thing we'd have for Proof
That he was Gone, would be the Roof;
I think it would be Most Revealing
To find out how the Ceiling's Feeling.

selections from *I Am! Said the Lamb*

The Chair

A funny thing about a Chair:

You hardly ever think it's *there*.

To know a Chair is really it,

You sometimes have to go and sit.

selections from *I Am! Said the Lamb*

■ **The Hippo**

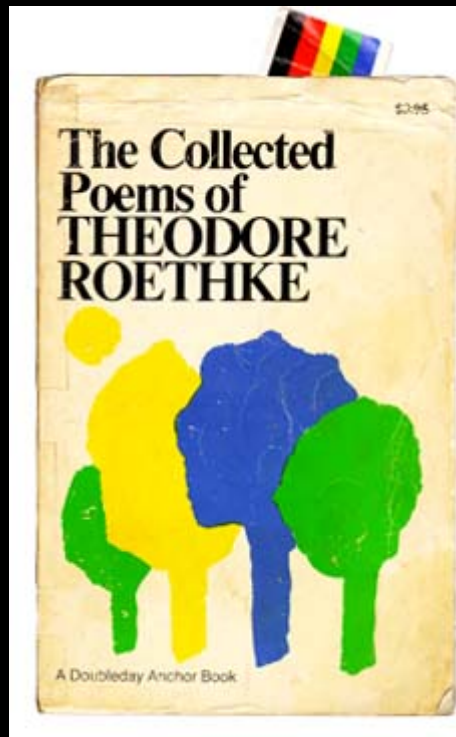
- A Head or Tail--which does he lack?
- I think his Forward's coming back!
- He lives on Carrots, Leeks and Hay;
- He starts to yawn--it takes All Day--
- Some time I think I'll live that way.

■ **The Lizard**

- The Time to Tickle a Lizard,
- Is Before, or Right After, a Blizzard.
- Now the place to begin Is just under his Chin,--
- And here's more Advice:
- Don't Poke more than Twice
- At an Intimate Place like his Gizzard.

various quotes from *On Poetry and Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*

- *The poem, even a short time after being written, seems no miracle; unwritten, it seems something beyond the capacity of the gods.
- * Art is the means we have of undoing the damage of haste. It's what everything else isn't.
- * You can't make poetry simply by avoiding clichés.
- * There's a point where plainness is no longer a virtue, when it becomes excessively bald, wrenched.
- * You must believe: a poem is a holy thing -- a good poem, that is.
- From *On Poetry and Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*;



"Long Live the Weeds," a poem, titled after a line in Hopkins, that illustrates his lifelong effort at primal release and identification with nature:

Long live the weeds that overwhelm
My narrow vegetable realm!

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.



Ashbery, John (1928-)



American poet, playwright, and novelist,
whose book *Self-Portrait in a Convex
Mirror* (1976) won the 1976 Pulitzer Prize
for poetry and the 1976 National Book
Award for poetry.

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- Influenced by surrealism, a 20th-century artistic and literary movement, Ashbery's poetry is characterized by abstract, unconventional use of imagery and syntax. His verse often focuses on the act of writing and attempts to reveal the internal world of the poet, rejecting conventional realism. To challenge his readers' preconceptions about poetry, Ashbery uses unexpected juxtapositions of evocative and incongruous imagery.
 - Ashbery was born in Rochester, New York. He received his B.A. degree in 1949 from Harvard University and his M.A. degree in English literature in 1951 from Columbia University. While at Columbia, Ashbery established close literary friendships with several other poets, including Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler. This group—along with artists and musicians of their generation—later became known as the New York School.

