My Papa’s Waltz

By Theodore Roethke

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,
Then waltzed me off to bed
   Still clinging to your shirt.

Theodore Roethke, "My Papa's Waltz" from Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke. Copyright 1942 by Heast Magazines, Inc. Used by permission of Doubleday, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.