

Under that arch; a keepsake issued by the Dartmouth College Library on the occasion of the opening of its Robert Frost Room, April 19, 1962. [Hanover, N. H., 1962].

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April 19, 1962

Extracts from a Reminiscence by Robert Frost

ON an autumn day seventy years ago a Dartmouth freshman walked up the path of Wilson Hall, which then housed the College Library. He passed beneath the wide Romanesque arch of the entryway and climbed the short flight of steps that leads to the heavy double doors. These were the simple preliminaries to what was to be a moment of fateful discovery for the young undergraduate.

Inside the building, as he looked about, his eye suddenly fell upon a magazine that lay before him on a library display rack: a copy of the November 17th number of The Independent, its front page given over to a poem by Richard Hovey: a poem entitled "Seaward," an elegy on the death of Thomas William Parsons.

Robert Frost in later years was frequently to recall both the impact and the significance of this dramatic incident of his brief period as a Dartmouth student. He had known of Richard Hovey, of course, and of Hovey's associations with the College. (Hovey had, indeed, been among his thoughts in entering Dartmouth: "A poet, that interested me," he has said.) But the adventure of coming upon this particular issue of The Independent, this was something special, and very important, as Mr. Frost has reminisced:

. . . here was a magazine that I had never heard of, but it had a whole front page of poetry—all the page, three columns. ...And then over on the next page some, I think. And then I leafed over, and there was an editorial on the poem.

That made a big impression on me. I didn't think that minute that I'll send some there, but that was where it grew on me I'd send a poem there sometime. I don't know whether it came until I'd written the poem. Really, I can't remember that, but when I had the poem that I thought was a poem I sent it there.

The Independent.

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“ Even as we have been approved of God to be intrusted with the Gospel, so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God which proveth our hearts. ”

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The Independent

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SEAWARD.

AN ELEGY ON THE DEATH OF THOMAS WILLIAM PARSONS.

BY RICHARD HOVEY.

“ Il tremolar della marina. ”— Dante.

The tide is in the marshes. Far away In Nova Scotia's woods they follow me, Marshes of distant Massachusetts Bay, Dear marshes, where the dead once loved to be! I see them lying yellow in the sun, And hear the mighty tremor of the sea Beyond the dunes where blue cloud shadows run.

I know that there the tide is coming in, Secret and slow, for in my heart I feel The silent swelling of a stress akin; And in my vision, lo, blue glimpses steal Across the yellow marsh-grass, where the flood, Filling the empty channels, lifts the keel Of one lone catboat bedded in the mud.

The tide is in the marshes. Kingscroft fades; It is not Minas there across the lea; But I am standing under pilgrim shades Far off where Scituate lapses to the sea. And he, my elder brother in the muse, The poet of the Charles and Italy. Stands by my side, Song's gentle, shy recluse.

The hermit thrush of singers, few might draw So near his ambush in the solitude As to be witness of the holy awe And passionate sweetness of his singing mood. Not oft he sang, and then in ways apart, Where foppish ignorance might not intrude To mar the joy of his sufficing art.

Only for love of song he sang, unbid And unexpectant of responsive praise; But they that loved and sought him where he hid, Forbearing to profane his templed ways, Went marveling if that clear voice they heard Pass thrilling through the hushed religious maze, Were of a spirit singing or a bird.

Alas, he is not here, he will not sing; The air is empty of him evermore. Alone I watch the slow kelp-gatherers bring Their dories full of sea-moss to the shore. No gentle eyes look out to sea with mine, No gentle lips are uttering quaint lore, No hand is on my shoulder for a sign.

Far, far, so far, the crying of the surf! Still, still, so still, the water in the grass! Here on the knoll the crickets in the turf And one bold squirrel barking, seek, alas, To bring the swarming summer back to me. In vain! my heart is on the salt morass Below, that stretches to the sunlit sea.

Interminable, not to be divined, The ocean's solemn distances recede; A gospel of glad color to the mind, But for the soul a voice of sterner creed. The sadness of unfathomable things Calls from the waste and makes the heart give heed With answering dirges, as a seashell sings.

Mother of infinite loss! Mother bereft! Thou of the shaken hair! Far-questing Sea! Sea of the lapsing wail of waves! O left Of many lovers! Lone, lamenting Sea! Desolate, prone, disheveled, lost, sublime! Unquelled and reckless! Mad, despairing Sea! Wail, for I wait—wail, ancient dirge of Time!

