

**Theodore Roethke Poetry**  
from *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*  
Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975

**In Praise of Prairie**

The elm tree is our highest mountain peak;  
A five-foot drop a valley, so to speak.

A man's head is an eminence upon  
A field of barley spread beneath the sun.

Horizons have no strangeness to the eye.  
Our feet are sometimes level with the sky,

When we are walking on a treeless plain,  
With ankles bruised from stubble of the grain

The fields stretch out in long, unbroken rows.  
We walk aware of what is far and close.

Here distance is familiar as a friend.  
The feud we kept with space comes to an end.

**Night Journey**

Now as the train bear west,  
Its rhythm rocks the earth,  
And from my Pullman berth  
I stare into the night  
While others take their rest.  
Bridges of iron lace,  
A suddenness of tress,  
A lap of mountain mist  
All cross my line of sight,  
Then a bleak wasted place,  
And a lake below my knees.  
Full on my neck I feel  
The straining at a curve; my muscles move with steel,  
I wake in every nerve.  
I watch a beacon swing  
From dark to blazing bright;  
We thunder through ravines  
And gullies washed with light.  
Beyond the mountain pass  
Mist deepens on the pane;  
We rush into a rain  
That rattles double glass.

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Wheels shake the roadbed stone,  
The pistons jerk and show,  
I stay up half the night  
To see the land I love.

**Root Cellar**

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,  
Looking obscenely from mildewed crates,  
Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.  
And what a congress of stinks!—  
Roots ripe as old bait,  
Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,  
Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.  
Nothing would give up life:  
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

**Transplanting**

Watching hands transplanting,  
Turning and tamping,  
Lifting the young plants with two fingers,  
Sifting in a palm-full of fresh loam,—  
One swift movement,—  
Then plumping in the bunched roots,  
A single twist of the thumbs, a tamping and turning,  
All in one,  
Quick on the wooden bench,  
A shaking down, while the stem stays straight,  
Once, twice, and faint third thump,—  
Into the flat-box it goes,  
Ready for the long days under the sloped glass:

The sun warming the fine lam,  
The young horns, winding and unwinding,  
Creaking their thin spines,  
The underleaves, the smallest buds  
Breaking into nakedness,  
The blossoms extending  
Out into the sweet air,  
The whole flower extending  
Stretching and reaching.

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**The Waking**

I waked 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 take the Tree; but who can tell us how?  
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has 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.

**A Walk in Late Summer**

1

A Gull rides on the ripples of a dream,  
White upon white, slow-settling on a stone;  
Across my lawn the soft-backed creatures come;  
In the weak light they wander, each alone.  
Bring me the meek, for I would know their ways;  
I am a connoisseur of midnight eyes.  
The small! The small! I hear them singing clear  
On the long banks, in the soft summer air.

2

What is there for the soul to understand?  
The clack face of the dismal pure inane?  
The wind dies down; my will dies with the wind,  
God's in that stone, or I am not a man!  
Body and soul transcend appearances

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Before the caving-in of all that is;  
I'm dying piecemeal, fervent in decay;  
My moments linger—that's eternity.

3

A later rose ravages the casual eye,  
A blaze of being on a central stem.  
It lies upon us to undo the lie  
Of living merely in the realm of time.  
Existence moves toward a certain end—  
A thing all earthly lovers understand.  
That dove's elaborate way of coming near  
Reminds me I am dying with the year.

4

A tree arises on a central plain—  
It is no trick of change or chance of light.  
A tree all out of shape from wind and rain,  
A tree thinned by the wind obscures my sight.  
The long day dies; I walked the woods alone;  
Beyond the ridge two wood thrush sing as one.  
Being delights in being, and in time.  
The evening wraps me, steady as a flame.

### **The Manifestation**

Many arrivals make us live: the tree becoming  
Green, a bird tipping the topmost bough,  
A seed pushing itself beyond itself,  
The mole making its way through darkest ground,  
The worm, intrepid scholar of the soil—  
Do these analogies perplex? A sky with clouds,  
The motion of the moon, and waves at play,  
A sea-wind pausing in a summer tree.

What does what it should do needs nothing more.  
The body moves, though slowly, toward desire.  
We come to something without knowing why.