

**Edgar Stillman**

**To his Grandson Eli:**

**Robert Frost's Poems**

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125 East 74th Street  
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Frost In His Own Prose Words

*Letters*, p. 261:

“Schooldays are the creative days, and college. Undergraduate days must be about making something before the evil days come when they will have to admit to themselves their minds are more critical than creative.”

So, dear Eli, “*Carpe Diem!*”

*The Paris Review*, Fall, 1960 interview:

“Poetry? Among other things, there’s got to be wit. Poetry is the marrow of wit. Having what’s in front of you bring up something in your mind you almost didn’t know. That click.”

*Letters to Louis Untermeyer*, page 92, 1919:

“The ordinary words in common speech always give off the special vocabulary of poetry. No matter how realistic we are, we go up with these and float on them like charred paper balancing on the updraft of a fire.”

*Robert Frost Himself* by Stanley Burnshaw, published by Braziller, 1986:

“I might be called a synecdochist, for I prefer the synecdoche in poetry.” [Frost rhymed it with Schenectady. Get it, Eli?] Synecdoche is metaphor, a figure of speech that poets since Homer have used as the revelatory part of the whole. When the entire Greek fleet, stuffed with armed warriors in every warship, set out for Troy, Homer declared that fifty *sail* were reaching their goal. Schenectady!

In his *Journals*, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “What can describe the folly and emptiness of scolding like the word *jawing*?”

Frost: “The only thing that can disappoint me in the head is my own failure to learn to make metaphor. My ambition is to have it said of me, ‘He made a few connections.’”

Frost must have died — 1864-1963 — a remarkably happy man.

He made a “few connections,” didn’t he, in this poem! And they are *metaphors*.

“Door into the Dark”

Stresses	Syllables	Rhyme	
/			
4	10	A	Īn góing frōm rōom tō rōom ĩn thĕ dárk,
4	9	B	Ī réached outh blĭndly tō sáve my fáce,
4	11	B	Bŭt něglĕctĕd, hōwĕver líghtly, tō láce
4	10	A	Mŷ fĭngĕrs ānd clóse mŷ árms ĩn ān árc.
3	8	C	Ā slĭm dōor gōt ĩn pást mŷ guárd,
4	10	C	Ānd hĭt mĕ ā blōw ĩn thĕ héad sō hárd
4	9	C	Ī hād mŷ nátvĕ símlĕ járred.
4	10	D	Sō péoplĕ ānd thĭngs dōn’t páir āny móre
4	9	D	With whát thĕy úsed tō páir with bĕfóre.

I’ve put in the accented syllables, Eli, but you may find another beat, or stress [ɪ] and yours may be better. Unaccented = ∪.

But more interesting, at least to me, is the way Frost takes his idea – Door **into** the Dark — into the hilarious. Consider how he neglects to “lace his fingers and close his arms in an arc.” Pirouetting until the door knocks him as silly as he looks. And so, good-naturedly, he ridicules his own stated ambition, to be re-read.

On Pages one and two:

“Poetry is the marrow of wit. Having what’s in front of you bring up something in your mind you almost didn’t know. That click.” [Page one] And, on Page 2, “My ambition is to have it said of me, ‘He made a few connections.’”

Do you know who “Anonymous” is? My bet is Robert Lee Frost:

- 10 A “Thě wřittěn wórd | shóuld bĕ cléan | ă ă bóne, |  
6 A Clĕar ă líght, | fĭrm ă stóne... |  
8 A Twó wórds | ăre nót | ăs góod | ăs ăne.”

“The Span of Life”

- 10 A Thĕ ăld dóg | barks bäckwărd | wĭthóut | gĕttĭng úp. |  
10 A Í căn rĕ | mĕmbĕr | whĕn hé | wă ă púp. |

Line 1: 3 anapests and an iamb. Line 2: 2 dactylic trimeters, an iamb, and an anapest. (Cf. page 22!!)

In the Litterton, N.H., Courier of 3/13/1901:

“Raymond Tracy Fitzgerald, one of twin sons of Michael G. and Margaret Fitzgerald of Bethlehem, died at his home March 24, as the result of an accident by which one of his hands was badly hurt in a sawing machine. The young man was assisting in sawing up some wood in his own dooryard with a sawing machine and accidentally hit the loose pulley causing the saw to descend upon his hand, cutting and lacerating it badly. Raymond was taken into the house and a physician was immediately summoned, but he died very suddenly from the effects of the shock producing heart failure.”

Frost was a friend of Mike Fitzgerald.

