

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## Not to Keep

ROBERT FROST

Page | 1

*This poem by Robert Frost (1874–1963) examines the emotions caused by a wounded soldier’s homecoming and his return to war once his wounds have healed. First published in the Yale Review in January 1917 and included in Frost’s 1924 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection New Hampshire, the poem was likely inspired by Frost’s friendship with the poet Edward Thomas, whom Frost had met while living in England between 1912 and 1915. Thomas enlisted in the British Artists Rifles in 1915 and was killed in action in France a few months after this poem was published, in April 1917. Frost went on to win three more Pulitzer Prizes and served as the Poet Laureate for the United States from 1958 to 1959.*

*Going slowly through the poem, line by line, describe as fully as you can the unfolding thoughts and feelings of the woman whose husband (or, perhaps, ‘whose son’) has been “sent . . . back to her,” wounded from the war. What can we learn from this poem about the effects of war on loved ones left behind? What does the man mean by “Enough/Yet not enough”? Reflect on the questions each asks the other with her/his eyes. What is the meaning of the poem’s title?*

They sent him back to her. The letter came  
Saying. . . . And she could have him. And before  
She could be sure there was no hidden ill  
Under the formal writing, he was in her sight,  
Living. They gave him back to her alive—  
How else? They are not known to send the dead—  
And not disfigured visibly. His face?  
His hands? She had to look, to ask,  
“What was it, dear?” And she had given all  
And still she had all—*they* had—they the lucky!  
Wasn’t she glad now? Everything seemed won,  
And all the rest for them permissible ease.  
She had to ask, “What was it, dear?”

“Enough,  
Yet not enough. A bullet through and through,

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High in the breast. Nothing but what good care  
And medicine and rest, and you a week,  
Can cure me of to go again." The same  
Grim giving to do over for them both.  
She dared no more than ask him with her eyes  
How was it with him for a second trial.  
And with his eyes he asked her not to ask.  
They had given him back to her, but not to keep.

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Page | 2