

**ROBERT FROST ON 'THE SOUND OF SENSE'
AND ON 'SENTENCE SOUNDS'**

Not only young people but all people tend to write badly, because they do not write with their hearing. They work only with their brains, ignoring their bodies; they see no need of matching every clause to what Robert Frost called a 'live sentence sound'.

Frost's simple, but hugely valuable, remarks about this are scattered throughout his letters and early lectures; I collect some of them here hoping that perhaps a student, straying to this page by chance, will take them to heart, and start to write with his hearing.

I hope that no one will be put off by a trait of these pages that might seem tedious, a rather constant boasting ("I alone" etc. etc.; see e.g. the first excerpt below). He boasts not because he wants glory and a patent, etc., but on the contrary, because it exasperated him that *no one* seemed to know this simple secret, or see how important it is. (It reminds me a bit of Osip Mandelstam's 'boasting' in his essay called 'Fourth Prose'. Enraged at the Soviet Writer's Union, which charged him with not being an honest Soviet writer, he said: "Yes, I even have no handwriting! -- because I never 'write'. I alone in Russia work from the voice -- while all around the unmitigated scum 'write'.")

Most of these remarks are about verse; but all apply *equally* to prose.

Of course, worth more than all his remarks about live 'sentence sounds', precious though they are, is his actual miming of them. His ear for the subtlest tones of American speech is so sharp that it makes every other writer's seem wretched! His brief illustrations taken from his own verse hardly do justice to it; to show it better I copy a poem by him at the end of this file.

(From a Letter to John Bartlett, 4 July 1913) (...) I am possibly the only person going who works on any but a worn out theory (principle I had better say) of versification. You see the great successes in recent poetry have been made on the assumption that the music of words was a matter of harmonised vowels and consonants. Both Swinburne and Tennyson arrived largely at effects in assonation. But they were on the wrong track or at any rate on a short track. They went the length of it. Any one else who goes that way must go after them. And that's where most are going. I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense. Now it is possible to have sense without the sound of sense (as in much prose that is supposed to pass muster but makes very dull reading) and the sound of sense without sense (as in Alice in Wonderland which makes anything but dull reading). The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words. Ask yourself how these sentences would sound without the words in which they are embodied:

You mean to tell me you can't read?

I said no such thing.

Well read then.

You're not my teacher.

==

He says it's too late.

Oh, say!

Damn an Ingersoll watch anyway.

==

One--two--three--go!

No good! Come back—come back.

Haslam go down there and make those kids get out of the track.

Those sounds are summoned by the audial imagination and they must be positive, strong, and definitely and unmistakably indicated by the context. The reader must be at no loss to give his voice the posture proper to the sentence. The simple declarative sentence used in making a plain statement is one sound. But Lord love ye it mustn't be worked to death. It is against the law of nature that whole poems should be written in it. If they are written they won't be read. The sound of sense, then. You get that. It is the abstract vitality of our speech. It is pure sound--pure form. One who concerns himself with it more than the subject is an artist. But remember we are still talking merely of the raw material of poetry. An ear and an appetite for these sounds of sense is the first qualification of a writer, be it of prose or verse.

(From a letter to John Bartlett, 22 Feb. 1914) It is so [by listening to sentence-sounds] and not otherwise that we get the variety that makes it fun to write and read. The ear does it. The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader. I have known people who could read without hearing the sentence sounds and they were the fastest readers. Eye readers we call them. They can get the meaning by glances. But they are bad readers because they miss the best part of what a good writer puts into his work.

Remember that the sentence sound often says more than the words. It may even as in irony convey a meaning opposite to the words.

I wouldn't be writing all this if I didn't think it the most important thing I know. I write it partly for my own benefit, to clarify my ideas for an essay or two I am going to write some fine day (not far distant.)

To judge a poem or piece of prose you go the same way to work—apply the one test—greatest test. You listen for the sentence sounds. If you find some of those not bookish, caught fresh from the mouths of people, some of them striking, all of them definite and recognizable, so recognizable that with a little trouble you can place them and even name them, you know you have found a writer.