As a reporter on the *Berkshire Eagle* from 1948 through 1951 — Pittsfield, Mass. — I wrote a few such stories, and perhaps as badly, but I had no Frost to turn a mudpie into an ice crystal.

Shakespeare’s blank verse — which is unrhyming iambic pentameter — gave Frost his title for the poem commemorating the death of Raymond.

*Macbeth*, Act. V, Scene 5

“Out, out, brief candle,  
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.”

“Out, Out, –”

10\* The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard  
10 And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood.  
10 Sweet-scented stuff when the wind blew across it, –  
10 And from there those that lifted eyes could count  
11 Fíve móuntain rángěs óne běhínd ánóthěr  
10 Under the sunset far into Vermont.  
11 Ánd thě sáw | snárled änd | ráttlěd, snárled änd | ráttlěd  
10 As it ran light, or had to bear a load.  
10 And nothing happened: day was almost done.  
10 Call it a day, I wish they might have said.  
11 To please the boy by giving him the half hour

I want to interrupt “Out, Out, –” before the sad accident takes up almost too much of your consideration: The very first line leads the reader into the disaster: “The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard” is the iambic line, sinister. The second line supports the threat: it can “drop stove-length sticks of wood.”

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\*No rhymes = blank verse.

The third line may relieve reader anxiety because the dust is “sweet-scented stuff” when summer wind blows across it, and those there that “lifted eyes” — is that what the boy does too? — can count five mountain ranges far into Vermont. But the repetition of the saw’s sounds is angrier, bringing bloody mayhem.

Eli, have you read *OUT LOUD* twice this poem? You can tell who **them** refers to. If not, you are not **thinking out your feelings**.

10\* That a boy counts so much when saved from work.  
11 His sister staid beside *them*, in her apron  
10 To tell *them* ‘Supper.’ At the word, the saw,  
10 As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,  
10 Leapt out at the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap.  
12 He must have given the hand. However it was,  
10 Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!  
10 The boy’s first outcry was a rueful laugh.  
10 As he swung toward them, holding up the hand,  
10 Half in appeal, but half as if to keep  
10 The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all —  
10 Since he was old enough to know, big boy  
10 Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart —  
11 He saw all spoiled. ‘Don’t let him cut my hand off —  
11 The doctor when he comes. Don’t let them, sister!’  
9 So. But the hand was gone already.  
11 The doctor put him in the dark of ether.  
10 He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.  
10 And then — the watcher at his pulse took fright.  
10 No one believed. They listened at his heart.  
9 Little — less — nothing! and that ended it.  
10 No more to build on there. And they, since they  
10 Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

\* \* \*

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\*Since you know that Shakespeare wrote in blank verse, *unrhyming* iambic pentameter (U /) — how’s Frost’s?

Why not continue the paraphrase of this poem (in your own wording). Is it not a touching psychological study of the boy who hopes to persuade himself that his hand had not really been topped off? And what about the Industrial Revolution?

Just when he published “Out, Out –,” Frost wrote Harriet Monroe in 1916 the most fascinating letter she ever got during her editorship of *Poetry* magazine:

“The poet in me died nearly ten years ago. Fortunately he had run through several phases, four to be exact, all well-defined before he went. The calf I was in the 1890’s I merely take to market. I am become my own salesman. Two of my phases you have already seen, so what shall I say? Take care you don’t get your mouth set to declare the other two (as I release them) a falling off of power, for that is what they can’t be, since they were almost inextricably mixed with the first two in the writing, and only my sagacity separated them in the afterthought — for putting them on the market. Did you ever hear quite such a case of Scottish-Yankee calculation?”

So get going. Eli. You, too, are an artist!

Frost writes: “The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words. Ask yourself how these sentences would sound without the words in which they are embodied.”

“You mean to tell me you can’t read?”

“I said no such thing!”

“Well, read then.”

“You’re not my teacher!”

\* \* \*

After he had finished writing his major books of poetry and “carting them to market,” Frost went out on a series of lecture tours reading his poems. After a year of this, he realized he had become his own salesman, and he described hell as “a half-filled auditorium.”

“The way of understanding,” he said, “with its inner or outer seriousness, is always partly laughter.”

\* \* \*

Do read and re-read these poems OUT LOUD, or you'll miss the sense that their sounds make. And if the line of poetry is not end-stopped by a period, a comma, a dash, a semicolon, a colon, or an !, you are obliged to carry over your voice into the next line, and the next 2 lines if there is still no punctuation. Otherwise the sounds make no sense. I like Frost's unpredictable line-lengths, and his rhyme schemes are often seductive. I also love his casual tone. The bracketed lines are carry-overs. When you THINK OUT YOUR *feelings*, you'll find yourself slowing up, or going with the rush as your *FEELING* dictates.

