

ROBERT FROST

In the Home Stretch

She stood against the kitchen sink, and looked
Over the sink out through a dusty window
At weeds the water from the sink made tall.
She wore her cape; her hat was in her hand.
Behind her was confusion in the room,
Of chairs turned upside down to sit like people
In other chairs, and something, come to look,
For every room a house has—parlor, bedroom,
And dining room—thrown pell-mell in the kitchen.
And now and then a smudged, infernal face
Looked in a door behind her and addressed
Her back. She always answered without turning.

‘Where will I put this walnut bureau, lady?’

‘Put it on top of something that’s on top
Of something else,’ she laughed. ‘Oh, put it where
You can tonight, and go. It’s almost dark;
You must be getting started back to town.’

Another blackened face thrust in and looked
And smiled, and when she did not turn, spoke gently,
‘What are you seeing out the window, *lady?*’

‘Never was I beladied so before.
Would evidence of having been called lady
More than so many times make me a lady
In common law, I wonder.’

‘But I ask,
What are you seeing out the window, lady?’

‘What I’ll be seeing more of in the years
To come as here I stand and go the round
Of many plates with towels many times.’

‘And what is that? You only put me off.’

‘Rank weeds that love the water from the dishpan
More than some women like the dishpan, Joe;

A little stretch of mowing-field for you;
Not much of that until I come to woods
That end all. And it's scarce enough to call
A view.'

'And yet you think you like it, dear?'

'That's what you're so concerned to know! You hope
I like it. Bang goes something big away
Off there upstairs. The very tread of men
As great as those is shattering to the frame
Of such a little house. Once left alone,
You and I, dear, will go with softer steps
Up and down stairs and through the rooms, and none
But sudden winds that snatch them from our hands
Will ever slam the doors.'

'I think you see
More than you like to own to out that window.'

'No; for besides the things I tell you of,
I only see the years. They come and go
In alternation with the weeds, the field,
The wood.'

'What kind of years?'

'Why, latter years—
Different from early years.'

'I see them, too.
You didn't count them?'

'No, the further off
So ran together that I didn't try to.
It can scarce be that they would be in number
We'd care to know, for we are not young now.
And bang goes something else away off there.
It sounds as if it were the men went down,
And every crash meant one less to return
To lighted city streets we, too, have known,
But now are giving up for country darkness.'

'Come from that window where you see too much,
And take a livelier view of things from here.
They're going. Watch this husky swarming up
Over the wheel into the sky-high seat,
Lighting his pipe now, squinting down his nose
At the flame burning downward as he sucks it.'

'See how it makes his nose-side bright, a proof
How dark it's getting. Can you tell what time
It is by that? Or by the moon? The new moon!
What shoulder did I see her over? Neither.
A wire she is of silver, as new as we
To everything. Her light won't last us long.
It's something, though, to know we're going to have her
Night after night and stronger every night
To see us through our first two weeks. But, Joe,
The stove! Before they go! Knock on the window;
Ask them to help you get it on its feet.
We stand here dreaming. Hurry! Call them back!'

'They're not gone yet.'

'We've got to have the stove,
Whatever else we want for. And a light.
Have we a piece of candle if the lamp
And oil are buried out of reach?'

Again

The house was full of tramping, and the dark,
Door-filling men burst in and seized the stove.
A cannon-mouth-like hole was in the wall,
To which they set it true by eye; and then
Came up the jointed stovepipe in their hands,
So much too light and airy for their strength
It almost seemed to come ballooning up,
Slipping from clumsy clutches toward the ceiling.
'A fit!' said one, and banged a stovepipe shoulder.
'It's good luck when you move in to begin
With good luck with your stovepipe. Never mind,
It's not so bad in the country, settled down,

