Language A: Literature
Part Two
International Baccalaureate Program
Bradley

The Poems of Robert Frost

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The white-tailed hornet lives in a balloon
That floats against the ceiling of the woodshed.
The exit he comes out at like a bullet
Is like the pupil of a pointed gun.
And having power to change his aim in flight,
He comes out more unerring than a bullet.
Verse could be written on the certainty
With which he penetrates my best defense
Of whirling hands and arms about the head
To stab me in the sneeze-nerve of a nostril.
Such is the instinct of it I allow.
Yet how about the insect certainty
That in the neighborhood of home and children
Is such an execrable judge of motives
As not to recognize in me the exception
I like to think I am in everything—
One who would never hang above a bookcase
His Japanese crepe-paper globe for trophy?
He stung me first and stung me afterward.
He rolled me off the field head over heels,
And would not listen to my explanations.

—stanza break—
That's when I went as visitor to his house.
As visitor at my house he is better.
Hawking for flies about the kitchen door,
In at one door perhaps and out another,
Trust him then not to put you in the wrong.
He won't misunderstand your freest movements.
Let him light on your skin unless you mind
So many prickly grappling feet at once.

He's after the domesticated fly
To feed his thumping grubs as big as he is.

Here he is at his best, but even here—
I watched him where he swooped, he pounced, he struck;
But what he found he had was just a nailhead.

He struck a second time. Another nailhead.

"Those are just nailheads. Those are fastened down."
Then disconcerted and not unannoyed,
He swooped and struck a little huckleberry
The way a player curls around a football.

"Wrong shape, wrong color, and wrong scent," I said.
The huckleberry rolled him on his head.
At last it was a fly. He shot and missed;
And the fly circled round him in derision.

But for the fly he might have made me think
He had been at his poetry, comparing
Nailhead with fly and fly with huckleberry:
How like a fly, how very like a fly.

But the real fly he missed would never do;
The missed fly made me dangerously skeptic.

—stanza break—

Won't this whole instinct thing bear revision?
Won't almost any theory bear revision?
To err is human, not to, animal.
Or so we pay the compliment to instinct,
Only too liberal of our compliment
That really takes away instead of gives.
Our worship, humor, conscientiousness
Went long since to the dogs under the table.
And served us right for having instituted
Downward comparisons. As long on earth
As our comparisons were stoutly upward
With gods and angels, we were men at least,
But little lower than the gods and angels.
But once comparisons were yielded downward,
Once we began to see our images
Reflected in the mud and even dust,
'Twas disillusion upon disillusion.
We were lost piecemeal to the animals,
Like people thrown out to delay the wolves.
Nothing but fallibility was left us,
And this day's work made even that seem doubtful.
(1936)
The Oven Bird

There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten. (5)
He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name the fall.
He says the highway dust is over all. (10)
The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing. (1916)
Two Look At Two

Love and forgetting might have carried them
A little further up the mountainside
With night so near, but not much further up.
They must have halted soon in any case
With thoughts of the path back, how rough it was (05)
With rock and washout, and unsafe in darkness;
When they were halted by a tumbled wall
With barbed-wire binding. They stood facing this,
Spending what onward impulse they still had
In one last look the way they must not go, (10)
On up the failing path, where, if a stone
Or earthslide moved at night, it moved itself;
No footstep moved it. "This is all," they sighed,
"Good-night to woods." But not so; there was more.
A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them (15)
Across the wall, as near the wall as they.
She saw them in their field, they her in hers.
The difficulty of seeing what stood still,
Like some up-ended boulder split in two,
Was in her clouded eyes: they saw no fear there. (20)
She seemed to think that two thus they were safe.
Then, as if they were something that, though strange,
She could not trouble her mind with too long,
She sighed and passed unscared along the wall.
"This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?" (25)
But no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.
A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them
Across the wall as near the wall as they.
This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,
Not the same doe come back into her place.  (30)
He viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,
As if to ask, "Why don't you make some motion?
Or give some sign of life? Because you can't.
I doubt if you're as living as you look."
Thus till he had them almost feeling dared  (35)
To stretch a proffering hand--and a spell-breaking.
Then he too passed unscared along the wall.
Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
"This must be all." It was all. Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,  (40)
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love.
(1923)
Bereft

Where had I heard this wind before
Change like this to a deeper roar?
What would it take my standing there for,
Holding open a restive door,
Looking downhill to a frothy shore? (05)
Summer was past and day was past.
Somber clouds in the west were massed.
Out in the porch’s sagging floor
Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
Blindly struck at my knee and missed. (10)
Something sinister in the tone
Told me my secret must be known:
Word I was in the house alone
Somehow must have gotten abroad,
Word I was in my life alone, (15)
Word I had no one left but God.
(1928)
Design

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth–
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right, (5)
Like the ingredients of a witches’ broth–
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.
What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all? (10)
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?–
If design govern in a thing so small. (1922, 1936)
I have been one acquainted with the night.

