

Our Comfort is the Song

Edwin Arlington Robinson

(1869–1935)

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Edwin Arlington Robinson's villanelle 'The House on the Hill,' considered one of the finest examples of the form, appeared in his first book *The Torrent and the Night Before*, self-published in 1896. Though his mother and two brothers were living when he wrote it, the poem eerily predicts, and mourns with a grief that becomes universal, the utter destruction of his family.

The House on the Hill

They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around the sunken sill?
They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:
There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill:
They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say.

Caught daydreaming in school at the age of eleven, Robinson had his ear boxed severely, causing an injury that would plague him all his life. He was allowed to attend Harvard while receiving treatment from a Boston specialist, but in 1892 was called home to nurse his dying father. Three years later, Robinson's mother died of black diphtheria, a disease so dreaded that no doctor or minister, not even the undertaker, would agree to attend her. Robinson and his brothers were left to care for her through a terrible death, deliver her body to the cemetery, dig her grave themselves, and bury her. Four years later, Robinson's beloved brother Dean, who had become addicted to morphine meant to treat the excruciating neuralgia from which he suffered, died of a self-administered overdose, probably intentional. The great hope of the family, the handsome and lucky Herman, who had won the hand of Emma Shepherd, the love of Robinson's life, became a hopeless alcoholic, losing even the house Emma and his three daughters lived in. He died in a charity hospital. By 1908, Robinson's birth family were all gone away.

But for Robinson, whose article of faith is the endurance of the human spirit even in extremity, life is never just the personal and never just the loss. In the poem's third line, the speaker says, 'There is nothing more to say,' then immediately says more. The villanelle form itself undercuts, rather than underscores, the message by repeating it three additional times: there is always more to say. Each life ends; the life of a family changes until the family, too, is pushed out of time – but life continues. A human voice, somewhere, somehow, keeps talking, keeps trying to tell the tale, and the love beyond saying that paces back and forth in the quiet rooms, repeating and denying and ultimately insisting on itself is our survival and our meaning. It is a bleak comfort, the only kind Robinson could accept, but a true one nonetheless. And the 'ruin and decay' that comes to everyone, that eventually overtakes every poor stationary house on every hill is a marker of life's presence, of its once having had the temerity to be. We the living 'stray / Around the sunken sill' as if we are the ghosts who can't seem to stop haunting our dead. But Robinson knew that such vigilance is a way of being fiercely here, and that in the flame of the candle by which we try so hard to see our lost ones, life's meaning burns its brightest.

One of Robinson's great gifts is his ability to find the life implied in the demise, the gleam of light still transmitting from a fragment amidst the wreckage. He does not say who the poem's *they* are; the anonymity is inclusive: 'they' are all of us who have gone away or will someday go. Yet the feeling of loss evoked is personal. The poem is so affecting because Robinson, by showing us only an emptiness

that once was filled, insists that *we* say who the missing are. We all have our lost and not forgotten, and Robinson captures perfectly the everyday human courage, when one cannot get home again on this earth, in trying to find one's way in memory, the reachable series of rooms – 'shut and still,' with their 'broken walls and gray' – between life and death that we can enter as we need to, with a strange assurance that someone lost to us forever will be waiting for us there.