When people're getting on in life. You'll like it.'
Joe said: 'You big boys ought to find a farm,
And make good farmers, and leave other fellows
The city work to do. There's not enough
For everybody as it is in there.'
'God!' one said wildly, and, when no one spoke:
'Say that to Jimmy here. He needs a farm.'
But Jimmy only made his jaw recede
Fool-like, and rolled his eyes as if to say
He saw himself a farmer. Then there was a French boy
Who said with seriousness that made them laugh,
'Ma friend, you ain't know what it is you're ask.'
He doffed his cap and held it with both hands
Across his chest to make as 'twere a bow:
'We're giving you our chances on de farm.'
And then they all turned to with deafening boots
And put each other bodily out of the house.
'Good-by to them! We puzzle them. They think—
I don't know what they think we see in what
They leave us to: that pasture slope that seems
The back some farm presents us; and your woods
To northward from your window at the sink,
Waiting to steal a step on us whenever
We drop our eyes or turn to other things,
As in the game "Ten-step" the children play.'

'Good boys they seemed, and let them love the city.
All they could say was "God!" when you proposed
Their coming out and making useful farmers.'

'Did they make something lonesome go through you?
It would take more than them to sicken you—
Us of our bargain. But they left us so
As to our fate, like fools past reasoning with.
They almost shook *me*.'

'It's all so much
What we have always wanted, I confess
It's seeming bad for a moment makes it seem
Even worse still, and so on down, down, down.'

It's nothing; it's their leaving us at dusk.
I never bore it well when people went.
The first night after guests have gone, the house
Seems haunted or exposed. I always take
A personal interest in the locking up
At bedtime; but the strangeness soon wears off.'
He fetched a dingy lantern from behind
A door. 'There's that we didn't lose! And these!'—
Some matches he unpocketed. 'For food—
The meals we've had no one can take from us.
I wish that everything on earth were just
As certain as the meals we've had. I wish
The meals we haven't had were, anyway.
What have you you know where to lay your hands on?'

'The bread we bought in passing at the store.
There's butter somewhere, too.'

'Let's rend the bread.

I'll light the fire for company for you;
You'll not have any other company
Till Ed begins to get out on a Sunday
To look us over and give us his idea
Of what wants pruning, shingling, breaking up.
He'll know what he would do if he were we,
And all at once. He'll plan for us and plan
To help us, but he'll take it out in planning.
Well, you can set the table with the loaf.
Let's see you find your loaf. I'll light the fire.
I like chairs occupying other chairs
Not offering a lady—'

'There again, Joe!

You're tired.'

'I'm drunk-nonsensical tired out;
Don't mind a word I say. It's a day's work
To empty one house of all household goods
And fill another with 'em fifteen miles away,
Although you do no more than dump them down.'

'Dumped down in paradise we are and happy.'

'It's all so much what I have always wanted,
I can't believe it's what you wanted, too.'

'Shouldn't you like to know?'

'I'd like to know
If it is what you wanted, then how much
You wanted it for me.'

'A troubled conscience!
You don't want me to tell if *I* don't know.'

'I don't want to find out what can't be known.
But who first said the word to come?'

'My dear,
It's who first thought the thought. You're searching, Joe,
For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.
Ends and beginnings—there are no such things.
There are only middles.'

'What is this?'

'This life?
Our sitting here by lantern-light together
Amid the wreckage of a former home?
You won't deny the lantern isn't new.
The stove is not, and you are not to me,
Nor I to you.'

'Perhaps you never were?'

'It would take me forever to recite
All that's not new in where we find ourselves.
New is a word for fools in towns who think
Style upon style in dress and thought at last
Must get somewhere. I've heard you say as much.
No, this is no beginning.'

'Then an end?'

'End is a gloomy word.'

‘Is it too late
To drag you out for just a good-night call
On the old peach trees on the knoll to grope
By starlight in the grass for a last peach
The neighbors may not have taken as their right
When the house wasn’t lived in? I’ve been looking:
I doubt if they have left us many grapes.
Before we set ourselves to right the house,
The first thing in the morning, out we go
To go the round of apple, cherry, peach,
Pine, alder, pasture, mowing, well, and brook.
All of a farm it is.’

‘I know this much:
I’m going to put you in your bed, if first
I have to make you build it. Come, the light.’

When there was no more lantern in the kitchen,
The fire got out through crannies in the stove
And danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling,
As much at home as if they’d always danced there.