

Jay Parini: On "The Oven Bird"

Mountain Interval also contains "The Oven Bird," one of Frost's unforgettable sonnets. Like "Mowing," it is a poem implicitly about the act of writing, about a bird who "knows in singing not to sing," which is to say that he must abandon the worn-out poetical diction and rhetorical conventions of his predecessors and offer a new kind of song. "The question that he frames in all but words / Is what to make of a diminished thing." The last two lines resonate with implications. What poet now writing is not faced with this dilemma? The world as we find it, much as the world Frost found, is sadly diminished, and the poet's job in the twentieth century has been what to make of this world, how to respond to its indignities, its savage and vengeful self-absorption, its greed, its abandonment of common decency and justice.

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