(From a letter to Sidney Cox, Dec. 1914) Dear Cox

I am glad you are going into it with me and one or two others. [Edward] Thomas thinks he will write a book on what my definition of the sentence means for literary criticism. If I didn't drop into poetry every time I sat down to write I should be tempted to do a

book on what it means for education. It may take some time to make people see—they are so accustomed to look at the sentence as a grammatical cluster of words. The question is where to begin the assault on their prejudice. For my part I have about decided to begin by demonstrating by examples that the sentence as a sound in itself apart from the word sounds is no mere figure of speech. I shall show the sentence sound saying all that the sentence conveys with little or no help from the meaning of the words. I shall show the sentence sound opposing the sense of the words as in irony. And so till I establish the distinction between the grammatical sentence and the vital sentence. The grammatical sentence is merely accessory to the other and chiefly valuable as furnishing a clue to the other. You recognize the sentence sound in this: *You, you—!* It is so strong that if you hear it as I do you have to pronounce the two you's differently. Just so many sentence sounds belong to man as just so many vocal runs belong to one kind of bird. We come into the world with them and create none of them. What we feel as creation is only selection and grouping. We summon them from Heaven knows where under excitement with the audile [audial] imagination. And unless we are in an imaginative mood it is no use trying to make them, they will not rise. We can only write the dreary kind of grammatical prose known as professorial. Because that is to be seen at its worst in translations especially from the classics, Thomas thinks he will take up the theme apropos of somebody's scholarly translation of Horace or Catullus some day when such a book comes his way for review.

(From a letter to John Freeman, 5 Nov. 1925) (...) Sentences may have the greatest monotony to the eye in length and structure and yet the greatest variety to the ear in the tones of voice they carry. As in Emerson.

The imagination of the ear flags first as the spirit dies down in writing. The "voices" fail you.

Some of the highlights, the most vivid imaginative passages in poetry are of the eye, but more perhaps are the ear.

The vocabulary may be what you please though I like it not too literary; but the tones of voice must be caught fresh and fresh from life. Poetry is a fresh look and a fresh listen.

The actor's gift is to execute the vocal image at the mouth. The writer's is to implicate the vocal image in a sentence and fasten it printed to the page.

I ask no machine to tell me the length of a syllable. Its length with me is entirely expressional. "Oh" may be as long as prolonged agony or as short as slight surprise.

Some have proposed inventing a notation to make sure [of] the tones intended. Some have tried to help themselves with marginal adjectives. But the sentences are a notation for indicating tones of voice. A good sentence does double duty: it conveys one meaning by word and syntax, another by the tone of voice it indicates. In irony the tone indicated contradicts the words.

One might make a distinction between intoned poetry and intonational poetry. Of course they interpenetrate.

The brute tones of our human throat that may once have been all our meaning. I suppose there is one for every feeling we shall ever feel, yes and for every thought we shall ever think. Such is the limitation of our thought.

The tones dealt in in poetry may be the broadest or again they may be the most delicate. Vocal reality. . . . observation of the voice.

Even in lyric the main thing is that every sentence should be come at from a different dramatic slant.

Fool psychologists treat the five sense elements in poetry as of equal weight. One of them is nearly the whole thing. The tone-of-voice element is the unbroken flow on which the others are carried along like sticks and leaves and flowers.

LECTURE TO THE BROWNE AND NICHOLS SCHOOL, 10 MAY 1915 (transcribed by George Browne).

Mr. Browne has alluded to the seeing eye. I want to call your attention to the function of the imagining ear. Your attention is too often called to the poet with extraordinarily vivid sight, and with the faculty of choosing exceptionally telling words for the sight. But equally valuable, even for schoolboy themes, is the use of the ear for material for compositions. When you listen to a speaker, you hear words, to be sure,—but you also hear tones. The problem is to note them, to imagine them again, and to get them down in writing. But few of you probably ever thought of the possibility or of the necessity of doing this. You are generally told to distinguish simple, compound, and complex sentences,—long and short, —periodic and loose, to varying sentence structure, etc. “Not all sentences are short, like those of Emerson, the writer of the best American prose. You must vary your sentences, like Stevenson, etc.” All this is missing the vital element. I always had a dream of getting away from it, when I was teaching school,—and, in my own writing and teaching, of bringing in the living sounds of speech. For it is a fundamental fact that certain forms depend on the sound;—e.g., note the various tones of irony, acquiescence, doubt, etc. in the farmer’s “I guess so.” And the great problem is, can you get these tones down on paper? How do you tell the tone? By the context, by the animating spirit of the living voice. And how many tones do you think there are flying round? Hundreds of them—hundreds never brought to book. Compare T. E. Brown’s *To a Blackbird*: “O blackbird, what a boy you are”. Compare W. B. Yeats’s “Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream”