#### After Apple-Picking

12	A	{	My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
4	B		Toward heaven still,
10	B	{	And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
10	A		Beside it, and there may be two or three
10	C	{	Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
10	C		But I am done with apple-picking now.
10	D	{	Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
10	E		The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
10	D	{	I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
10	F		I got from looking through a pane of glass
10	G	{	I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
10	F		And held against the world of hoary grass.
10	G	{	It melted, and I let it fall and break.
4	H		But I was well
10	H	{	Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
4	H		And I could tell
10	G	{	What form my dreaming was about to take.

11	I	}	Magnified apples appear and disappear,
6	J		Stem end and blossom end,
10	I	}	And every fleck of russet showing clear.
10	K		My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
10	L	}	It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
10	J		I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
10	K	}	And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
4	L		The rumbling sound
10	K	}	Of load on load of apples coming in.
6	M		For I have had too much
11	N	}	Of apple-picking: I am overtired
11	N		Of the great harvest I myself desired.
10	M	}	There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
10	O		Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
2	O	}	For all
4	P		That struck the earth,
11	Q	}	No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
10	R		Went surely to the cider-apple heap
4	P	}	As of no worth.
7	Q		One can see what will trouble
10	S	}	This <u>sleep</u> of mine, whatever <u>sleep</u> it is.
7	Q		Were he not gone,
10	S	}	The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
4	T		Long <u>sleep</u> , as I describe its coming on,
10	S	}	Or just some human <u>sleep</u> .

Do those 4 last sleeps mesmerize you, Eli?

Brad Leithauser [*NYRB*, August 1996] writes:

“The long and short lines in ‘Apple-picking’, the careful choice of words, the slow tempo and the incantation all suggest repetitive labor has drained away his energy. The perfume of apples, the essence of apples distorts, transforms, and with deep sleep the boy feels drugged. He is suffused with a drowsy numbness — he enters a visionary state needed for artistic creation.”

You’ve known this feeling, Eli, I feel certain. Get hold of John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale”:

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness  
Pains my sense, as though of hemlock I had  
drunk” — and again  
“I cannot see what flowers are at my feet”

“Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”

8 A Whóse wóods | thése áre | I thínk | Ĩ knów.  
8 A Hís hǒuse | ĩs ín | thě víl|lǎge thóugh; |  
8 B He will not see me stopping here  
8 A To watch his woods fill up with snow.  
8 B { Mý littlě hórse mǔst thínk ĩt quéer  
8 B { Tǒ stóp | wíthóut | ǎ fárm | hóuse nǎar  
8 C { Bětwéen | thě wóods | ǎnd frózĕn láke |  
8 B { Thě dárkĕst évenĭng óf | thě yéar.  
8 C Hě givés | hĭs hárnĕss bélls ǎ sháke  
8 C Tó | ask ĩf there | is some | mĭstaké. |  
8 D Thě ónlŷ óthĕr sǒund’s thé swéep  
8 C Őf easy wind and downy flake.  
8 D The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
8 D But I have promises to keep,  
8 D And miles to go before I sleep,  
8 D And miles to go before I sleep.

\* \* \*

### Comments on “Stopping by Woods”

(1) *Alliteration* means repeated consonant sounds within the circumference of one or two poetic lines, for instance all the third stanza, especially lines 3 and 4. Those whispering *s* sounds.

Five years before Frost wrote “Stopping by Woods” he wrote a piece for the University of Michigan’s literary quarterly, “Everything has its own inevitable way of being said.” In 1913, he wrote to his best Pinkerton Academy student: “An ear, and an appetite for these sounds of sense is the first qualification of a writer. *Alliteration* and *Assonance* are useful poetic devices. Even if the young can intuit every feeling life offers except the process of becoming old, an eager young one might feel if he’s reading OUT LOUD that something in the final stanza is closing down.

(2) Edward Arlington Robinson, an American poet nearly Frost’s contemporary, wrote that he wished he had written the last stanza because “these are the four greatest lines written by an American poet.” They and a woodcut of New England woods were the only objects on Robinson’s bedroom walls when he died in 1928.

(3) Frost himself said he got his last stanza's first line from a man who wrote a poem called "The Phantom Wooer:" — "Our bed is lovely, dark, and sweet."

