

# The Abyss by Theodore Roethke

I

Is the stair here?  
Where's the stair?  
"The stair's right there,  
But it goes nowhere."

And the abyss? the abyss?  
"The abyss you can't miss:  
It's right where you are—  
A step down the stair."

Each time ever  
There always is  
Noon of failure,  
Part of a house.

In the middle of,  
Around a cloud,  
On top a thistle  
The wind's slowing.



## II

I have been spoken to variously  
 But heard little.  
 My inward witness is dismayed  
 By my unguarded mouth.  
 I have taken, too often, the dangerous path,  
 The vague, the arid,  
 Neither in nor out of this life.

Among us, who is holy?  
 What speech abides?  
 I hear the noise of the wall.  
 They have declared themselves,  
 Those who despise the dove.

Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues :  
 For the world invades me again,  
 And once more the tongues begin babbling.  
 And the terrible hunger for objects quails me :  
 The sill trembles.  
 And there on the blind  
 A furred caterpillar crawls down a string.  
 My symbol!  
 For I have moved closer to death, lived with death ;  
 Like a nurse he sat with me for weeks, a sly surly attendant,  
 Watching my hands, wary.  
 Who sent him away?  
 I'm no longer a bird dipping a beak into rippling water  
 But a mole winding through earth,  
 A night-fishing otter.

## III

Too much reality can be a dazzle, a surfeit ;  
 Too close immediacy an exhaustion :  
 As when the door swings open in a florist's storeroom—  
 The rush of smells strikes like a cold fire, the throat freezes,  
 And we turn back to the heat of August,  
 Chastened.

So the abyss—  
 The slippery cold heights,  
 After the blinding misery,  
 The climbing, the endless turning,  
 Strike like a fire,  
 A terrible violence of creation,  
 A flash into the burning heart of the abominable ;  
 Yet if we wait, unafraid, beyond the fearful instant,  
 The burning lake turns into a forest pool,  
 The fire subsides into rings of water,  
 A sunlit silence.

## IV

How can I dream except beyond this life?  
Can I outleap the sea—  
The edge of all the land, the final sea?  
I envy the tendrils, their eyeless seeking,  
The child's hand reaching into the coiled smilax,  
And I obey the wind at my back  
Bringing me home from the twilight fishing.

In this, my half-rest,  
Knowing slows for a moment,  
And not-knowing enters, silent,  
Bearing being itself,  
And the fire dances  
To the stream's  
Flowing.

Do we move toward God, or merely another condition?  
By the salt waves I hear a river's undersong,  
In a place of mottled clouds, a thin mist morning and evening.  
I rock between dark and dark,  
My soul nearly my own,  
My dead selves singing.  
And I embrace this calm—  
Such quiet under the small leaves!—  
Near the stem, whiter at root,  
A luminous stillness.

The shade speaks slowly:  
'Adore and draw near.  
Who knows this—  
Knows all.'

## V

I thirst by day. I watch by night.  
I receive! I have been received!  
I hear the flowers drinking in their light,  
I have taken counsel of the crab and the sea-urchin,  
I recall the falling of small waters,  
The stream slipping beneath the mossy logs,  
Winding down to the stretch of irregular sand,  
The great logs piled like matchsticks.

I am most immoderately married:  
The Lord God has taken my heaviness away;  
I have merged, like the bird, with the bright air,  
And my thought flies to the place by the bo-tree.

Being, not doing, is my first joy.

## *Five Poems by Donald Hall*

### **The Valley**

The hills bend water  
into the river  
on which the villages  
  
hang like clothespins.  
The valley huddles  
the grain of the sun,  
  
and the sun's animals  
graze in the valley.  
The fat barges  
  
low for the hillsides  
as they steer downstream  
to the coast and the city.  
  
This is the valley  
which encloses the sun  
in its warm body,  
  
and I keep the valley  
in my own body  
from the beaks of the wind.

### **The Husbands**

This one  
is a sail  
and catches  
the fist of  
the wind.  
  
This one  
is an elm  
which makes shade  
on a lawn  
and roosts  
  
birds. This  
one is a  
piano  
factory.  
This one  
  
is a  
Greek temple  
of clapboard.  
This one is  
gold bells.

### **The Bird**

Its eye on the  
side of its head  
flicks like a snake's  
tongue. Now it runs  
by hopping through  
the blades of stiff  
grass. Suddenly  
I feel shadow  
move over me.  
I see a bat  
with the body  
of a black horse.  
I run  
under the rock.