

On the Move

"Man, you gotta Go."

THE blue jay scuffling in the bushes follows
Some hidden purpose, and the gust of birds
That spurts across the field, the wheelingswallows,
Have nested in the trees and undergrowth.
Seeking their instinct, or their poise, or both,
One moves with an uncertain violence
Under the dust thrown by a baffled sense
Or the dull thunder of approximate words.

On motorcycles, up the road, they come:
Small, black, as flies hanging in heat, the Boys,
Until the distance throws them forth, their hum
Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh.
In goggles, donned impersonality,
In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,
They strap in doubt—by hiding it, robust—
And almost hear a meaning in their noise.

Exact conclusion of their hardness
Has no shape yet, but from known whereabouts
They ride, direction where the tires press.
They scare a flight of birds across a field:
Much that is natural, to the will must yield.
Men manufacture both machine and soul,
And use what they imperfectly control
To dare a future from the taken routes.

It is a part solution, after all.
One is not necessarily discord
On earth; or damned because, half animal,
One lacks direct instinct, because one wakes
Afloat on movement that divides and breaks.
One joins the movement in a valueless world,
Choosing it, till, both hurler and the hurled,
One moves as well, always toward, toward.

A minute holds them, who have come to go:
The self-defined, astride the created will
They burst away; the towns they travel through
Are home for neither bird nor holiness,
For birds and saints complete their purposes.
At worst, one is in motion; and at best,
Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
One is always nearer by not keeping still.

Thom Gunn

The Dying Man

I

His Words

"Man has created death"

—W. B. YEATS

I heard a dying man
Say to his gathered kin,
"My soul's hung out to dry,
Like a fresh-salted skin;
I doubt I'll use it again.

"What's done is yet to come;
The flesh deserts the bone,
But a kiss widens the rose;
I know, as the dying know,
Eternity is Now.

"A man sees, as he dies,
Death's possibilities;
My heart sways with the world,
I am that final thing,
A man learning to sing."

II

What Now?

I

Caught in the dying light,
I thought myself reborn.
My hands turn into hooves.
I wear the leaden weight
Of what I did not do.

2

Places great with their dead,
The mire, the sodden wood,
Remind me to stay alive.
I am the clumsy man
The instant ages on.

3

I burned the flesh away,
In love, in lively May.
I turn my look upon
Another shape than hers
Now, as the casement blurs.

In the worst night of my will,
I dared to question all,
And would the same again.
What's beating at the gate?
Who's come can wait.

III

The Wall

What apparition from the conscious mind
Moans at the sill? What longs to be reborn?
The figure at my back is not my friend;
The hand upon my shoulder turns to horn.
I found my father when I did my work,
Only to lose myself in this small dark.

Though it reject dry borders of the seen,
What sensual eye can keep an image pure,
Leaning across a sill to greet the dawn?
A slow growth is a hard thing to endure.
When figures out of obscure shadow rave.
All sensual love's but dancing on a grave.

The wall has entered: I must love the wall,
A madman staring at perpetual night.
A spirit raging at the visible.
I breathe alone until my dark is bright.
Dawn's where the white is. Who would
know the dawn
When there's a dazzling dark behind the
sun?

Theodore Roethke

The Exacting Ghost

I SPEAK of an exacting ghost,
And if the world distrust my theme
I answer: This that moved me most
Was first a vision, then a dream.

By the new year you set great store.
The leaves have turned, and some are shed,
A sacred, moving metaphor
Is living in my mind, though dead.

I would have counted good years more;
But all is changed: your life has set.
I praise that living metaphor
And when I sleep I see it yet.

Why is it, though the conscious mind
Toils, the identity to keep
Forgetful ages leave behind,
No likeness matches that of sleep?

Last night, when sleep gave back the power
To see what nature had withdrawn,
I saw, corrected by that hour,
All likenesses the mind had drawn.

In crowded tavern you I found
Conversing there, yet knew you dead.
This was no ghost. When you turned round,
It was indeed your living head.

Time had returned, and pregnant wit
Lodged in your eyes. What health was this?
Never had context been so fit
To give old words new emphasis.

If hope was then restrained by doubt
Or joy by fear, I cannot tell.
All the disturbances of thought
Hung on my words; yet all seemed well.

You smiled. Your reassurance gave
My doubt its death, my hope its due.
I had always known beyond the grave,
I said, all would be well with you.

You fixed contracted, narrowing eyes
To challenge my instinctive sense.
The uncertainty of my surmise
Their penetration made intense.

"What right had you to know, what right
To arrogate so great a gift?"
I woke, and memory with the light
Brought back a weight I could not lift.

In sleep the dead and living year
Had stood one moment reconciled,
But in the next the accuser's spear
Had sacked the city of the child.

Why is it, though the conscious mind
Toils, the identity to keep
Forgetful years will leave behind,
No likeness matches that of sleep?

Vernon Watkins