No more, no more that brow to greet, no more! Mourn, bitter heart! mourn, fool of Fate! Again Thy lover leaves thee; from thy pleading shore Swept far beyond the caverns of the rain, No phantom of him lingers on the air. Thy foamy fingers reach for his—in vain! In vain thy salt breath searches for his hair!

Mourn gently, tranqu *il* marshes, mourn with me! Mourn, if acceptance so serene can mourn! Grieve, marshes, tho your noonday melody Of color thrill through sorrow like a horn Blown far in Elfland! Mourn, free-wandering dunes! For he has left you of his voice forlorn, Who sang your slopes full of an hundred Junes.

O viking Death, what hast thou done with him? Sea-wolf of Fate, marauder of the shore! Storm reveler, to what carousal grim Hast thou compelled him? Hark, through the Sea's roar Heroic laughter mocking us afar! There will no answer come for evermore, Tho for his sake Song beacon to a star.

Mourn, Muse beyond the sea! Ausonian Muse! Mourn, where thy vinelands watch the day depart! Mourn for him, where thy sunsets interfuse, Who loved thy beauty with no alien heart, And sang it in his not all alien line! Muse of the passionate thought and austere art! O Dante's Muse! lament his son and thine.

And thou, divine one of this western beach! A double loss has left thee desolate; Two rooms are vacant in thy House of Speech, Two ghosts have vanished through the open gate, The Attic spirit,

epicure of light, The Doric heart, strong, simple, passionate, Thy priest of Beauty and thy priest of Right.

Last of the elder choir, save one whose smile Is gentler for its memories, they rest. Mourn, goddess, come apart and mourn awhile! Come with thy sons, lithe Song-Queen of the West,— The poet Friend of Poets, the great throng Of seekers on the long elusive quest, And the lone voice of Arizonian song.

Nor absent they, thy latest-born, O Muse, My young companions in Art's wildwood ways; She whose swift verse speaks words that smite and bruise With scarlet suddenness of flaming phrase, Virginia's hawk of Song; and he who sings, Alike his people's homely rustic lays, And his fine spirit's high imaginings,

Far-stretching Indiana's melodist. Quaint, humorous, full of quirks and wanton whims, Full-throated, with imagination kissed; With these two pilgrims from auroral streams, The Greek revealer of Canadian skies, And thy close darling, voyager of dreams, Carman, the sweetest, strangest voice that cries.

And thou, friend of my heart, in fireside bonds Near to the dead, not with the poet's bay Brow-bound but eminent with kindred fronds, Paint us some picture of the summer day For his memorial,—the distant dune, The marshes stretching palpitant away And blue sea fervid with the stress of noon.

For we were of the few who knew his face, Nor only heard the rumor of his fame; This house beside the sea the sacred place Where first with you to clasp his hand I came— Art's knight of courtesy, eager to commend, Who to my youth accorded the dear name Of poet, and the dearer name of friend.

O mourners by the sea, who loved him most! I watch you where you move, I see you all; Unmarked I glide among you like a ghost, And on the portico, in room and hall, Lay visionary fingers on your hair. You do not feel their unsubstantial fall Nor hear my silent tread, but I am there.

I would my thought had but the weakest throat, To set the air a-vibrate with a word. Alas! dumb, ineffectual, remote, I murmur, but my solace is not heard; Nor, could I reach you, would your grief abate. What sorrow ever was with speech deterred? What power has Song against the hand of Fate?

Not all in vain! For with the will to serve. Myself am served, at least. A secure calm Soars in my soul with wings that will not swerve, And on my brow I feel a ministering palm. Even in the effort for another's peace I have achieved mine own. I hear a psalm Of angels, and the grim forebodings cease.

I see things as they are, nor longer yield
To truce and parley with the doubts of sense. My certainty of
vision goes afield, Wide-ranging, fearless, into the immense; And finds no terror there, no ghost nor
ghoul Not to be dazzled back to impotence, Confronted with the indomitable soul.

What goblin frights us? Are we children, then, To start at shadows? Things fantastic slay The
imperishable spirit in whose ken Their only birth is? Blaze one solar ray Across the grisly darkness
that appalls, And where the gloom was murkiest, the bright Day Laughs with a light of bloomy
coronals.

