



Theodore Roethke

(1908-1963)

My Papa's Waltz (1950)

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.

ANALYSIS

Careful reading brings out at once that this is a cruel experience for a little boy, despite Papa's gaiety. The boy's terror mounts, stanza by stanza. In stanza one he admits that the whiskey breath could make him dizzy and that such waltzing is not easy. In stanza two the waltz gets so violent that pans are shaken from the kitchen shelf and the mother shows her concern. In stanza three the dance becomes still wilder and the

boy's ear is painfully scraped. In stanza four Papa beats time heavily on the boy's head and he is barely able to cling to his father's shirt as he is finally whirled into bed. But not all is cruelty and terror. There is affection, too. The little boy does hang on, and the father does waltz his boy off to bed, showing paternal, even though drunken, affection.

James M. Reid
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966)
with Laurence Perrine