



Robert Lowell

(1917-1977)

Mr. Edwards and the Spider (1944)

I saw the spiders marching through the air,
Swimming from tree to tree that mildewed day
 In latter August when the hay
 Came creaking to the barn. But where
 The wind is westerly,
Where gnarled November makes the spiders fly
Into the apparitions of the sky,
They purpose nothing but their ease and die
Urgently beating east to sunrise and the sea;

What are we in the hands of the great God?
It was vain you set up thorn and briar
 In battle array against the fire
 And treason crackling in your blood;
 For the wild thorns grow tame
And will do nothing to oppose the flame;
Your lacerations tell the losing game
You play against a sickness past your cure.
How will the hands be strong? How will the heart endure?

A very little thing, a little worm,
Or hourglass-blazoned spider, it is said,
 Can kill a tiger. Will the dead
 Hold up to his mirror and affirm
 To the four winds the smell
And flash of his authority? It's well

If God who holds you to the pit of hell,
Much as one holds a spider, will destroy,
Baffle and dissipate your soil. As a small boy

On Windsor Marsh, I saw the spider die
When thrown into the bowels of fierce fire:
There's no long struggle, no desire
To get up on its feet and fly--
It stretches out its feet
And dies. This is the sinner's last retreat;
Yes, and no strength exerted on the heat
Then sinews the abolished will, when sick
And full of burning, it will whistle on a brick.

But who can plumb the sinking of that soul?
Josiah Hawley, picture yourself cast
Into a brick-kiln where the blast
Fans your quick vitals to a coal--
If measured by a glass
How long would it seem burning! Let there pass
A minute, ten, ten trillion; but the blaze
Is infinite, eternal: this is death,
To die and know it. This is the Black Widow, death.

ANALYSIS

As a precocious boy of eleven, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) wrote a remarkable three-thousand word scientific essay on spiders. In it he described, from personal observation, how spiders floated from tree to tree, borne by the wind, at the end of a lighter-than-air strand of web, and how the wind always bore them in one direction, toward the sea, where they died. Later Edwards became a notable preacher and the greatest Puritan theologian of his time, the author of books on sin and predestination and the freedom of the will. In fiery sermons like "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" and "The Future Punishment of the Wicked" he used spiders as images in discussing death and damnation and the torments of hell. The greatest crisis in Edwards' personal life came when he was dismissed after twenty-four years from his pastorate in Northampton, Massachusetts, as a result of a controversy with his congregation. The leader of the anti-Edwards faction was his cousin Joseph (or Josiah) Hawley.

In this poem Robert Lowell imagines Jonathan Edwards as meditating, or preaching a sermon, on the subject of spiders. Actually, the poem is closely modeled on passages from the two sermons and the scientific treatise above referred to, and both the images and the language are more Edwards' than Lowell's. Lowell has given them coherent order, however, and has cast them into an intricate stanza pattern, of which the basic meter is iambic 5-5-4-4-3-5-5-6, and of which the rhyme scheme is similar, though not identical, in all five stanzas.

The real subject of Edwards' discourse is death and damnation. In stanzas one and four, spiders are pictured as the victims of death; in stanza three, as an agent of death; in stanza five (the Black Widow), as a metaphor for death. Death is inevitable for all men, Edwards argues, and for all but a few it is followed by damnation of inconceivable torment and of infinite duration. Edwards' Calvinistic theology--his belief in original sin, in predestination, in the littleness of man, and in the absolute sovereignty of God--is clearly seen in this poem. In the first stanza the light lives and deaths of spiders suggest symbolically the inevitable destiny and destruction of men. Stanza two points out the powerlessness of man to combat his inherent sinfulness--which foredooms him to damnation--by any effort of the will. He plays against "a sickness" past his cure--"the fire / And treason crackling" in his blood. Stanza five, addressed particularly to Josiah Hawley, describes the torment and the duration of eternal punishment. To be punished, thus is "To die and know it"--to die yet not lose consciousness--to die and yet suffer, indescribably, forever.

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