Stretch wide, O marshes, in your golden joy! Stretch ample, marshes, in serene delight! Proclaiming
faith past tempest to destroy, With silent confidence of conscious might! Glad of the blue sky,
knowing nor wind nor rain Can do your large indifference despite, Nor lightning mar your tolerant
disdain!

The fanfare of the trumpets of the sea Assaults the air with jubilant foray; The intolerable exigence of
glee Shouts to the sun and leaps in radiant spray; The laughter of the breakers on the shore Shakes
like the mirth of Titans heard at play, With thunders of tumultuous uproar.

Playmate of terrors! Intimate of Doom! Fellow of Fate and Death! Exultant Sea! Thou strong
companion of the Sun, make room! Let me make one with you, rough comrade Sea! Sea of the
boisterous sport of wind and spray! Sea of the lion mirth! Sonorous Sea! I hear thy shout, I know
what thou wouldst say.

Dauntless, triumphant, reckless of alarms, O Queen that laughest Time and Fear to scorn! Death, like
a bridegroom, tosses in thine arms. The rapture of your fellowship is borne Like music on the wind. I
hear the blare, The calling of the undesisting horn And tremors as of trumpets on the air.

Sea-Captain of whose keels the Sea is fain, Death, Master of a thousand ships, each prow That sets
against the thunders of the main, Is lyric with thy mirth. I know thee now, O Death, I shout back to
thy hearty hall, Thou of the great heart and the cavernous brow, Strong Seaman at whose look the
north winds quail.

Poet, thou hast adventured in the roar Of mighty seas with one that never failed To make the havens
of the further shore. Beyond that vaster Ocean thou hast sailed What old immortal world of beauty
lies! What land where light for matter has prevailed! What strange Atlantid dream of Paradise!

Down what dim bank of violets did he come, The mild historian of the Sudbury Inn, Welcoming thee to that long-wished-for home? What talk of comrades old didst thou begin? What dear inquiry lingered on his tongue Of the Sicilian, ere he led thee in To the eternal company of Song?

There thy co-laborers and high compeers Hailed thee as courtly hosts some noble guest,— Poe, disengloomed with the celestial years, Calm Bryant, Emerson of the antique zest And modern vision, Lowell all a-bloom At last, unwintered of his mind's unrest, And Whitman, with the old superb aplomb.

Not far from these Lanier, deplored so oft From Georgian live-oaks to Acadian firs, Walks with his friend as once at Cedarcroft. And many more I see of speech diverse; From whom a band aloof and separate, Landor and Meleager in converse And lonely Collins for thy greeting wait.

But who is this, that from the mightier shades Emerges, seeing whose sacred laureate hair Thou startest forward trembling through the glades, Advancing upturned palms of filial prayer? Long hast thou served him; now, of lineament Not stern but strenuous still, thy pious care He comes to guerdon. Art thou not content?

Forbear, O Muse, to sing his deeper bliss, What tenderer meetings, what more secret joys! Lift not the veil of heavenly privacies! Suffice it that nought unfulfilled alloys The pure gold of the rapture of his rest, Save that some linger where the jarring noise Of earth afflicts, whom living he caressed.

His feet are in thy courts, O Lord; his ways Are in the City of the Living God. Beside the eternal sources of the days He dwells, his thoughts with timeless lightnings shod; His hours are exaltations and desires, The soul itself its only period And life unmeasured save as it aspires.

Time, like a wind, blows through the lyric leaves Above his head, and from the shaken boughs Æonian music falls; but he receives Its endless changes in alert repose, Nor drifts unconscious as a dead leaf blown On with the wind and senseless that it blows, But hears the chords like armies marching on.

About his paths the tall swift angels are, Whose motion is like music but more sweet; The centuries for him their gates unbar; He hears the stars their Glorias repeat; And in high moments when the fervid soul Burns white with love, lo, on his gaze replete The Vision of the Godhead shall unroll;—

Trine within trine, inextricably One, Distinct, in numerable, inseparate, And never ending what was ne'er begun, Within Himself his Freedom and his Fate, All dreams, all harmonies, all Forms of light In his Infinity intrinsecate.— Until the soul no more can bear the sight.