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- In 1955 Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden chose Ashbery's first collection of poetry, *Some Trees* (1956), for publication in the Yale Series of Younger Poets. The same year, Ashbery received a Fulbright Fellowship and moved to Paris. He stayed in France until 1965, working as an art and literature critic for the European edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* and as a correspondent for the American art magazine *Art News*. Upon his return to New York City, Ashbery served as the executive editor for *Art News* until 1972. From 1974 to 1990 he taught English at Brooklyn College and Bard College, both in New York state.
 - Ashbery's early works include *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), and *Sunrise in Suburbia* (1968). His later works include *As We Know* (1979), *Shadow Train* (1981), *Flow Chart* (1991), *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994), *Can You Hear, Bird* (1995), and *Wakefulness* (1998). In 1997 the anthology *The Mooring of Starting Out: The First Five Books of Poetry* was published. With James Schuyler, Ashbery coauthored the novel *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969), a parody of suburban American life as seen through the lives of two families. He also published a collection of plays, *Three Plays* (1978), and his art criticism is collected in *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957—1987* (published 1989).

Repetition of lines and phrases is a common aspect of oral tradition, as will be seen in examples below. Later written forms also repeat lines for a hypnotic, deeply musical effect.

- John Ashbery, a 20th-century American poet known for his poems that seem to keep from explaining themselves or coming to a decisive ending, uses the circular form of the pantoum, from Malay folk poetry, to express confusion. The repeated lines are in boldface type.
 - Now, silently, as one mounts a stair we emerge into the open
 - **but it is shrouded, veiled: we must have made some ghastly error.**
 - To end the standoff that history long ago began
 - **Must we thrust ever onward, into perversity?**

 - **But it is shrouded, veiled: we must have made some ghastly error.**
 - You mop your forehead with a rose, recommending its thorns.
 - **Must we thrust ever onward, into perversity?**

("Hotel Lautréamont," 1992)

Poetic experiment

- Ashbery wrote wildly experimental poetry that derived from **dada** and from an embrace of Whitman's open-road aesthetic—namely a desire to keep moving and to celebrate change, instability, and chance.
- The resulting poems provide verbal trips through landscapes of shifting discourse with no center and no fixed voice: modes of speech alternate rapidly, high diction is mixed with street slang, and moments from different realms of experience are juxtaposed.

What Is Poetry

John Ashbery

- The medieval town, with frieze
Of boy scouts from Nagoya? The snow That came when we wanted
it to snow?
Beautiful images? Trying to avoid
- Ideas, as in this poem? But we
Go back to them as to a wife, leaving
- The mistress we desire? Now they
Will have to believe it
- As we believed it. In school
All the thought got combed out:
- What was left was like a field.
Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.
- Now open them on a thin vertical path.
It might give us--what?--some flowers soon?

THE GRAPEVINE

John Ashbery

- Of who we and all they are
You all now know. But you know
After they began to find us out we grew
Before they died thinking us the causes Of their acts. Now
we'll not know
The truth of some still at the piano, though
They often date from us, causing
These changes we think we are. We don't care
- Though, so tall up there
In young air. But things get darker as we move
To ask them: Whom must we get to know
To die, so you live and we know?

SOME TREES

John Ashbery

- These are amazing: each
Joining a neighbor, as though speech
Were a still performance.
Arranging by chance
- To meet as far this morning
From the world as agreeing
With it, you and I
Are suddenly what the trees try
- To tell us we are:
That their merely being there
Means something; that soon
We may touch, love, explain.
- And glad not to have invented
Some comeliness, we are surrounded:
A silence already filled with noises,
A canvas on which emerges
- A chorus of smiles, a winter morning.
Place in a puzzling light, and moving,
Our days put on such reticence

At North Farm

Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you,
At incredible speed, traveling day and night,
Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through narrow passes.
But will he know where to find you,
Recognize you when he sees you,
Give you the thing he has for you?

Hardly anything grows here,
Yet the granaries are bursting with meal,
The sacks of meal piled to the rafters.
The streams run with sweetness, fattening fish;
Birds darken the sky. Is it enough
That the dish of milk is set out at night,
That we think of him sometimes,
Sometimes and always, with mixed feelings?

Local docs

- Ashbery My Philosophy of Life
- Into the Dusk
- For John Clare
- Daffy Duck In Hollywood
- <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/ashbery/> Online texts