

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Francis
- poems -

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Robert Francis(August 12, 1901 - July 13, 1987)

Robert Francis, born in Upland, Pennsylvania in 1901. He was educated at Harvard University. After graduating, he moved into a small house in Amherst, Massachusetts that he named "Fort Juniper", inspiring editors at the University of Massachusetts Press to name their poetry award the Juniper Prize. His autobiography, *The Trouble with Francis* (1971), recounts in alarming detail the construction of this retreat, even including a ledger of materials and their cost down to the last nail, as though the poet were driven to prove his frugality.

In *The Satirical Rogue On Poetry*, his curious collection of witticisms, criticisms and aphorisms, Francis included a short essay called "Poetry and Poverty." Here he cited the poet, Robert Herrick, whose cottage garden provided sufficiency for a modest board: "Or pea, or bean, or wort, or beet, Whatever comes, content makes sweet." From his own experience Francis proposed that "a young poet just out of college and not yet married might consider a Herrick sort of life for a few years. Like Herrick he could grow the pea, the bean, the wort, the beet, and like Herrick, he could keep a hen. Rough clothes, old clothes, would be fine. A good half the day or half the year he could have clear for himself and his poetry. Even if he didn't wholly like such a life, it might be better than going hungry in New York or Paris. He could always move to the city whenever his income permitted.... He might, of course, like it. He might decide to stay on. Healthy, solvent, and independent, he might find cottage life good for him, and being good for him, good for his poetry as well." He was sixty-seven when *Satirical Rogue* appeared in 1968. He lived another nineteen years, long enough to see his collected poems in print, and to produce a final slender volume, *Late Fire, Late Snow*, which contains several of his finest lyrics.

During his writing career, Francis served as Phi Beta Kappa poet at both Tufts and Harvard. A world traveler, he often journeyed to Europe, at one time teaching at the American University in Beirut, Lebanon.

Francis' poems are widely varied in form and subject, though a kind tone permeates much of his work. His first collection of poetry, *Stand with Me Here* (1936) was followed by nine other volumes, including *The Orb Weaver* (Wesleyan University Press). His complete poetic texts can be found in *Collected Poems: 1936-1976* (1976). Prolific in many genres, Francis also produced a novel, *We Fly Away* (1948), and essays. In 1957, he received the Rome Prize of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Robert Francis died in July, 1987

Blue Winter

Winter uses all the blues there are.
One shade of blue for water, one for ice,
Another blue for shadows over snow.
The clear or cloudy sky uses blue twice-
Both different blues. And hills row after row
Are colored blue according to how far.
You know the bluejay's double-blur device
Shows best when there are no green leaves to show.
And Sirius is a winterbluegreen star.

Robert Francis

Catch

Two boys uncoached are tossing a poem together,
Overhand, underhand, backhand, sleight of hand, everyhand,
Teasing with attitudes, latitudes, interludes, altitudes,
High, make him fly off the ground for it, low, make him stoop,
Make him scoop it up, make him as-almost-as possible miss it,
Fast, let him sting from it, now, now fool him slowly,
Anything, everything tricky, risky, nonchalant,
Anything under the sun to outwit the prosy,
Over the tree and the long sweet cadence down,
Over his head, make him scramble to pick up the meaning,
And now, like a posy, a pretty one plump in his hands.

Robert Francis

Encounter

Those who have touched it or been touched by it
Or brushed by something that the vine has brushed,
Or burning it, have stood where the sly smoke
Has touched them-Know the meaning of its name.

The leaf is smooth. Its green is innocence.
A clean, unblemished leaf, glossy when young.
A leaf the unobserving might overlook
And the observing find too prosperous.

I've seen a vine of it so old and crooked
It held a hen-coop in its grip, the stalk
Thick as a man's wrist. There it had grown,
Half out of sight, permitted, undisturbed.

Strangers to it, who on a autumn road
Have found a vine that swept a tree like fire
And gathered it barehanded and brought it home
For color, seldom gathered it again.

Some are immune and some have thought they were
And some, ever so cautiously with gloves,
Finding that it grew to near their homes,
Have tried to root it out and have succeeded

Except that something from the vine fastened
Upon their flesh and burned, and in a year
Or two the vine itself was there again,
Glossy and green and smooth and innocent.