Oh, secret, taciturn, disdainful Death! Knowing all this, why hast thou held thy peace? Master of Silence, thou wilt waste no breath On weaklings, nor to stiffen nerveless knees Deny strong men the conquest of one qualm;— And they, thy dauntless comrades, are at ease And need no speech and greet thee calm for calm.

Cast them adrift in wastes of ageless Night, Or bid them follow into Hell, they dare; So are they worthy of their thrones of light. O that great, tranquil rapture they shall share! That life compact of adamant fire! My soul goes out across the eastern air To that far country with a wild desire!

But still the marshes haunt me, still my thought Returns upon their silence, there to brood, Till the significance of earth is brought Back to my heart, and in a sturdier mood I turn my eyes toward the distance dim, And in the purple far infinitude Watch the white ships sink under the sea-rim:

Some bound for Flemish ports or Genovese, Some for Bermuda bound or Baltimore; Others, perchance, for further Orient seas, Sumatra and the straits of Singapore, Or antique cities of remote Cathay, Or past Gibraltar and the Libyan shore Through Bab-el mandeb eastward to Bombay;

And one shall signal flaming Teneriffe, And the Great Captive's ocean-prison speak, Then on beyond the demon-haunted cliff, By Madagascar's palms and Mozambique, Till in some sudden tropic dawn afar The Sultan sees the colors at her peak Salute the minarets of Zanzibar.

Kingscroft, Windsor, Nova Scotia. September, 1892.

RICHARD HOVEY'S POEM.

We print, this week, one of the longest poems that we have ever put into The Independent. It is unnecessary to say that we would not publish it if we did not believe it to be unusually good. It is an elegy on the death of the late Thomas W. Parsons, the translator of Dante's "Inferno," a friend of Longfellow's, and one of the literary club who devoted themselves for years to the study of Dante. He was a very quiet, reserved man, and the author of several literary volumes of verse in part privately printed. He occupies some such place in American poetry as Gray or Collins does in English poetry, not having written much, but extremely well. The poet is not living in the country who could have written a stronger, grander poem than that on "The Bust of Dante," beginning:

" See from this counterfeit of him Whom Arno shall remember long, How stern of lineament, how grim, The father was of Tuscan song."

He died at the age of seventy-three.

Mr. Hovey's elegy does not follow the classical example of Milton's "Lycidas," Shelley's "Adonais," and Arnold's "Thyrsis," three of the great elegies of the English language. It is modern and American. It begins with a view of the marshes of Nova Scotia, seeing which the poet seems to be looking upon the coast of Marshfield and Scituate, near which Parsons had his summer home. The poet is then described as the hermit thrush of singers. The marshes mourn for him; the sea, mad, despairing, lone, lamenting, unquelled, reckless, is bidden to wail its dirge for him; the marauder Death is questioned of his fate; the Italian muse is called to his bier; then the muse of this Western beach that now mourns his loss and that of Whittier, two poets who died within a few days of each other—leaving only Holmes of the elder choir. He bids her come and mourn with those of the succeeding generation of Stedman and Miller, and then with those of the younger tribe. The painter who is mentioned is Mr. T. B. Meteyard, who was nearly related to Dr. Parsons; and "the Sicilian" is Luigi Monti, brother-in-law of Dr. Parsons, who was the original of the Sicilian in Longfellow's "Tales of a Wayside Inn," as Parsons himself was the original of the Poet in the same volume. Vain is the effort given with word of grief or solace to comfort those that mourn. Yet not all in vain, for with the attempt there come, at least to him, calm and hope, and his soul turns from the bitterness and loss of death to its victory. He looks at the marshes and sees them in their serene delight. The sea is transformed and jubilant with its radiant spray. Again he invokes the exultant, dauntless Sea and Death her bridegroom. He sees the poet carried by the sea captain, Death, across the ocean into the havens of the further shore, down whose dim banks old comrades come to greet him, and upon whose hills is the city of the living God. There before him the vision of the godhead is unrolled, and the singer asks Death why, with all this gift to bestow, he has held his peace; a silence which he disdains to break for the comfort of weaklings, knowing that strong men will meet his coming with courage and faith. The poem comes to its climax on a plane of exultation which is surpassed only by Milton's elegy. At the close the author comes back again to the marshes and looks out to sea, and ends with a strain like that with which he began, except that it is in the major key of hope as he sees the ships (or are they the souls of the passing dead?) sinking below the horizon each on its distant voyage.

