The Waking

By Theodore Roethke

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.


Many of Theodore Roethke's finest poems evoke the plant and insect life he knew intimately growing up in Michigan around the greenhouses of his family's floral business. Troubled throughout adulthood by mental instability and alcoholism, he often dwells on his psyche's vulnerability, but also shows a deft comic touch in treating familial and erotic relationships. From 1948 until his
death, he was a legendary teacher at the University of Washington; his posthumous collection The Far Field won the 1964 National Book Award.

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