

“A Lover’s Quarrel with the World”

Near the end of his life, Robert Frost said that his only ambition had been “to write a few little poems it’d be hard to get rid of.” And it’s hard to think of any poet whose lines are harder to dislodge from people’s minds. He was a popular poet, which is odd, because most people don’t care for poetry much, and popular tastes often tend toward the moralizing or sentimental. Whereas Frost’s verse frequently had a harsh edge to it, tinged with tragedy, matter-of-fact regarding death and the sheer cussedness of life.

Things don’t always happen for a reason in Frost’s poems, like “Out, Out —“ which describes the kind of accident that must have been all too common among the poet’s farming neighbors:

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them “Supper.” At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy’s first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand,
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. “Don’t let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes, Don’t let him, sister!”
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

What strikes me about the poem is Frost's empathy with the boy—mature enough to understand in a flash that his prospects have been ruined, but still (as the poet says) “a child at heart,” vulnerable and dependent on sisters, doctors, someone to undo the catastrophe that one so young could scarcely have imagined possible. It's this sympathetic chord that saves the poem from being merely mean or cold-blooded, that might even get the listener a little choked up, “No tears in the writer,” he said, “no tears in the reader.”

Frost in some sense was that injured boy, mortally so. All his life, he could be both childish (selfish, competitive, rebellious) and child-like as well. But he remained forever youthful in the sense of being terribly tender: open to the wounds of existence, soft-skinned and sensitive to human frailty, living by the grace or mercy or powers greater-than-himself that he couldn't reckon with or understand. All his poems began, in his own words, as “a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness.”

His attitude toward God was probably shaped by the kind of father he had growing up in the gold rush town of San Francisco in the 1870's. William Frost was not just a devout atheist, but a hard drinker and gambler who beat his son and other members of the family, then died of tuberculosis when Rob was just eleven, leaving them with nothing. That was when Robert moved to New Hampshire, back to the Frost family homestead, where affection from his in-laws was in as short supply as material wealth. It must have been a lonely childhood, for years later, he'd describe

Some boy too far from town to learn to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again.

Swinging on birches ... yet he drew strength from the earth, and from his own inward visions. For his mother Belle was just as otherworldly as his father was ruthless, a follower of the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, and “to the end of his life,” according to one friend, “Robert believed he could hear voices, real voices. He poems came to him like voices from nowhere.”

He described his own spiritual progression as “Presbyterian, Unitarian, Swedenborgian, Nothing,” and married the daughter of a Universalist pastor who'd lost his faith. Once he called himself a freethinker. But while disdaining any formal religious affiliation, he remained throughout his life a seeker whose verse dwelt on the mysteries closest to hand.

Evil, chance, fate, contingency were the themes that obsessed him. Was there any purpose behind the universe, any reason that could explain the apportionment of luck and misfortune here on earth? More than most literary types, Frost was fascinated by science—supposed to be the great source book of answers to such cosmic

questions—and Frost was intrigued with what the biologists and astronomers had to say. In high school, he sold enough magazine subscription to win a telescope, and in his poem “The Star Splitter” he describes a farmer who “burned his house down for the fire insurance and spent the proceeds” on a spy-glass “to satisfy a lifelong curiosity about our place among the infinities,” the irony being that if you can’t find a sense of place on your own farmyard, you’re unlikely to discover any better home in the Milky Way.

Frost loved the night sky. He took his children out long past bedtime, taught them the names of constellations, and told them rather charmingly that they could each choose one star as their very own. But he complains at the heavens when he asks them to “talk fahrenheit, talk centigrade. Use language we can comprehend.” Instead the stars say only “we burn,” remaining otherwise taciturn. One of Frost’s most startling and disturbing images appears in the poem called simply “Stars,” where the heavens seem utterly blind to human fate, a poem written shortly after the loss of his little son Elliot, dead at the age of four. “How countlessly they congregate,” those points of light,

As if with keenness for our fate,
Our faltering few steps on
To white rest, and a place of rest
Invisible at dawn--

And yet with neither love nor hate,
Those stars like some snow-white
Minerva’s snow-white marble eyes
Without the gift of sight.

Frost found solace in solitude and long walks. As an undergraduate at Dartmouth, he sometimes went roaming the woods late at night, a habit that puzzled his fraternity brothers who asked him what on earth he did there journeying alone, to which he replied that “I gnaw bark.” If he had a spiritual discipline, it was probably tramping the country on what he called his “botanizing” expeditions where he delighted in identifying and collecting the ferns and flowers and fungi. He knew his plants, but had studied Darwin as a young man, who seemed to explain the wild profusion of life but shrugged at any moral accounting for it all beyond randomness and the struggle for survival. Frost was too keen an observer to see much beneficence in nature, which appeared so often arbitrary and (by human standards) cruel, as in his poem “Design.”