We admire in the poem a lofty conception, a large and free execution, a clear plan, and a firm execution. It is a poem of noble structure. There is about it not the mere mechanical excellence of academic verse writers, but thought and power as well. It is not easy for us to foretell what may be in the future for a young man who can do such work as this. It is certainly one of the most memorable poems which have been published for many a day, and will, we think, be numbered among the great elegies of the language.

Richard Hovey was born in Normal, Ill., in 1864, but spent his childhood and youth in Washington. He was graduated at Dartmouth College in 1885, pursued a partial course in divinity at the General

Theological Seminary in this city, and has since given himself to a very thorough study of literature in this country and in Paris. He is an excellent classical scholar, an adept in philosophy, and has been one of the lecturers in the Summer School of Philosophy with Thomas Davidson and Dr. William T. Harris. He has published two little volumes of verse, one "The Laurel" (1889), and the other "Launcelot and Guenevere" (1891). Another book, "Gandolfo," will appear this year. The poem which we publish this week certainly gives promise of a noble career.

This leaf contains the poem and editorial reduced in facsimile from the actual copy of *The Independent*, pages 1, 2, 10 and 11, that Mr. Frost talks about in the accompanying recollection of three score and ten years ago. His first work in a publication of general circulation, 'My Butterfly', came out two years later in *The Independent*. The present reproduction is part of a keepsake prepared by Dartmouth College Library on the occasion of the opening of the Robert Frost Room, April 19, 1962.

. . . I had never heard of T. W. Parsons, but he's quite a name in American literature. They neglect him now, but it's quite a fine poem of his "On a Bust of Dante":

Read, from this counterfeit of him Whom Arno shall remember long,
How stern of lineament, how grim,
The father was of Tuscan song. . . .

The poem, the other, the long thing of Hovey's, that's a very readable poem. . . . I only remember one line of it, one new way of taking the Trinity: "Trine within trine, inextricably One."

Referring to Wilson Hall, the scene of his 1892 discovery, Mr. Frost has declared,

I always hope they won't tear that down, because under that arch I went into my idea of publishing something.

. . . I saw that poem there. As if I could see it today. That's why I must have had, more than you'd know, more interest in such a thing. What is that meaning? What does a big serious poem mean? And then I turned over, found talk about it in an editorial. So it meant that I was beginning to think of being a writer, I suppose. I can't remember that. I didn't know whether that was a thing to be or one ought to be or whether I wanted to be or what. I wouldn't know anything about that. I don't know what I thought I wanted to be. I don't know as I thought of anything. I was a good deal lost without minding being lost, you see. . . . I was just lost and quite willing to be.

And he has spoken further of "the old library that's now the museum":

That arch there, I always think, that that's sort of a beginning for me of something that was going to happen that year. . . . All of it long, very indefinite. . . . Somebody talks about rededication and dedication, and nobody really dedicates himself till long afterward. He doesn't dedicate himself, he gets dedicated. He finds himself deep in something and long before he's aware of committing himself. And he's never aware of his taking his life in his hands to go forward to do something or do or die, you know, unless it's to battle or something.

I didn't think anything like that. I just had it coming on me. I can't tell how it came, this wish to have something: write things and get'em printed.

IT was in 1894 that "My Butterfly," written during the spring of '93, just after Mr. Frost had left college, appeared in The Independent, his first poem to be included in a publication of national circulation. He remembers that the editors in accepting the poem "made quite a fuss over it—sort of a premature fuss." And they became cross with him for his having left Dartmouth: "They blamed me for that and reminded me of Milton, who was a very learned man."

But, doubtless, the spark that was struck when he walked "under that arch" and entered Wilson Hall on that fall day in 1892 could best have been kindled only by Robert Frost himself in his own time and manner. Dartmouth in losing him soon as a freshman was never, however, to lose him entirely. Its ties of affection have held him firm, and Mr. Frost, for his part, has over the years returned again and again to Hanover Plain to read and talk and teach—and "to touch home base" at Ledyard's monument (for John Ledyard he counts "the patron saint of all freshmen who run away")—, allowing the College frequent occasion to renew its sense of pride in the fact that, as he has often proclaimed, "This is where it all began."

MR. FROST'S RECOLLECTIONS ARE QUOTED, IN EXTRACTS, FROM A 1958 INTERVIEW

Portfolio 98 # 12

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