I have walked out in rain --and back in rain.

I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.

I have passed by the watchman on his beat and dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet when far away an interrupted cry came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye; and further still at an unearthly height

One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.

I have been one acquainted with the night.

(1923)
Desert Places

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it—it is theirs. (5)
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it be less— (10)
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home (15)
To scare myself with my own desert places.
(1936)
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:

"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

(1914)
Home Burial

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again. He spoke
Advancing toward her: "What is it you see
From up there always?—for I want to know."
She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull.
He said to gain time: "What is it you see?"
Mounting until she cowered under him.
"I will find out now—you must tell me, dear."
She, in her place, refused him any help,
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see.
But at last he murmured, "Oh," and again, "Oh."

"What is it—what?" she said.

"Just that I see."

"You don't," she challenged. "Tell me what it is."

"The wonder is I didn't see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it—that's the reason.
The little graveyard where my people are!
So small the window frames the whole of it.
Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?
There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill. We haven't to mind those.
But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child's mound——"

"Don't, don't, don't, don't," she cried.

She withdrew, shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
"Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"
"Not you!—Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it! I must get out of here. I must get air.— I don't know rightly whether any man can." (40)

"Amy! Don't go to someone else this time. Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs." He sat and fixed his chin between his fists. "There's something I should like to ask you, dear."

"You don't know how to ask it." (45)

"Help me, then."

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

"My words are nearly always an offense. I don't know how to speak of anything So as to please you. But I might be taught, I should suppose. I can't say I see how. A man must partly give up being a man With womenfolk. We could have some arrangement By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off Anything special you're a-mind to name. Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love. Two that don't love can't live together without them. But two that do can't live together with them." She moved the latch a little. "Don't—don't go. Don't carry it to someone else this time. Tell me about it if it's something human. Let me into your grief. I'm not so much Unlike other folks as your standing there Apart would make me out. Give me my chance. I do think, though, you overdo it a little. What was it brought you up to think it the thing To take your mother-loss of a first child So inconsolably—in the face of love. You'd think his memory might be satisfied——"

"There you go sneering now!" (70)

"I'm not, I'm not!"

You make me angry. I'll come down to you. God, what a woman! And it's come to this, A man can't speak of his own child that's dead."
"You can't because you don't know how to speak. If you had any feelings, you that dug With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave; I saw you from that very window there, Making the gravel leap and leap in air, Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly And roll back down the mound beside the hole. I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you. And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs To look again, and still your spade kept lifting. Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why, But I went near to see with my own eyes. You could sit there with the stains on your shoes Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave And talk about your everyday concerns. You had stood the spade up against the wall Outside there in the entry, for I saw it."

"I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed. I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed."

"I can repeat the very words you were saying: 'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.' Think of it, talk like that at such a time! What had how long it takes a birch to rot To do with what was in the darkened parlor? You couldn't care! The nearest friends can go With anyone to death, comes so far short They might as well not try to go at all. No, from the time when one is sick to death, One is alone, and he dies more alone. Friends make pretense of following to the grave, But before one is in it, their minds are turned And making the best of their way back to life And living people, and things they understand. But the world's evil. I won't have grief so If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"

"There, you have said it all and you feel better. You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door."
The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up?
Amy! There's someone coming down the road!" (115)

"You—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you——"

"If—you—do!" She was opening the door wider.
"Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will!—" (120)
After Apple-Picking

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough. (05)
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass (10)
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell, (15)
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear. (20)
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound (25)
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.

There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch, (30)
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.

For all

That struck the earth,

No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,

Went surely to the cider-apple heap (35)
As of no worth.

One can see what will trouble

This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.

Were he not gone,

The woodchuck could say whether it's like his (40)
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,

Or just some human sleep.

(1914)
The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other (5)
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said (10)
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them “Supper.” At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant, (15)
Leaped out at the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap–
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy’s first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand (20)
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all–
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart–
He saw all spoiled. “Don’t let him cut my hand off– (25)
The doctor, when he comes. Don’t let him, sister!”
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of the ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright. (30)
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.
(1916)
Birches

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy’s been swinging them.
But swinging doesn’t bend them down to stay
As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun’s warmth makes them shed crystals shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball, (25)
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he subdued his father’s trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise (35)
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground. (40)
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It’s when I’m weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs (45)
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig’s having lashed across it open.
I’d like to get away from earth a while
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me (50)
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.
I’d like to go by climbing a birch tree,

And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk (55)

Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,

But dipped its top and set me down again.

That would be good both going and coming back.

One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

(1916)