My neighbor's cow grazing beside the road
Munches with joy (and almost with a smile)
The salad of its leaves, transmuting them
Into sweet milk that I will drink tomorrow.

Robert Francis

Fair And Unfair

The beautiful is fair. The just is fair.
Yet one is commonplace and one is rare,
One everywhere, one scarcely anywhere.

So fair unfair a world. Had we the wit
To use the surplus for the deficit,
We'd make a fairer fairer world of it.

Anonymous submission.

Robert Francis

Farm Boy After Summer

A seated statue of himself he seems.
A bronze slowness becomes him. Patently
The page he contemplates he doesn't see.

The lesson, the long lesson, has been summer.
His mind holds summer, as his skin holds sun.
For once the homework, all of it, was done.

What were the crops, where were the fiery fields
Where for so many days so many hours
The sun assaulted him with glittering showers.

Expect a certain absence in his presence.
Expect all winter long a summer scholar,
For scarcely all its snows can cool that color.

Robert Francis

Glass

Words of a poem should be glass
But glass so simple-subtle its shape
Is nothing but the shape of what it holds.

A glass spun for itself is empty,
Brittle, at best Venetian trinket.
Embossed glass hides the poem of its absence.

Words should be looked through, should be windows.
The best word were invisible.
The poem is the thing the poet thinks.

If the impossible were not,
And if the glass, only the glass,
Could be removed, the poem would remain.

Robert Francis

Hallelujah: A Sestina

A wind's word, the Hebrew Hallelujah.
I wonder they never gave it to a boy
(Hal for short) boy with wind-wild hair.
It means Praise God, as well it should since praise
Is what God's for. Why didn't they call my father
Hallelujah instead of Ebenezer?

Eben, of course, but christened Ebenezer,
Product of Nova Scotia (hallelujah).
Daniel, a country doctor, was his father
And my father his tenth and final boy.
A baby and last, he had a baby's praise:
Red petticoats, red cheeks, and crow-black hair.

A boy has little to say about his hair
And little about a name like Ebenezer
Except that you can shorten either. Praise
God for that, for that shout Hallelujah.
Shout Hallelujah for everything a boy
Can be that is not his father or grandfather.

But then, before you know it, he is a father
Too and passing on his brand of hair
To one more perfectly defenseless boy,
Dubbing him John or James or Ebenezer
But never, so far as I know, Hallelujah,
As if God didn't need quite that much praise.

But what I'm coming to - Could I ever praise
My father half enough for being a father
Who let me be myself? Sing Hallelujah.
Preacher he was with a prophet's head of hair
And what but a prophet's name was Ebenezer,
However little I guessed it as a boy?

Outlandish names of course are never a boy's
Choice. And it takes some time to learn to praise.
Stone of Help is the meaning of Ebenezer.
Stone of Help - what fitter name for my father?

Always the Stone of Help however his hair
Might graduate from black to Hallelujah.

Such is the old drama of boy and father.
Praise from a grayhead now with thinning hair.
Sing Ebenezer, Robert, sing Hallelujah!

Robert Francis

In Memoriam: Four Poets

1

Searock his tower above the sea,
Searock he built, not ivory.
Searock as well his haunted art
Who gave to plunging hawks his hearts.

2

He loved to stand upon his head
To demonstrate he was not dead.
Ah, if his poems misbehave
'Tis only to defy the grave.

3

This exquisite patrician bird
Grooming a neatly folded wing
Guarded for years the Sacred Word.
A while he sang then ceased to sing.

4

His head carved out of granite O,
His hair a wayward drift of snow,
He worshipped the great God of Flow
By holding on and letting go.

Robert Francis

New England Mind

My mind matches this understand land.
Outdoors the pencilled tree, the wind-carved drift,
Indoors the constant fire, the careful thrift
Are facts that I accept and understand.

I have brought in red berries and green boughs-
Berries of black alder, boughs of pine.
They and the sunlight on them, both are mine.
I need no florist flowers in my house.

