

## ROBERT FLANAGAN

### *Once You Learn You Never Forget*

Fated by a birthday, my daughter  
straddles her present down the drive,  
small arms fret tight enough  
to break a father's silence:  
"Will you listen? Relax!"

With tangled, prickly bushes  
one side, hard dirt  
the other? Fall after fall  
peels knees and elbows to reveal  
blood as her body's secret.

I tell her it's the only way  
she'll learn, and find myself  
the ogre in a dream  
I escaped. We should escape  
pain, the child's heart tells us

—yet I expect her to believe  
pain is growth? I learned it  
a hard, backhanded way:  
*You'll thank me later, boy,  
when you're a man . . .*

What should I enforce? Why?  
I want to spare her  
the traitorously narrow  
wheels that will keep angling  
to home in on hurt:

I want to carry her inside,  
*it's all right, all right,*  
keep her the princess no one  
frees to a world of cinders,  
and roads with no white lines.

Pain learns my nerve ends  
all over again with her.  
I remember . . . I never forgot.  
Yet my feet refuse  
to give up their place.

She crashes. "Better," I say,  
"Try again. Okay?," and witness  
fear winging her shoulders  
as she wobbles away from me,  
as we balance the best we can.