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning light,
Like the ingredients of a witches’ broth—
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?--
If design govern in a thing so small.

Frost experienced more than his share of darkness. Daughter Majorie died in childbirth. His son Carol committed suicide. His only sister Jeanie spent the last nine years of her life in an insane asylum, and with his own swings between exultation on the public platform and private despondency, he feared that he and his children might have inherited a touch of the illness. "Every human being must learn to carry his own craziness and confusion and not bother his friends about it," he wrote in his later years. "He will have clarifications but they will be momentary flashes ... smoke rings."

Toward the end of life, he wrote a long dramatic poem titled "A Masque of Reason," based on the Biblical book of Job, where God remarks that "There's no connection man can reason out between his just deserts and what he gets." And as in Job, where the main character has a final vision of the infinite revealed in the strange animals of planet earth, the hippo and crocodile and ostrich and stallion, Frost seemed to find the creation not a source of reason or goodness or order but rather of sheer, inhuman vitality, as in his poem, "The Most of It,"

He thought he kept the universe alone
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
Some mornings from the boulder-broken beach
He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response.
And nothing ever came of what he cried
Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
In the cliff's talus on the other side,
And then in the far-distant water splashed,
But after a time allowed for it to swim,
Instead of proving human when it neared
And someone else additional to him,
As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
And landed poured like a waterfall,
And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
And forced the underbrush—and that was all.

Job himself might have written the jest Frost is famous for: "Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee, and I'll forgive Thy great big joke on me." And humor was one of his defenses against despair. It was Robert Frost who said, "The brain is a wonderful

organ. It starts working the moment you get up in the morning and does not stop until you get to the office.” It was Frost who observed “A jury consists of twelve persons chosen to decide who has the better lawyer.” But his ultimate defense was poetry itself, which he called “a momentary stay against confusion.”

It’s the humanity of his verse that constitutes its saving grace. For if he couldn’t find God in nature, Frost felt a compassion and solidarity with the human race in all its tribulations that redeemed life from mere mayhem and endowed it with kindness and the consolations of companionship. He was blessed with good friends, and Wilfred Gibson’s poem “The Golden Room” describes what life was like for Frost and his wife Elinor among their literary comrades during a stay in England:

Do you remember the still summer evening
When in the cozy cream-washed living-room
Of the Old Nailshop we all talked and laughed—
Our neighbors from the Gallows, Catherine
And Lascelles Abercrombie; Rupert Brooke;
Eleanor [sic] and Robert Frost, living awhile
At Little Iddens, who’d brought over with them
Helen and Edward Thomas? In the lamplight
We talked and laughed, but for the most part listened
While Robert Frost kept on and on
In his slow New England fashion for our delight,
Holding us with shrewd turns and racy quips,
And the rare twinkle of his grave blue eyes.

There were idyllic moments at the farm in Derry, New Hampshire, rearing his children, loafing and playing at agriculture, coming into his artistic power and sense of self, where he gathered together memories and images that would last him a lifetime. “Happiness makes up in height for what it lacks in length,” he said, thinking of those interludes.

He once inquired “What is man but all his connections? He’s just a tiny invisible knot: the knot where all his connections meet.” And the image of knots and the intertwining of human ties is taken up again in his lovely sonnet, “The Silken Tent,” all fourteen lines written in a single, unbroken sentence, as if to suggest the unbroken, seamless quality of loyalty and affection:

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound

By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

Ultimately, Robert Frost is beloved because he loved others, not the misanthrope some biographers alleged, but with a soft spot in his heart for people in all their variety ... in their grief, their aloneness, their inward struggle as well as in their intervals of clarity and calm. In the privacy of his own thoughts, he found universals. He made us aware of the unseen connections we all share, as in this poem that I leave you with this morning, "The Tuft of Flowers," from his first book, *A Boy's Will*.

I went to turn the grass once after one
who mowed it in the dew before the sun.

The dew was gone that made his blade so keen
Before I came to view the leveled scene.

I looked for him behind an isle of trees;
I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,
And I must be, as he had been—alone,

"As all must be," I said within my heart,
Whether they work together or apart."

But as I said it, swift there passed me by
On noiseless wing a bewildered butterfly,

Seeking with memories grown dim o'er night
Some resting flower of yesterday's delight.

And once I marked his flight go round and round,
As where some flower lay withering on the ground.

And then he flew as far as eye could see,
And then on tremulous wing came back to me.

I thought of questions that have no reply,
And would have turned to toss the grass to dry;

But he turned first, and led my eye to look
At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,
A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared

Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.

The mower in the dew had loved them thus,
By leaving them to flourish, not for us,

Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him,
But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

The butterfly and I had lit upon,
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,

That made me hear the wakening birds around,
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,

And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
So that henceforth I worked no more alone;

But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;

And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

“Men work together,” I told him from the heart,
“Whether they work together or apart.”