I went to church, once (loud laughter) —this will sound funnier when I tell you that the only thing I remember is the long line of “Nows” that I counted. The repetition grew tiresome. I knew just when to expect a ‘Now’, and I knew beforehand just what the tone was going to be. There is no objection to repetition of the right kind,—only to

the mechanical repetition of the tone. It is all right to repeat, if there is something for the voice to do. The vital thing, then, to consider in all composition, in prose or verse, is the ACTION of the voice,—sound-posturing, gesture. Get the stuff of life into the technique of your writing. That's the only escape from dry rhetoric.

When I began to teach, and long after I began to write, I didn't know what the matter was with me and my writing and with other people's writing. I recall distinctly the joy with which I had the first satisfaction of getting an expression adequate for my thought. I was so delighted that I had to cry. It was the second stanza of the little poem on the Butterfly, written in my eighteenth year. And the sound in the mouths of men I found to be the basis of all effective expression,—not merely words or phrases, but sentences,—living things flying round,—the vital parts of speech. And my poems are to be read in the appreciative tones of this live speech. For example, there are five tones in this first stanza,

The Pasture

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;	<i>(light, informing tone)</i>
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away	<i>("only" tone—reservation)</i>
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):	<i>(supplementary, possibility)</i>
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.	<i>(free tone, assuring)</i>
	<i>(afterthought, inviting)</i>
	<i>"Rather well for me" —</i>
I'm going out to fetch the little calf	<i>(Similar, free, persuasive,</i>
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,	<i>assuring and inviting tones</i>
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.	<i>in second stanza)</i>
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.	

(Similar demonstration in "Mending Wall". . . .) Just see and hear the two farmers across the old wall in the spring, picking up stones, and placing them back in their places on the wall. Note the tone, challenging and threatening, at

"We have to use a spell to make them balance:

'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'"

Playful note at "Oh, just another kind of outdoor game" —

Idiomatic balance, "He is all pine and I am apple orchard."

Incredulity of the other's dictum: "Good fences make good neighbors." and "But here there are no cows." Shaking his head as he says, "Before I built a wall" etc,—Can't you see him? and hear him?

So, my advice to you boys in all your composition work is: "Gather your sentences by ear, and reimagine them in your writing." [. . .]

From "ROBERT FROST, NEW AMERICAN POET", an interview by the critic and anthologist William Stanley Braithwaite, originally published in the Boston Evening Transcript for May 8, 1915. (The quotations from Frost in this interview are very plainly not in Frost's own earthy "voice"; one sees that Braithwaite remembers the thoughts but not the exact words.)

[. . .] The poet was in his twentieth year when he realized that the speech of books and the speech of life were far more fundamentally different than was supposed. His models up to this period, as with all youthful poets and writers, had been literary models. But he found quite by accident that real artistic speech was only to be copied from life. On his New Hampshire farm he discovered this in the character of a man with whom he used to drive along the country roads. Having discovered this speech he set about copying it in poetry, getting the principles down by rigorous observation and reproduction through the long years which intervened to the publication of his books.

He also discovered that where English poetry was greatest it was by virtue of this same method in the poet, and, as I shall show, in his talk with me he illustrated it in Shakespeare, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Emerson. That these poets did not formulate the principles by which they obtained these subtle artistic effects, but accomplished it wholly unconscious of its exact importance, he also suggested. But with a deliberate recognition of it as a poetic value in the poets to come, he sees an entirely new development in the art of verse.

[. . .]

