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Comeback in broad day
 To the same place, the same face, the same brute
 Amused shout:
 "A miracle!"
 That knocks me out.
 There is a charge
 For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
 For the hearing of my heart —
 It really goes.
 And there is a charge, a very large charge,
 For a word or a touch
 Or a bit of blood
 Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
 So, so, Herr Doktor.
 So, Herr Enemy.
 I am your opus,
 I am your valuable,
 The pure gold baby
 That melts to a shriek.
 I turn and burn.
 Do not think I underestimate your great concern.
 Ash, ash —
 You poke and stir.
 Flesh, bone, there is nothing there —
 A cake of soap,
 A wedding ring,
 A gold filling.
 Herr God, Herr Lucifer,
 Beware
 Beware.
 Out of the ash
 I rise with my red hair
 And I eat men like air.

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THEODORE ROETHKE (1908–1963) was born in Saginaw, Michigan, the son of a successful operator of commercial greenhouses. Already writing poetry as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, he began publishing his work during his graduate studies at Michigan and Harvard. His first full-time teaching position was at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania in 1931. He later taught at several other universities before going in 1947 to the University of Washington, where he taught for the rest of his life. His book *Words for the Wind: The Collected Verse*, in 1958, established his reputation.

Roethke was a prolific writer and had a successful career as a poet, but he struggled against alcoholism and manic-depressive illness. On more than one occasion he had to be taken in handcuffs from his classroom and was hospitalized for long periods. The poet Robert Lowell, a close friend, described him as "a ponderous, coarse, fattish, fortyish man, well read, likes the same things I do, and is quite a competent poet."

"My Papa's Waltz" recounts a painful childhood memory; "Elegy for Jane" is about the death of one of his students. "I Knew a Woman" uses a complicated rhyme scheme and some of the language of earlier poets to describe his very modern feelings. (See also Roethke's "The Waking" on p. 676.)

THEODORE ROETHKE

My Papa's Waltz

1948

The whiskey on your breath
 Could make a small boy dizzy;
 But I hung on like death:
 Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
 Slid from the kitchen shelf;
 My mother's countenance
 Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
 Was battered on one knuckle;
 At every step you missed
 My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
 With a palm caked hard by dirt,^{not-seal}
 Then waltzed me off to bed
 Still clinging to your shirt.

THEODORE ROETHKE

Elegy for Jane

1953

My Student, Thrown by a Horse

I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils;
 And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;
 And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,
 And she balanced in the delight of her thought,
 A wren, happy, tail into the wind,
 Her song trembling the twigs and small branches.

The shade sang with her;
 The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing;
 And the mold sang in the bleached yellow under the rose