Robinson's obsessive theme is that the individual's often deluded yet indomitable response to the world is more real and lasting than any illusory notion of the collective. If Whitman sang of the 'Modern Man,' it was in the ecstatic tones of generality, as a proselytizer for the new religion of an idealized selfhood. But for Robinson, such a deeply reticent man that he described himself as having been 'born with [his] skin inside out,' the individual's limitations are the crux of personality, and society, the notion of a harmonious many, does not exist, except as a distortion (sometimes a torment) of the one. Richard Cory, the eponymous golden boy of one of Robinson's most anthologized poems ('And he was rich – yes, richer than a king – / And admirably schooled in every grace; / In fine, we thought that he was everything / To make us wish that we were in his place'), resists, finally, the simplistic, inaccurate impression of him formed in the minds of others: 'So on we worked, and waited for the light, / And went without the meat, and cursed the bread; / And Richard Cory, one calm summer night, / Went home and put a bullet through his head.' No reader escapes the violent shock of the last line (I remember the involuntary head jerk when I first read it as a teen), just as no human being escapes the ruthless, necessary dictates of the self. Miniver Cheevy, 'born too late,' who 'sighed for what was not, / And dreamed, and rested from his labors,' coughs and keeps on drinking, insisting on the superior reality of his escape from the wholly unsatisfactory actual. And the public persona of the speaker left behind after the festivities are over in 'On the Night of a Friend's Wedding' disintegrates into the wreckage of the true self:

But everything is all askew to-night,—
As if the time were come, or almost come,
For their untenanted mirage of me
To lose itself and crumble out of sight,
Like a tall ship that floats above the foam
A little while, and then breaks utterly.

As the poet James Dickey noted, 'No poet ever understood loneliness or separateness better than Robinson,' who admitted that 'many of [his] verses were written with a conscious hope that they might

make some despairing devil a little stronger and a little better satisfied with things – not as they are, but as they are to be.' When one tries to think of a way to describe the American character, one does not immediately come upon the word 'sadness,' but the sorrow at the heart of personal freedom, the uncertainty in which self-sovereignty and loneliness cohabit at the solitary hovel of the outcast, is Robinson's territory. Robert Frost, who greatly admired Robinson's poems, wrote of the 'distinction [that] must be made between griefs and grievances': 'Grievances are a form of impatience. Griefs are a form of patience.' He adds, 'What I like is griefs and I like them Robinsonianly profound.' In Robinson, Frost found a 'solid satisfaction in a sadness that is not just a fishing for ministration and consolation. Give us inmedicable woes – woes that nothing can be done for – woes flat and final.' Robinson knew that in a world in which 'everything is all askew,' patience, though it always asks too much of us just when we have the least to give, is sometimes our only means of survival. And there is a quiet, adult heroism in Robinson's seeing so clearly and writing so faithfully the world's grief without, in the process, accusing life of any wrongdoing. He extends to the mystery of existence the same mercy he holds out to his characters: the sure knowledge that, despite all the mistakes and regrets, life is only being itself. And as with Eben Flood, or Richard Cory, or Luke Havergal, what else could it be but what it is?

'I've always rather liked the queer, odd sticks of men, that's all,' admitted Robinson, the first American poet to take the interior lives of ordinary men and women, who seemed to him anything but ordinary, as his primary subject. Again and again in the poems, Robinson commits the fiercely compassionate act of truly seeing someone, often the only thing that can be done to show solidarity with another's plight.

In some cases, the character becomes the vehicle by which Robinson shyly approaches aspects of his own psyche. He drank to excess, like Eben Flood of 'Mr. Flood's Party,' the solitary on the moonlit hill above town who 'as a mother lays her sleeping child / Down tenderly, fearing it may awake, / [...] set the jug down slowly at his feet / With trembling care, knowing that most things break.' An utterly original image of the self in all its fragility, guarding its illusions against the self-awareness that might at any time awaken to shatter the dreamer's uneasy peace. Robinson's private dream of love for his sister-in-law Emma could not find a way into the world. Though he would receive help from the American president Teddy Roosevelt, who was deeply moved by his poetry, and eventually win three Pulitzer Prizes, he endured years of wretched poverty and neglect that made him a lifelong compatriot of the unnoticed and unsung. Despite his supreme

mastery of his craft, there is a deep-seated modesty in Robinson the man's approach, a chastened delight in ceding space to his poems' irredeemable eccentrics, an advocate's interest in helping the overlooked to become known somehow, and the forgotten to be remembered.