"First," he said, "let me find a name for this principle which will convey to the mind what I mean by this effect which I try to put into my poetry. And secondly, do not let your readers be deceived that this is anything new. Before I give you the details in proof of its importance, in fact of its essential place in the writing of the highest poetry, let me quote these lines from Emerson's 'Monadnoc,' where, in almost a particular manner, he sets forth unmistakably what I mean:

Now in sordid weeds they sleep,
In dulness now their secret keep;
Yet, will you learn our ancient speech,
These the masters who can teach.
Fourscore or a hundred words
All their vocal muse affords;
But they turn them in a fashion
Past clerks' or statesmen's art or passion.
I can spare the college bell,

And the learned lecture, well;
Spare the clergy and libraries,
Institutes and dictionaries,
For that hearty English root
Thrives here, unvalued, underfoot.
Rude poets of the tavern hearth,
Squandering your unquoted mirth,
Which keeps the ground and never soars,
While Jake retorts and Reuben roars;
Scoff of yeoman strong and stark,
Goes like bullet to its mark;
While the solid curse and jeer
Never balk the waiting ear.

“Understand these lines perfectly and you will understand what I mean when I call this principle ‘sound-posturing’ or, more liter ally, getting the sound of sense.

“What we do get in life and miss so often in literature is the sentence sounds that underlie the words. Words in themselves do not convey meaning, and to [. . . prove] this, which may seem entirely unreasonable to any one who does not understand the psychology of sound, let us take the example of two people who are talking on the other side of a closed door, whose voices can be heard but whose words cannot be distinguished. Even though the words do not carry, the sound of them does, and the listener can catch the meaning of the conversation. This is because every meaning has a particular sound-posture; or, to put it in another way, the sense of every meaning has a particular sound which each individual is instinctively familiar with and without at all being conscious of the exact words that are being used is able to under stand the thought, idea, or emotion that is being conveyed.

“What I am most interested in emphasizing in the application of this belief to art is the sentence of sound, because to me a sen tence is not interesting merely in conveying a meaning of words. It must do something more; it must convey a meaning by sound.”

“But,” I queried, “do you not come into conflict with metrical sounds to which the laws of poetry conform in creating rhythm?”

“No,” the poet replied, “because you must understand this sound of which I speak has principally to do with tone. It is what Mr. Bridges, the Poet Laureate, characterized as speech-rhythm. Meter has to do with beat, and sound-posture has a definite relation as an alternate tone between the beats. The two are one in creation but separate in analysis.

“If we go back far enough we will discover the sound of sense existed before words, that something in the voice or vocal gesture made primitive man convey a

meaning to his fellow before the race developed a more elaborate and concrete symbol of communication in language. I have even read that our American Indians possessed, besides a picture-language, a means of communication (though it was not said how far it was developed) by the sound of sense. And what is this but calling up with the imagination, and recognizing, the images of sound?

“When Wordsworth said, ‘Write with your eye on the object,’ or (in another sense) it was important to visualize, he really meant something more. That something carries out what I mean by writing with your ear to the voice.

“This is what Wordsworth did himself in all his best poetry, proving that there can be no creative imagination unless there is a summoning up of experience, fresh from life, which has not hitherto been evoked. The power, however, to do this does not last very long in the life of a poet. After ten years Wordsworth had very nearly exhausted his, giving us only flashes of it now and then. As language only really exists in the mouths of men, here again Wordsworth was right in trying to reproduce in his poetry not only the words—and in their limited range, too, actually used in common speech—but their sound.

“To carry this idea a little further it does not seem possible to me that a man can read on the printed page what he has never heard. Nobody today knows how to read Homer and Virgil perfectly, because the people who spoke Homer’s Greek and Virgil’s Latin are as dead as the sound of their language.¹

¹ * What Frost says about Greek and Latin poetry, that we are deaf to it, because we have lost their voices, is only partly true. He exaggerates, I think from ignorance. For example, here I feel that I can hear the voice of Ennius:

Nemo me lacrumis decoret nec funera fletu.
faxit cur? uolito uiuu' per ora uirum.

Nobody ever adorn me with tears, nor my death with sobbing.
Why do that, when I flit live in the mouths of men?