Having lived here the years that are my best,
I call it home. I am content to stay.
I have no bird's desire to fly away.
I envy neither north, east, south, nor west.

My outer world and inner make a pair.
But would the two be always of a kind?
Another latitude, another mind?
Or would I be New England anywhere?

Robert Francis

On A Theme By Frost

Amherst never had a witch
O Coos or of Grafton

But once upon a time
There were three old women.

One wore a small beard
And carried a big umbrella.

One stood in the middle
Of the road hailing cars.

One drove an old cart
All over the town collecting junk.

They were not weird sisters,
No relation to one another.

A duly accredited witch I
Never heard Amherst ever had

But as I say there
Were these three old women.

One was prone to appear
At the door (not mine!):

"I've got my nightgown on,
I can stay all night."

One went to a party
At the president's house once

Locked herself in the bathroom
And gave herself a bath.

One had taught Latin, having
Learned it at Mount Holyoke.

Of course Amherst may have
Had witches I never knew.

Robert Francis

Paper Men To Air Hopes And Fears

The first speaker said
Fear fire. Fear furnaces
Incinerators, the city dump
The faint scratch of a match.

The second speaker said
Fear water. Fear drenching rain
Drizzle, oceans, puddles, a damp
Day and the flush toilet.

The third speaker said
Fear wind. And it needn't be
A hurricane. Drafts, open
Windows, electric fans.

The fourth speaker said
Fear knives. Fear any sharp
Thing, machine, shears
Scissors, lawnmowers.

The fifth speaker said
Hope. Hope for the best
A smooth folder in a steel file.

Robert Francis

Part for the Whole

When others run to windows or out of doors
To catch the sunset whole, he is content
With any segment anywhere he sits.

From segment, fragment, he can reconstruct
The whole, prefers to reconstruct the whole,
As if to say, I see more seeing less.

A window to the east will serve as well
As window to the west, for eastern sky
Echoes the western sky. And even less—

A patch of light that picture-glass happens
To catch from window-glass, fragment of fragment,
Flawed, distorted, dulled, nevertheless

Gives something unglazed nature cannot give:
The old obliquity of art, and proves
Part may be more than whole, least may be best.

Robert Francis

Return

This little house sows the degrees
By which wood can return to trees.

Weather has stained the shingles dark
And indistinguishable from bark.

Lichen that long ago adjourned
Its lodging here has now returned.

And if you look in through the door
You see a sapling through the floor.

Robert Francis

Sheep

From where I stand the sheep stand still
As stones against the stony hill.

The stones are gray
And so are they.

And both are weatherworn and round,
Leading the eye back to the ground.

Two mingled flocks -
The sheep, the rocks.

And still no sheep stirs from its place
Or lifts its Babylonian face.

Robert Francis

Silent Poem

backroad leafmold stonewall chipmunk
underbrush grapevine woodchuck shadblow

woodsmoke cowbarn honeysuckle woodpile
sawhorse bucksaw outhouse wellsweep

backdoor flagstone bulkhead buttermilk
candlestick ragrug firedog brownbread

hilltop outcrop cowbell buttercup
whetstone thunderstorm pitchfork steeplebush

gristmill millstone cornmeal waterwheel
watercress buckwheat firefly jewelweed

gravestone groundpine windbreak bedrock
weathercock snowfall starlight cockcrow

Robert Francis

Squash In Blossom

How lush, how loose, the uninhibited squash is.
If ever hearts (and these immoderate leaves
Are vegetable hearts) were worn on sleeves,
The squash's are. In green the squash vine gushes.

The flowers are cornucopias of summer,
Briefly exuberant and cheaply golden.
And if they make a show of being hidden,
Are open promiscuously to every comer.

Let the squash be what it was doomed to be
By the old Gardener with the shrewd green thumb.
Let it expand and sprawl, defenceless, dumb.
But let me be the fiber-disciplined tree

Whose leaf (with something to say in wind) is small,
Reduced to the ingenuity of a green splinter
Sharp to defy or fraternize with winter,
Or if not that, prepared in fall to fall.