The Rat

As often as he let himself be seen
We pitied him, or scorned him, or deplored
The inscrutable profusion of the Lord
Who shaped as one of us a thing so mean—
Who made him human when he might have been
A rat, and so been wholly in accord
With any other creature we abhorred
As always useless and not always clean.

Now he is hiding all alone somewhere,
And in a final hole not ready then;
For now he is among those over there
Who are not coming back to us again.
And we who do the fiction of our share
Say less of rats and rather more of men.

In the first line, Robinson notes the skulking courage, the terrible risk and vulnerability, in being an outcast, the typical hero of a Robinson poem. For some, merely to scutter across someone else's sightline is to excite censure. To 'let [your]self be seen' is a perilous course, more obviously for some, but in the end, for any of us. Yet the jury of peers presented here, the 'we' who feel free to pity or scorn or to abhor, question even 'the inscrutable profusion of the Lord,' the manyness that might let such a one slip by (clearly God has made a mistake). The description of the rat in the final line of the octave, 'always useless and not always clean,' would seem to provide ample justification for such a creature's banishment. Yet what seems unforgivable in life seems slight in the face of death.

The ninth line, the volta that traditionally signals the turn from a Petrarchan sonnet's proposition (that the rat must go) to its resolution (all right, then, he is gone now – we were needed and we did not know) is remarkable for the way in which self-righteousness (society has succeeded in repulsing the interloper) is overthrown by empathy (the rat is now 'hiding all alone' in an indeterminate 'somewhere' no longer able to be found by our intentions). Trapped now, he has reached a final hole, one that hadn't yet been ready to receive him 'then.' So much depends on this small word, with its antecedent 'often' back in the first line, when it was still within the power of the 'we' to treat him differently. But now 'he is among those over

there' who are permanently parted from us in death – as they were in life, by virtue of our failure to see them with love. Whether you interpret the 'final hole' to be the grave and the rat's not coming back as his death, or whether you read it as a metaphor for the interim between someone's relinquishing of his hopes and his final end, the distance is unbridgeable now, and therefore unbearable. But if there is nothing left here for us to put our arms around, Robinson leaves us on the lookout for another chance.

His loving sighting of the rat before he disappears forever is what Robinson does best. More than any other American poet, perhaps, Robinson bets on us. Not to win, exactly. Wins hold no interest for him. And not to lose, either, because that we eventually will is a given. But to insist on our authentic selves, to suffer and yet dare to say, I am. In his knowing, but untypical, way, Robinson is the best friend a human being, even a rat, could ever find. He loves his characters, exults in them without condition, and believes that it is precisely within their clumsy, doomed attempts to somehow live in the world as it is that life's preciousness is realized.

The poet Robert Mezey has speculated that Robinson's propensity for giving highly individualized names to the characters who populate his poems (John Evereldown, Fleming Helphenstine, Bewick Finzer) might well have originated from the circumstances of his own naming. Already the parents of two boys, his mother and father had been desperately hoping for a girl. When in December of 1869 their third child was born a boy, they were so disappointed that they didn't bother to name him until the following summer, and then only at the insistence of a guest at a lawn party, where his name was chosen randomly from entries put into a hat. Arlington, which sounds like a family name handed down over generations, refers to Arlington, Massachusetts, the hometown of the guest who offered up the winning name, which Robinson always disliked, saying it sounded like someone kicking a can down the stairs. Though his family called him Win, he was known to his friends as E.A.R., a serendipitous set of initials for a poet with such a gifted ear for the deep privacies of the English language.

In the compelling 'Luke Havergal,' the intractable mystery of who we are is shown to be never less explicable or more powerful than in love, our point of deepest vulnerability:

Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal,
There where the vines cling crimson on the wall,
And in the twilight wait for what will come.
The leaves will whisper there of her, and some,
Like flying words, will strike you as they fall;

But go, and if you listen she will call.
Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal—
Luke Havergal.

No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies
To rift the fiery night that's in your eyes;
But there, where western glooms are gathering,
The dark will end the dark, if anything:
God slays himself with every leaf that flies,
And hell is more than half of paradise
No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies—
In eastern skies.