Vergil's voice was very different, more sensuous and much more musical; nevertheless one can often hear it. For example, precisely here where he echoes that couplet by Ennius:

. . . temptanda uia est, qua me quoque possim
tollere humo uictorque uirum uolitare per ora.

. . . I, too, must find a path where I can too:
leave earth and flit, victorious, in men's mouths.

In the ancient 'Life of Vergil' (Donatus' *Vita Vergiliana*, ch. 22) there is an anecdote which to me seems authentic, about how Vergil composed: '*It is said that when he wrote the Georgics, his habit was to dictate very many verses which he had pondered in the morning, and in revising them throughout the day, to reduce them to a very small number, saying wittily that he give birth to his poem as a mother bear did, that he shaped it just by licking it (ursae more... et lambendo demum effingere).*'

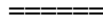
"On the other hand, to further emphasize the impossibility of words rather than sound conveying the sense of meaning, take the matter of translation. Really to understand and catch all that is embodied in a foreign masterpiece it must be read in the original, because while the words may be brought over, the tone cannot be.

"In the matter of poetry," the poet continued, "there is a subtle differentiation between sound and the sound of sense, which ought to be perfectly understood before I can make clear my position.

"For a second let me turn aside and say that the beginning of literary form is in some turn given to the sentence in folk speech. Art is the amplification and sophistication of the proverbial turns of speech.

"All folk speech is musical. In primitive conditions man has not at his aid reactions by which he can quickly and easily convey his ideas and emotions. Consequently, he has to think more deeply to call up the image for the communication of his meaning. It was the actuality he sought; and thinking more deeply, not in the speculative sense of science or scholarship, he carried out Carlyle's assertion that if you 'think deep enough you think musically.'

"Poetry has seized on this sound of speech and carried it to artificial and meaningless lengths. We have it exemplified in Sidney Lanier's musical notation of verse, where all the tones of the human voice in natural speech are entirely eliminated, leaving the sound of sense without root in experience."



SNOW

The three stood listening to a fresh access
Of wind that caught against the house a moment,
Gulped snow, and then blew free again -- the Coles
Dressed, but dishevelled from some hours of sleep,
Meserve belittled in the great skin coat he wore.
Meserve was first to speak. He pointed backward
Over his shoulder with his pipe-stem, saying,
"You can just see it glancing off the roof
Making a great scroll upward toward the sky,
Long enough for recording all our names on. --
I think I'll just call up my wife and tell her
I'm here -- so far -- and starting on again.
I'll call her softly so that if she's wise
And gone to sleep, she needn't wake to answer."
Three times he barely stirred the bell, then listened.

"Why, Lett, still up? Lett, I'm at Cole's. I'm late.
I called you up to say Good-night from here
Before I went to say Good-morning there. --
I thought I would. -- I know, but, Lett -- I know --
I could, but what's the sense? The rest won't be
So bad. -- Give me an hour for it. -- Ho, ho,
Three hours to here! But that was all up hill;
The rest is down. -- Why no, no, not a wallow:
They kept their heads and took their time to do it
Like darlings, both of them. They're in the barn. --
My dear, I'm coming just the same. I didn't
Call you to ask you to invite me home. -- "
He lingered for some word she wouldn't say,
Said it at last himself, "Good-night," and then,
Getting no answer, closed the telephone.
The three stood in the lamplight round the table
With lowered eyes a moment till he said,
"I'll just see how the horses are."

"Yes, do,"

Both the Coles said together. Mrs. Cole
Added: "You can judge better after seeing. --
I want you here with me, Fred. Leave him here,
Brother Meserve. You know to find your way
Out through the shed."

"I guess I know my way,
I guess I know where I can find my name
Carved in the shed to tell me who I am
If it don't tell me where I am. I used
To play -- "

"You tend your horses and come back.
Fred Cole, you're going to let him!"

"Well, aren't you?

How can you help yourself?"

"I called him Brother.
Why did I call him that?"

