

RALPH GUSTAFSON

QUEBEC WINTER SCENE

Ralph Gustafson (1909-1995) was born in Lime Ridge and grew up in Sherbrooke, Quebec. He earned a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from Bishop's University in 1929 and 1930, and he also earned a bachelor's degree from Oxford University in 1933. He briefly taught at the St. Alban's School for Boys in Brockville, Ontario, before moving to London, England, where he worked as a tutor and journalist. While living in England he published his first poetry collections and edited the first anthology of Canadian poetry. During WWII he worked as a correspondent for the British Information Services in New York, and he remained there after the war. The following poem was published in the autumn 1952 issue and included in the collections *Rivers Among Rocks* (1960), *Selected Poems* (1972), and *The Moment is All: Selected Poems, 1944-83* (1983). His essay "A Nest of Anglophone Birds" (1975) explained that this poem is about an isolated railway station that served the countryside around Compton, Quebec: "The artist truly to create must do it from his particular parish; his own two-by-four refuge in the world. For myself, it is the Eastern Townships I grew up in. I always came back to them."

And the snow trodden round the yard,
Soiled with boots and fetched cordwood,
Straw ravelled near the barn—
The long snow of the fourfold land.
At dusk, acres clamped cold,
Threshold and clearing everywhere white
To the distant scribble of alders, across
The frozen field railfence like a crazy
Staff of music; sky only harvest
Helps over, cold, the taste of tin

Dipper a man drinks from, gulping,
Sweat of snug barn-work a hazard
Once out, door-to, headed for house.

At eight, night now pitch, the train,
Halted for mailsacks at the swung
Lantern—the ringing horizontals
A history happening the hills—
The engine alongside, monstrous, civil
Pistons poised. Then pulls past.
At the cutting, beard lonely
 whose only
Answer is the human heart.