Aunt Imogen

By Edwin Arlington Robinson

Aunt Imogen was coming, and therefore The children—Jane, Sylvester, and Young George— Were eyes and ears; for there was only one Aunt Imogen to them in the whole world, line 5 And she was in it only for four weeks In fifty-two. But those great bites of time Made all September a Queen's Festival; And they would strive, informally, to make The most of them.—The mother understood, line 10 And wisely stepped away. Aunt Imogen Was there for only one month in the year, While she, the mother,—she was always there: And that was what made all the difference. She knew it must be so, for Jane had once Expounded it to her so learnedly line 15 That she had looked away from the child's eyes And thought; and she had thought of many things.

There was a demonstration every time Aunt Imogen appeared, and there was more Than one this time. And she was at a loss Just how to name the meaning of it all: It puzzled her to think that she could be So much to any crazy thing alive— Even to her sister's little savages Who knew no better than to be themselves; But in the midst of her glad wonderment She found herself besieged and overcome By two tight arms and one tumultuous head, And therewith half bewildered and half pained By the joy she felt and by the sudden love That proved itself in childhood's honest noise. Jane, by the wings of sex, had reached her first; And while she strangled her, approvingly, Sylvester thumped his drum and Young George howled. But finally, when all was rectified, And she had stilled the clamor of Young George By giving him a long ride on her shoulders, They went together into the old room That looked across the fields; and Imogen Gazed out with a girl's gladness in her eyes,

Happy to know that she was back once more
Where there were those who knew her, and at last
Had gloriously got away again
From cabs and clattered asphalt for a while;
And there she sat and talked and looked and laughed
And made the mother and the children laugh.
Aunt Imogen made everybody laugh.

There was the feminine paradox—that she Who had so little sunshine for herself Should have so much for others. How it was That she could make, and feel for making it, So much of joy for them, and all along Be covering, like a scar, and while she smiled, That hungering incompleteness and regret— That passionate ache for something of her own, For something of herself—she never knew. She knew that she could seem to make them all Believe there was no other part of her Than her persistent happiness; but the why And how she did not know. Still none of them Could have a thought that she was living down— Almost as if regret were criminal, So proud it was and yet so profitless— The penance of a dream, and that was good. Her sister Jane—the mother of little Jane, Sylvester, and Young George—might make herself Believe she knew, for she—well, she was Jane.

Young George, however, did not yield himself
To nourish the false hunger of a ghost
That made no good return. He saw too much:
The accumulated wisdom of his years
Had so conclusively made plain to him
The permanent profusion of a world
Where everybody might have everything
To do, and almost everything to eat,
That he was jubilantly satisfied
And all unthwarted by adversity.
Young George knew things. The world, he had found out,
Was a good place, and life was a good game—
Particularly when Aunt Imogen
Was in it. And one day it came to pass—
One rainy day when she was holding him

And rocking him—that he, in his own right, Took it upon himself to tell her so; And something in his way of telling it— The language, or the tone, or something else— Gripped like insidious fingers on her throat, And then went foraging as if to make A plaything of her heart. Such undeserved And unsophisticated confidence Went mercilessly home; and had she sat Before a looking glass, the deeps of it Could not have shown more clearly to her then Than one thought-mirrored little glimpse had shown, The pang that wrenched her face and filled her eyes With anguish and intolerable mist. The blow that she had vaguely thrust aside Like fright so many times had found her now: Clean-thrust and final it had come to her From a child's lips at last, as it had come Never before, and as it might be felt Never again. Some grief, like some delight, Stings hard but once: to custom after that The rapture or the pain submits itself, And we are wiser than we were before. And Imogen was wiser; though at first Her dream-defeating wisdom was indeed A thankless heritage: there was no sweet, No bitter now; nor was there anything To make a daily meaning for her life— Till truth, like Harlequin, leapt out somehow From ambush and threw sudden savor to it— But the blank taste of time. There were no dreams, No phantoms in her future any more: One clinching revelation of what was One by-flash of irrevocable chance, Had acridly but honestly foretold The mystical fulfilment of a life That might have once . . . But that was all gone by: There was no need of reaching back for that: The triumph was not hers: there was no love Save borrowed love: there was no might have been.

But there was yet Young George—and he had gone Conveniently to sleep, like a good boy; And there was yet Sylvester with his drum,

And there was frowzle-headed little Jane; And there was Jane the sister, and the mother,— Her sister, and the mother of them all. They were not hers, not even one of them: She was not born to be so much as that, For she was born to be Aunt Imogen. Now she could see the truth and look at it; Now she could make stars out where once had palled A future's emptiness; now she could share With others—ah, the others!—to the end The largess of a woman who could smile; Now it was hers to dance the folly down, And all the murmuring; now it was hers To be Aunt Imogen.—So, when Young George Woke up and blinked at her with his big eyes, And smiled to see the way she blinked at him, 'T was only in old concord with the stars That she took hold of him and held him close, Close to herself, and crushed him till he laughed.