"It's right enough.
That's all you ever heard him called round here.
He seems to have lost off his Christian name."
"Christian enough I should call that myself.
He took no notice, did he? Well, at least
I didn't use it out of love of him,
The dear knows. I detest the thought of him

With his ten children under ten years old.
I hate his wretched little Racker Sect,
All's ever I heard of it, which isn't much.
But that's not saying -- Look, Fred Cole, it's twelve,
Isn't it, now? He's been here half an hour.
He says he left the village store at nine.
Three hours to do four miles -- a mile an hour
Or not much better. Why, it doesn't seem
As if a man could move that slow and move.
Try to think what he did with all that time.
And three miles more to go!"

"Don't let him go.

Stick to him, Helen. Make him answer you.
That sort of man talks straight on all his life
From the last thing he said himself, stone deaf
To anything anyone else may say.
I should have thought, though, you could make him hear you."
"What is he doing out on a night like this?
Why can't he stay at home?"

"He had to preach."

"It's no night to be out."

"He may be small,

He may be good, but one thing's sure, he's tough."

"And strong of stale tobacco."

"He'll pull through."

"You only say so. Not another house

Or shelter to put into from this place
To theirs. I'm going to call his wife again."

"Wait and he may. Let's see what he will do.

Let's see if he will think of her again.

But then I doubt he's thinking of himself

He doesn't look on it as anything."

"He shan't go -- there!"

"It is a night, my dear."

"One thing: he didn't drag God into it."

"He don't consider it a case for God."

"You don't think so, do you? You don't know the kind.

He's getting up a miracle this minute.

Privately -- to himself, right now, he's thinking

He'll make a case of it if he succeeds,

But keep still if he fails."

"Keep still all over.

He'll be dead -- dead and buried."

"Such a trouble!

Not but I've every reason not to care
What happens to him if it only takes
Some of the sanctimonious conceit
Out of one of those pious scalawags."

"Nonsense to that! You want to see him safe."

"You like the runt."

"Don't you a little?"

"Well,

I don't like what he's doing, which is what
You like, and like him for."

"Oh, yes you do.

You like your fun as well anyone;
Only you women have to put these airs on
To impress men. You've got us so ashamed
Of being men we can't look at a good fight
Between two boys and not feel bound to stop it.
Let the man freeze an ear or two, I say. --
He's here. I leave him all to you. Go in
And save his life. -- All right, come in, Meserve.
Sit down, sit down. How did you find the horses?"
"Fine, fine."

"And ready for some more? My wife here
Says it won't do. You've got to give it up."

"Won't you to please me? Please! If I say please?
Mr. Meserve, I'll leave it to your wife.

What did your wife say on the telephone?"
Meserve seemed to heed nothing but the lamp
Or something not far from it on the table.

By straightening out and lifting a forefinger,
He pointed with his hand from where it lay
Like a white crumpled spider on his knee:

"That leaf there in your open book! It moved
Just then, I thought. It stood erect like that,
There on the table, ever since I came,
Trying to turn itself backward or forward,
I've had my eye on it to make out which;
If forward, then it's with a friend's impatience --
You see I know -- to get you on to things
It wants to see how you will take, if backward
It's from regret for something you have passed

And failed to see the good of. Never mind,
Things must expect to come in front of us
A many times -- I don't say just how many --
That varies with the things -- before we see them.
One of the lies would make it out that nothing
Ever presents itself before us twice.
Where would we be at last if that were so?
Our very life depends on everything's
Recurring till we answer from within.
The thousandth time may prove the charm. -- That leaf!
It can't turn either way. It needs the wind's help.
But the wind didn't move it if it moved.
It moved itself. The wind's at naught in here.
It couldn't stir so sensitively poised
A thing as that. It couldn't reach the lamp
To get a puff of black smoke from the flame,
Or blow a rumple in the collie's coat.
You make a little foursquare block of air,
Quiet and light and warm, in spite of all
The illimitable dark and cold and storm,
And by so doing give these three, lamp, dog,
And book-leaf, that keep near you, their repose;
Though for all anyone can tell, repose
May be the thing you haven't, yet you give it.
So false it is that what we haven't we can't give;
So false, that what we always say is true.
I'll have to turn the leaf if no one else will.
It won't lie down. Then let it stand. Who cares?"
"I shouldn't want to hurry you, Meserve,
But if you're going -- Say you'll stay, you know?
But let me raise this curtain on a scene,
And show you how it's piling up against you.
You see the snow-white through the white frost?
Ask Helen how far up the sash it's climbed
Since last we read the gage."