Out of a grave I come to tell you this,
Out of a grave I come to quench the kiss
That flames upon your forehead with a glow
That blinds you to the way that you must go.
Yes, there is yet one way to where she is,
Bitter, but one that faith may never miss.
Out of a grave I come to tell you this—
To tell you this.

There is the western gate, Luke Havergal,
There are the crimson leaves upon the wall.
Go, for the winds are tearing them away,—
Nor think to riddle the dead words they say,
Nor any more to feel them as they fall;
But go, and if you trust her she will call.
There is the western gate, Luke Havergal—
Luke Havergal.

The poem features an internal war: the question, as Shakespeare put it, of whether to be or not to be, pitting the light of compassionate love and the hope for healing, even at the furthest reach of reason, against the dark seductions of the grave. 'God slays Himself with every leaf that flies' is a direct argument for suicide: even God does it. The next line, 'And hell is more than half of paradise,' finds an interesting echo in the Gospel of Luke: 'Thou shalt be with me in Paradise,' here subverted by Robinson to refer not to Christ's words on the cross, but to the tortured logic of a man who, like Robinson himself, finds the way toward earthly love forever blocked. The 'kiss / that flames upon your forehead with a glow / that blinds you to the way that you must go' might be Christ's kiss that protects the saved, or Emma's sisterly kiss, always on the forehead, never on the lips. It gives no hope of transmutation but still is Robinson's/Luke's most precious possession on earth and a symbol of the love that keeps him alive, even as the pain of its denial tempts him toward death.

The 'crimson leaves upon the wall' are thought to refer to ivy vines on Oak Grove Cemetery's western fence; crimson in autumn, they could be seen as one stepped out of the Robinsons' front door in Gardiner, Maine. (I remember as a teen being terrified of those leaves. The mark of Robinson's genius is that all these years later, when I know what's coming, both in the poem, and at the end of life, I still am.) The Robinson-Palmer Monument in Oak Grove was inscribed on north, south, east, and west faces with the names and dates of deceased family members. As Robert Mezey reminds us in his notes to the poem, 'To go west is to die.' And Luke 13:22-30 is known as 'The Narrow Gate.' In verse twenty-four, the Lord advises, 'Strive to enter in at the strait [narrow] gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.' Verse twenty-nine continues, 'And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God.' But suicide would debar Luke from such a heavenly mercy as that. This is a poem for all those who cannot pass through the narrow gate — the frightened, the unworthy, the inappropriate lovers. It is for those cast out of the circle of love, who must try to be their own light.

'Luke Havergal' is one of the most mysterious poems ever written. Not that the situation remains overly obscure: this is a battle between life and death, light and dark, love and forgetting. And the stakes are eternity, whether or not you believe that ends with our lives on earth. No, the mystery contained in these four stanzas is nothing less than the obscure vitality of the human soul, the little gleam of light that gutters and persists. Because death is calling so loudly, even if it's only a whisper in the speaker's own head, the answering force of life is felt, too, at its highest pitch. Because Luke can never be with the one who gives his life meaning, we feel the ever unsounded power of love. Because he can discover no other purpose in living, we discover, there at the edge of the grave, which is where we learn it best, that our purpose in the world is to love. It is why we are important. Why Robinson, who is now in danger of being forgotten, believed us so worth the saving. And why, as America's Poet Laureate Donald Hall has said with sincere urgency, 'We must bring Robinson back.'

Robert Frost wrote that 'Robinson was a prince of heartachers amid countless achers of another part. The sincerity he wrought in was all sad. He asserted the sacred right of poetry to lean its breast to a thorn and sing its dolefullest.' Yes. Robinson's ear, once brutalized for dreaming, was attuned to all the griefs that go unsaid because they are so hard to say. He sang for the tongue-tied and the silent weepers, lost in time. And their comfort is the song.