1 The Darkling Thrush

—Thomas Hardy

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind its death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;

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An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

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Robert Frost

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was an American poet, whose work was initially published in England before it was published in America. Frost was honoured frequently during his lifetime, receiving four Pulitzer Prizes for poetry. He also delivered a poem at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy, who remarked about him, "He has bequeathed his nation a body of imperishable verse from which Americans will forever gain joy and understanding."

For his poems, Frost developed an original, modern idiom and a sense of directness and economy. He maintained that a poem, "begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a loneliness. It is never a thought to begin with. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness." Frost enriched his style by setting traditional meters against the natural rhythms of speech. His poems frequently employ settings from rural life in New England in the early twentieth century, using them to examine complex social and philosophical themes.

The poem 'Birches' is written in blank verse with a particular emphasis on the "sound of sense." In writing the poem, Frost was inspired by his childhood experience of swinging on birches which was a popular form of play for children in rural areas. In the poem, the act of swinging on birch trees, is presented as a way to escape harsh rationality or the "truth" of the adult world, if only for a moment. Though he can climb to a place where his imagination can be free, a swinger is grounded in the earth through the roots of the tree. The narrator in the poem feels a sense of regret that as an adult, he is unable to leave his responsibilities behind and climb towards heaven until he can start afresh on earth.

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2

Birches

—Robert Frost

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 crystal 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,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.

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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
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.
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
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 awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
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
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.

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Carol Ann Duffy

Dame Carol Ann Duffy (born 23 December, 1955) is a Scottish poet and playwright. She is Professor of Contemporary Poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University, and was appointed Britain's Poet Laureate in May 2009. She is the first woman, and the first Scot, to hold the position.

Her collections include *Standing Female Nude* (1985), winner of a Scottish Arts Council Award; Selling Manhattan (1987), which won a Somerset Maugham Award; and *Mean Time* (1993), which won the Whitbread Poetry Award. Her next collection *Feminine Gospels* (2002) shows an increased interest in long narrative poems, accessible in style and often surreal in their imagery. Her 2005 publication, *Rapture* (2005), is a series of intimate poems charting the course of a love affair, for which she won the £10,000 T.S. Eliot Prize. In 2007, she published *The Hat*, a collection of poems for children. Her poems address issues such as oppression, gender, and violence in an accessible language that has made them popular in schools.

The poem 'Dolphins' covers many themes regarding oppression and lack of freedom. It also broaches ideas which have to do with animal welfare and treatment of animals. The poem takes us into the world of dolphins, an endangered species, and asks us to look at the world from their perspective. We are asked to understand how their imprisonment by humans affects them.The speaker, a dolphin, remembers its previous life of freedom in the ocean and the sense of constriction and confinement that it now feels in the aquarium. The poem appears to be a dramatic monologue in the voice of a dolphin.

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