"It looks as if
Some pallid thing had squashed its features flat
And its eyes shut with overeagerness
To see what people found so interesting
In one another, and had gone to sleep
Of its own stupid lack of understanding,
Or broken its white neck of mushroom stuff

Short off, and died against the window-pane."
"Brother Meserve, take care, you'll scare yourself
More than you will us with such nightmare talk.
It's you it matters to, because it's you
Who have to go out into it alone."
"Let him talk, Helen, and perhaps he'll stay."
"Before you drop the curtain -- I'm reminded:
You recollect the boy who came out here
To breathe the air one winter -- had a room
Down at the Avery's? Well, one sunny morning
After a downy storm, he passed our place
And found me banking up the house with snow.
And I was burrowing in deep for warmth,
Piling it well above the window-sills.
The snow against the window caught his eye.
"Hey, that's a pretty thought" -- those were his words.
"So you can think it's six feet deep outside,
While you sit warm and read up balanced rations.
You can't get too much winter in the winter."
Those were his words. And he went home and all
But banked the daylight out of Avery's windows.
Now you and I would go to no such length.
At the same time you can't deny it makes
It not a mite worse, sitting here, we three,
Playing our fancy, to have the snowline run
So high across the pane outside. There where
There is a sort of tunnel in the frost
More like a tunnel than a hole -- way down
At the far end of it you see a stir
And quiver like the frayed edge of the drift
Blown in the wind. I like that -- I like that.
Well, now I leave you, people."

"Come, Meserve,

We thought you were deciding not to go --
The ways you found to say the praise of comfort
And being where you are. You want to stay."
"I'll own it's cold for such a fall of snow.
This house is frozen brittle, all except
This room you sit in. If you think the wind
Sounds further off, it's not because it's dying;
You're further under in the snow -- that's all --
And feel it less. Hear the soft bombs of dust

It bursts against us at the chimney mouth,
And at the eaves. I like it from inside
More than I shall out in it. But the horses
Are rested and it's time to say good-night,
And let you get to bed again. Good-night,
Sorry I had to break in on your sleep."
"Lucky for you you did. Lucky for you
You had us for a half-way station
To stop at. If you were the kind of man
Paid heed to women, you'd take my advice
And for your family's sake stay where you are.
But what good is my saying it over and over?
You've done more than you has a right to think
You could do -- now. You know the risk you take
In going on."

"Our snow-storms as a rule
Aren't looked on man-killers, and although
I'd rather be the beast that sleeps the sleep
Under it all, his door sealed up and lost,
Than the man fighting to keep above it,
Yet think of the small birds at roost and not
In nests. Shall I be counted less than they are?
Their bulk in water would be frozen rock
In no time out to-night. And yet to-morrow
They will come budding boughs from tree to tree
Flirting their wings and saying Chickadee,
As if not knowing what you meant by the word storm."
"But why when no one wants you to go on?
Your wife -- she doesn't want you to. We don't,
And you yourself don't want to. Who else is there?"
"Save us from being cornered by a woman.
Will, there's" -- She told Fred afterward that in
The pause right there, she thought the dreaded word
Was coming, "God." But no, he only said
"Well, there's -- the storm. That says I must go on.
That wants me as a war might if it came.
Ask any man."

He threw her that as something
To last her till he got outside the door.
He had Cole with him to the barn to see him off.
When Cole returned he found his wife still standing
Beside the table near the open book,

Not reading it.

"Well, what kind of a man
Do you call that?" she said.

