

## Tulip-Tree in Bloom · *Robert Penn Warren*

At the time when the tulip-tree, even then rare, bloomed  
By the edge of the cloistered lane,  
They met, and each mildly wondered if ever again  
It might be assumed  
That such accident would bring them face to face  
In another such astutely designed, lovely, and lonely place.  
Would they part with a nod of civility—  
Or stand with a tentative smile until mutual timidity  
Of youth made them pass on? Almost surely not,  
For spring sun was reddening westward to gild earth's heaven.  
But secretly he stubbed the turf with the toe of a boot,  
And his tongue went dry, his brain drained. But how could he leave  
Without some recognition of her own, and beauty's, worth.  
At last in panic, he set heel firmly where boot-toe had scored earth.

He mumbled something. Was gone.  
She, too, with no backward look, or word, was gone,  
Her gaze idly wandering the gold-flecked hill  
As idly as in some store she'd pass someone never known.  
But unconsciously now—or half so—she kicked at a stone.

She had married, he later heard. Oh, well, so had he!  
And children both. Contentment? Why not?  
Yes, a county was like a trap of propinquity,  
And memories blur like old mirrors, unsilvering spot by spot.

Twenty-five years later, or so, he said to his bigger son,  
“Get out the Ford, I got business over to Tarleton.”  
They get down the road, gravel then, but in good condition;  
Then spotting the county line, the old one's keen eyes  
Began to scan road-brush for a gap that might come by surprise.

“Take yore next turn left, up that lane,” he said. “And slow,  
For it used to be rough, and a spring’s just iron, you know.”  
“I’d help,” the son said, “if you’d say where you’re trying to go.”

“Just an old man’s craziness, to see if ever yet  
Anything’s the same,” he said. Then: “Hey!—that tulip-tree’s gone!”  
“Tulip’s rare,” the son said, “and dollars pay axe-handle sweat.”  
“Yes, rare,” said the old one, slow, “yet it seems they might leave that  
one.”

“What next?” the son asked, but got no reply,  
For the hard, blue old eyes were staring at vacancy.  
Or was it at something that had taken the place of the sky?

At last: “On to Tarleton. I used to have friends thereabout,  
And might just drop by to see how they’re making out.  
At Main Street, the light, just turn right and on to the end.”  
“But that—that’s the graveyard!” “Shore is,” the old one said,  
“And that makes it easy to find a friend,  
If it happens at last he’s decided he’s dead.”

Son parked the car and snoozed in the shade,  
While his father, weaving from stone to stone, made  
His prowling way, just now and then kneeling to peer at  
Some name or a date, this or that.  
And at last found one where he crouched, and lingered. Then woke his  
son.