Robert Francis

Summons

Keep me from going to sleep too soon
Or if I go to sleep too soon
Come wake me up. Come any hour
Of night. Come whistling up the road.
Stomp on the porch. Bang on the door.
Make me get out of bed and come
And let you in and light a light.
Tell me the northern lights are on
And make me look. Or tell me clouds
Are doing something to the moon
They never did before, and show me.
See that I see. Talk to me till
I'm half as wide awake as you
And start to dress wondering why
I ever went to bed at all.
Tell me the walking is superb.
Not only tell me but persuade me.
You know I'm not too hard persuaded.

Robert Francis

Symbol

The winter apples have been picked, the garden turned.
Rain and wind have picked the maple leaves and gone.
The last of them now bank the house or have been burned.
None are left upon the trees or on the lawn.

Green and tall as ever it grew in spring the grass
Grows not too tall, will not be cut again this year.
Geraniums in bloom behind the windowglass
Are safe. Fall has fallen yet winter is not yet here.

How warm the late November sun although how wan.
The white house stands a symbol of fulfillment there,
Housing one old woman, a cat, and one old man
After abundance but before the earth is bare.

Robert Francis

The Base Stealer

Poised between going on and back, pulled
Both ways taut like a tightrope-walker,
Fingertips pointing the opposites,
Now bouncing tiptoe like a dropped ball
Or a kid skipping rope, come on, come on,
Running a scattering of steps sidewise,
How he teeters, skitters, tingles, teases,
Taunts them, hovers like an ecstatic bird,
He's only flirting, crowd him, crowd him,
Delicate, delicate, delicate, delicate—now!

Robert Francis

The Bulldozer

Bull by day
And dozes by night.

Would that the bulldozer
Dozed all the time

Would that the bulldozer
Would rust in peace.

His watchword
Let not a witch live

His battle cry
Better dead than red.

Give me if you must
The bull himself

But not the bulldozer
No, not the bulldozer.

Robert Francis

Thoreau In Italy

Lingo of birds was easier than lingo of peasants-
they were elusive, though, the birds, for excellent reasons.
He thought of Virgil, Virgil who wasn't there to chat with.

History he never forgave for letting Latin
lapse into Italian, a renegade jabbering
musical enough but not enough to call music

So he conversed with stones, imperial and papal.
Even the preposterous popes he could condone
a moment for the clean arrogance of their inscriptions.

He asked the Italians only to leave him in the past
alone, but this was what they emphatically never did.
Being the present, they never ceased to celebrate it.

Something was always brushing him on the street, satyr
or saint-impossible to say which the more foreign.
At home he was called touchy; here he knew he was.

Impossible to say. The dazzling nude with sex
lovingly displayed like carven fruit, the black
robe sweeping a holy and unholy dust.

Always the flesh whether to lacerate or kiss-
Conspiracy of fauns and clerics smiling back
and forth at each other acquiescently through leaves.

Caught between wan monastic mountains wearing the tonsure
and the all-siren, ever-dimpling sea, he saw
(how could he fail?) at heart geography to blame.

So home to Concord where (as he might have known he would)
he found the Italy he wanted to remember.
Why had he sailed if not for the savour of returning?

An Italy distilled of all extreme, conflict,
Collusion-an Italy without the Italians-
in whose green context he could con again his Virgil.

In cedar he read cypress, in the wild apple, olive.
His hills would stand up favorably to the hills of Rome.
His arrowheads could hold their own with are Etruscan.

And Walden clearly was his Mediterranean
whose infinite colors were his picture gallery.
How far his little boat transported him-how far.

He coughed discreetly and we likewise coughed;
we waited and we heard him clear his throat.

How to be perfect prisoners of the past
this was the thing but now he too is past.

Shall we go sit beside the Mississippi
and watch the riffraft driftwood floating by?

Robert Francis

Waxwings

Four Tao philosophers as cedar waxwings
chat on a February berry bush
in sun, and I am one.

Such merriment and such sobriety--
the small wild fruit on the tall stalk--
was this not always my true style?

Above an elegance of snow, beneath
a silk-blue sky a brotherhood of four
birds. Can you mistake us?

To sun, to feast, and to converse
and all together--for this I have abandoned
all my other lives.

Submitted by Larry Bole

Robert Francis