FIRST IMPRESSIONS

FRANK ROBINSON

First Impressions

For John

Little maple tree,
two inches high –
even your three leaves are turning.

Dropping Sticks

Dropping sticks is a game
the summer crows have learned to
play, flying from May
to September, one above the other.
The higher lets his toy fall through the
air to the other of the pair,
who returns the favor. We gulp
to see these evening acrobats climb so
high, printed black against the sky
above the blacker hills.
They become absorbed in their little
game. It seems so tame:
one drops a stick, the other catches it,
what more is there to
say? Just that every day
my heart drops with it
through the empty air, till a strange
and gay and capricious bird, unknown to
men, catches that heart, and it soars again.

Powder

She carries such explosives in her purse

That when she soothes my wounds, she makes them worse.
What walls must I throw up, what guns poke out,
To turn all her gathered armies to rout?
How can I keep her dynamited grace
From so sweetly exploding in my face?

The Ten-Foot Pole

I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole,
I said, as I escaped a hidden shoal
Lying beneath the surface of the mind,
One of those that, with luck, we never find.
Though I've learned to maneuver, navigate,
And judge distances and my cargo's weight,
Though I've handled my little barge with skill,
Sometimes, when I'm tired and the night is still,
I find I drift into an unknown bay
And run aground and shove myself away.
I seem, then, to touch shores of other lands,
And the pole shivers slightly in my hands.

My Father's Snoring

This iceberg has its own fog horn
And crashes slowly through the night,
After leaving the house intact,
With the message, however slight,
That the real terrors of the sea
Approach us only silently.

For His Daughter

For now, only my dreams, only my life
Lie scattered on the rug among your bones,

But soon the man who claims you for his wife
Will occupy an empire all alone.
Your sons will be a city of their own
And sleep in all the corners of your house,
While whole hillsides find in you their home
And universes sigh beneath your blouse.
At last white hair will bloom around your head,
A hundred fingers stretch across your face,
Generations come, starving, to be fed –
An ancient woman is an ancient place.
You look up, I collect your bones for bed
And hold you tight; you just pretend you're dead.

At the Wedding

At the wedding they threw needles, not rice,
A tiny shower of silver pricks.
Some of them still stick to my skin
And tinkle down when I comb my hair;
My wife pinches them from the floor
And puts them in a box.
"Some day," she whispers, and our daughter stares.

The Operation

The doctor told me I would have to walk with care,
My leg was weak, I had no strength to spare.
"But," I said, "You've no need to worry on that score,
"For I've been in hospitals before.
"I know the ordered life of nurse and pill,
"The long relaxing atrophy of will,
"The dangerous luxury of lying wrapped in white,
"The gropings of self-pity in the night.
"No, I love life too much to be so insane,
"And," laughing, "I'm really quite afraid of pain."

I said this in as loud a voice as I was able,
And then I beat my leg against the table.

Departure

The car is crammed: pie plates beneath the seat,
Books in the glove, lampshades between your feet.
The crib is jammed between a lamp and chair;
Shoved against a door, puppies pant and stare.
The one place for your hat is on your head.
And your children cry, Daddy, are we dead?

Dancing With the Audience

I'm like a little girl
That dances with the cat
Across the kitchen floor.
I grasp your paws
And swing you past the table,
And your legs, unused to dancing,
Scrape and stumble to my waltz,
Your eyes plead with mine
Not to lead you wrong.
This can't be what the grown-ups do,
But dancing is for children too,
And even cats can learn the steps.
I put you down and pat your head,
The dance was fun.
I hear my parents laughing,
Half a dozen adults heave their bellies toward me,
I turn and fold myself up in one.

One Ring Circus

When she smiles, her lips perform with such grace
An acrobat does handsprings on her face.
Her nose quivers like an elephant's trunk,
Stretching for peanuts or rooting in junk.
A clown's arranged her cotton candy hair
And made her a whole sideshow at the fair.
As for lion tamers, you may surmise
Jungle cats stalk behind her gum-ball eyes.

Corners

I.

You will find me in a corner,
In the darkness, staring.
No silent feet will surprise me sleeping,
No sea of whispers tip me from my seat.
I'm here to stay.

II.

I'm so tired.
I wrap my arms around myself and pull.
I'm cold.
All our corners are stained with shadow,
And filled with fists of wind piling and punching.

III.

You cannot clean your conscience
By coming with soft candles
And heavy plates of pancakes.
I am in the corner, here,
And you are there,
Laughing in the silent light.
You will have to wait
To see what I will do.

When I Had Trouble Sleeping

When I had trouble sleeping, she would come
And stretch out on me, above the blankets,
And breathe in rhythm. Soon I'd go to sleep
And feel at last, from beneath the covers,
Something huge pulling away from the bed,
As if my own heartbeat were leaving me.

Love and Marriage

I don't want to get married
Beauty billows out from pavement, trees, and lighted rooms,
just yet,
From great hollow caves
And women with enormous limbs
And empty cars waiting for lovers
you know what I mean?

"I have a dream … "

"I have a dream, a day-dream." His hand went up to his face and he grinned again. "I see myself and my wife and my child walking down a road, really a path through a meadow, and over the meadow, the forest. The grass is very high in the meadow, my wife and I are wearing rich, beautiful, medieval clothes, and our child is naked and has a toy in his hand. He's holding on to my hand. The grass, as I say, is very high and we're walking very slowly, very gravely. It's Sunday afternoon. Suddenly, out of the grass, we hear somebody groaning, in great suffering, rolling over and over and groaning. He is quite close by, but we can't see him. My

child wants to run to him but I hold his hand tight and we three keep walking slowly forward. Then on the other side, we hear another voice, screaming and groaning, perhaps a female voice this time, but again we can't see her because the grass is so high. Again my child wants to run to her, but I hold on tight, and my wife stays close to my side, walking very slowly, very gravely, her beautiful, medieval dress trailing on the ground. We stay in the middle of our path. We hear groans on every side, from every part of the field. They are all calling to us, calling us by name, but we never go to help, even though my child tugs at my hand from side to side, holding his toy in his other hand. His bare feet kick up dust from the path, he throws his toy into the grass, but the groaning goes on. I hold him tight. What had started as a simple, pleasant walk across a meadow has become very serious, very dangerous, and we have to concentrate every moment. Somehow, by going very slowly, we arrive at the forest and my wife and my child are smiling and happy and they embrace me. They are grateful to me and I am grateful to them." He looked embarrassed and put his hands together.

"Do you still hear the groans when you're in the woods, do they ever stop?" his brother asked. "But what does it mean?" somebody else wanted to know, perhaps the child. It was late, however, and everyone went up to bed.