"He had the gift
Of words, or is it tongues, I ought to say?"
"Was ever such a man for seeing likeness?"
"Or disregarding people's civil questions --
What? We've found out in one hour more about him
Than we had seeing him pass by in the road
A thousand times. If that's the way he preaches!
You didn't think you'd keep him after all.
Oh, I'm not blaming you. He didn't leave you
Much say in the matter, and I'm just as glad
We're not in for a night of him. No sleep
If he had stayed. The least thing set him going.
It's quiet as an empty church without him."
"But how much better off are we as it is?
We'll have to sit here till we know he's safe."
"Yes, I suppose you'll want to, but I shouldn't.
He knows what he can do, or he wouldn't try.
Get into bed I say, and get some rest.
He won't come back, and if he telephones,
It won't be for an hour or two."

"Well then.

We can't be any help by sitting here
And living his fight through with him, I suppose."

Cole had been telephoning in the dark.

Mrs. Cole's voice came from an inner room:

"Did she call you or you call her?"

"She me.

You'd better dress: you won't go back to bed.

We must have been asleep: it's three and after."

"Had she been ringing long? I'll get my wrapper.

I want to speak to her."

"All she said was,
He hadn't come and had he really started."

"She knew he had, poor thing, two hours ago."

"He had the shovel. He'll have made a fight."

"Why did I ever let him leave this house!"

"Don't begin that. You did the best you could
To keep him -- though perhaps you didn't quite

Conceal a wish to see him show the spunk
To disobey you. Much his wife'll thank you."
"Fred, after all I said! You shan't make out
That it was any way but what it was.
Did she let on by any word she said
She didn't thank me?"

"When I told her 'Come,'
"Well then," she said, and "Well then" -- like a threat.
And then her voice came scraping slow: "Oh, you,
Why did you let him go?"

"Asked why we let him?
You let me there. I'll ask her why she let him.
She didn't dare to speak when he was here.
Their number's -- twenty-one? The thing won't work.
Someone's receiver's down. The handle stumbles.
The stubborn thing, the way it jars your arm!
It's theirs. She's dropped it from her hand and gone."
"Try speaking. Say 'Hello!'"

"Hello. Hello."

"What do you hear?"

"I hear an empty room --
You know -- it sounds that way. And yes, I hear --
I think I hear a clock -- and windows rattling.
No step though. If she's there she's sitting down."
"Shout, she may hear you."

"Shouting is no good."

"Keep speaking then."

"Hello. Hello. Hello."

You don't suppose -- ? She wouldn't go out doors?"
"I'm half afraid that's just what she might do."
"And leave the children?"

"Wait and call again."

You can't hear whether she has left the door
Wide open and the wind's blown out the lamp
And the fire's died and the room's dark and cold?"
"One of two things, either she's gone to bed
Or gone out doors."

"In which case both are lost."

Do you know what she's like? Have you ever met her?
It's strange she doesn't want to speak to us."
"Fred, see if you can hear what I hear. Come."
"A clock maybe."

"Don't you hear something else?"

"Not talking."

"No."

"Why, yes, I heard -- what is it?"

"What do you say it is?"

"A baby's crying!"

"Frantic it sounds, though muffled and far off."

"Its mother wouldn't let it cry like that,
Not if she's there."

"What do you make of it?"

"There's only one thing possible to make.

That is, assuming -- that she has gone out.

Of course she hasn't though." They both sat down
Helpless. "There's nothing we can do till morning."

"Fred, I shan't let you think of going out."

"Hold on." The double bell began to chirp.

They started up. Fred took the telephone.

"Hello, Mrs. Merve. You're there, then! -- And your wife?

Good! Why I asked -- she didn't seem to answer.

He says she went to let him in the barn. --

We're glad. Oh, say no more about it, man.

Drop in and see us when you're passing."

"Well,

She has him, then, though what she wants him for
I don't see."

"Possibly not for herself.

Maybe she only wants him for the children."

"The whole to-do seems to have been for nothing.

What spoiled out night was to him just his fun.

What did he come in for? -- To talk and visit?

Thought he'd just call to tell us it was snowing.

If he thinks he is going to make our house

A halfway coffee house 'twixt town and nowhere --"

"I thought you'd feel you'd been too much concerned."

"You think you haven't been concerned yourself."

"If you mean he was inconsiderate

To rout us out to think for him at midnight

And then take our advice no more than nothing,

Why, I agree with you. But let's forgive him.

We've had a share in one night of his life.

What'll you bet he ever calls again?"