

FOUR UNCOLLECTED POEMS

Sylvia Townsend Warner

THE WINTER ROAD

All yesterday and all last night it snowed,
and heavy the cloud hangs,
looming with sag of snow that will fall later.
Since morning the gangs
have laboured to clear a single-track on the road,
where a man comes by wheeling a perambulator.

Ramshackle and ungainly it jolts and careens
over the frozen slush.
Steadying himself he tightens his grip on the handle
as though he must hush
at all costs the babe asleep there, and leans
a dotting gaze over his darling a-dandle.

But the hood flapped back by the wind shows a billycan,
old newspapers tied with twine,
foot-rags, and a mug, and some scraps of fuel.
Without a sign
of question the roadmen watch as he trundles on
his little ark, his life's holding, his heart's jewel.

THE TREE PRUNER

Up the tree trunk we watched him clamber—
animal from man emerging as snake from sheath—
smoothly ascending the embraced bole, and walking
overhead, sure-footed in that swaying chamber
of boughs, and half to himself and half to us talking,
calling to us who stood uneasily beneath:
No fear of falling. You can trust an apple-tree.

So unexpectedly into air translated,
one would have looked to the tree's foot to behold
his body along with his coat lying there discarded,
had not the wary words, falling as with earth weighted,
betokened him overhead, still stayed and guarded
by knowledge of earth, by cunning, like sap from mould
long-sucked, admonished to trust not to every tree.

Not walnut, said he, nor plum. The tree assented,
swaying with long sighs, with tremblings stirred
as the pruning-saw gripped on the bough and snarled louder.
As though a soul and a sorrow shook out, the air was scented
with apple-harvest, and downward drifted a powder
of sap-alive sawdust, whitening the winter sward,
while he haphazard went walking through the tree.

EDWARD THOMAS MEMORIAL

Because a young man, petulant and young,
walked this hilltop with strides swinging and strong,
and hid apart
under these trees cooling his hot heart,
and cast his black mood listening to a bird's song;

I who am old, study and city bred,
have climbed hither, slipping in the autumn mud,
and stand here now,
panting for breath, mopping sweat off my brow,
thinking of my first editions and of his spilled blood.

All three poems above from
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MEDITATION UPON GRASS

Grass in the meadow,
 Before it seeds,
Is hay, that the sweet-breathed
 Nation feeds,
And if you walk through it
 The farmer bleeds;

And grass in the cloister
 Of St Bede's
Is one of England's
 Noblest deeds,
To be shown to Americans,
 Mahometans, and Swedes;

And grass to man
 For his Maker pleads
If it grow in a prison-yard,
 Or in Leeds;
But grass on the gravel
 Is merely weeds.

So out comes my neighbour with a long rake,
And scrabbles it up, saying, What a mistake!

from *Morrow's Almanack and Everyday Book for 1930*