

"Out, Out - "

by Robert Frost

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 it meant to prove saws know 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!
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 was spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off -
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!"
So. 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 a fright.
No one believed. They listened to 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.

From "Complete Poems of Robert Frost", 1916

The Man He Killed

by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have set us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

I shot him dead because—
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like—just as I—
Was out of work—had sold his traps—
No other reason why.

Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat, if met where any bar is,
Or help to half a crown.

Musee des Beaux Arts

by W.H. Auden (1907-1973)

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or
 just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen,
 skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the
 torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns
 away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun
 shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the
 green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have
 seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Pathedy of Manners

by Ellen Kay (b. 1931)

At twenty she was brilliant and adored,
Phi Beta Kappa, sought for every dance;
Captured symbolic logic and the glance
Of men whose interest was their sole reward.

She learned the cultured jargon of those bred
To antique crystal and authentic pearls,
Scorned Wagner, praised the Degas dancing girls,
And when she might have thought, conversed instead.

She hung up her diploma, went abroad,
Saw catalogues of domes and tapestry,
Rejected an impoverished marquis,
And learned to tell real Wedgwood from a fraud.

Back home her breeding led her to espouse
A bright young man whose pearl cufflinks were real.
They had an ideal marriage, and ideal
But lonely children in an ideal house.

I saw her yesterday at forty-three,
Her children gone, her husband one year dead,
Toying with plots to kill time and re-wed
Illusions of lost opportunity.

But afraid to wonder what she might have known
With all that wealth and mind had offered her,
She shuns conviction, choosing to infer
Tenets of every mind except her own.

A hundred people call, though not one friend,
To parry a hundred doubts with nimble talk.
Her meanings lost in manners, she will walk
Alone in brilliant circles to the end.

No man is an island

John Donne (1572-1631)

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.