(4) Does "Stopping By Woods" have a moral, Eli? By good luck, I recall your grandfather Sherwood's answer to that very question. I saw his moustache quivering — an endearing habit that promised a gag — and he said very slowly: "A man must keep his pecker up."

If you don't know the word, pecker is an old-fashioned word for penis.

(5) In a English newspaper interview with the poet on his poem, the reporter recalled that "a professor had asked the famous Texan horseman Frank Dobie if a horse could ask a question." Frost approvingly quoted Dobie's reply: "A horse can ask better questions than most professors!"

(6) What's a syllogism is the name of this game. Woods: promises :: revery : obligations, or woods is to promises as revery is to obligations. So what's a syllogism? If my beloved Uncle Joseph Chamberlain were alive, he'd rub his hands, eyes twinkling, and say "Come let's look it up in *Webster's Collegiate*." I named your dear Papa after Unle Joe. So what's a syllogism, Eli? And since you are good at math, how do promises and revery have everything to do with woods and obligations?

(7) By 1950 Frost was getting \$200–\$300 for a single reading, and isn't that comparable today with \$2000–\$3000? Standing Room YMHA was then \$1000 which today would mean \$10,000 for an evening's worth of Frost's best poems and fascinating anecdotes. He said: "The only way to make them pay."

He read publicly until his late 80's because he said he hadn't become known until he was 44, and he couldn't get enough of it. "My anxiety is for myself as a performer. Am I any good? That's what I'd like to know, and all I need to know."

I know that during my first year at Milton Academy — 1935 — Frost read his poems to Mother's women's reading group. The scene was unphotographed in Uncle Joe's teak wood panelled library at 8 Sutton Square, right next to my childhood home, No. 6, and it was reported a wowser. I have no idea what the ladies paid him.

(8) Re: "Stopping By Woods": One of Frost's daughters told a biographer that her father "regularly passed a pond driving to his farm in West Derry, New Hampshire."

(9) In stanzas 2 and 3, do you think Frost is horsing around to lighten up the no-jokes solitude that the poem lives within? David Smythe writes that Frost said he wouldn't write about a Packard car because he couldn't be sure the Packard would be here forever. Although he worried about using the horse, he imagined the animal might be immortal.

(10) Robert Frost is fully packed with wise and witty phrases called *aphorisms*:

“A poetic line is a triumph over something that has bothered me. A poem is a momentary stay against confusion. But what about this confusion they talk about? I'm not confused. I'm just well-mixed.”

“The weakness, the strength to be swept away, to be carried away by something more than beer and games, and so on. I want everybody to be carried away by something. I'd rather be beer and games than nothing, I think.”

“I get tired of these quid nunc heads — not lunk heads, but quid-nunc heads who are always wringing their hands and saying ‘What now?’”

“Really arguments don’t matter. The only thing that counts is what you can’t help feeling.” (To Sydney Cox, September 17, 1914)

“Talking is a hydrant in the yard, and writing is a faucet upstairs in the house. Opening the first takes all the pressure off the second.” (Again to Sydney Cox, January 1, 1937)

Do you ever wonder how old Frost is in his wise and witty spoutings? Born 1864 — died 1963.

“I was just saying today how Christ posed himself the whole problem and died for it. How can we be just a world that needs mercy, and merciful in a world that needs justice.”

Jan. 12, 1963 — *Letters*, page 596

Well, Eli, you probably think that’s enough of Frost’s aphorisms, although I have hundreds more. But the above quotation may be his last “connection.”

Last sweet moments of “Stopping By Woods”

(11) The darkness, the silence, the whiteness. Do you think the man senses why the horse stops? Does he himself relish stopping? If so, why? Or has it been a pleasant social evening and now it’s time to trot along home?

(12) Frost once defined our famous Freedom as “the ability to move easy in harness.” Marxists define freedom as the recognition of necessity. Do you want to consider the rhyme scheme and iambic tetrameter of “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” within the context of the above definitions?

Iambic tetrameter is

$$\cup^{(1)} \text{ } / | \cup^{(2)} \text{ } / | \cup^{(3)} \text{ } / | \cup^{(4)} \text{ } /$$

contains 4 (tetra) metric feet (5=penta).

(13) Frost writes that the 19<sup>th</sup> Century novelist Walter Scott has the following in his *The Rover*: “He gave the bridle reins a shake.” Perhaps Scott stirred Frost to write this near magical 16 lines that the poet singles out as his “best bid for remembrance.” But “they” often say poets are seldom their own best critics.

Nóthǐng Góld Cǎn Stáy

- 6 A Náturě's | fǐrst gréen | ǐs góld, |  
6 A Hěr hárděst húa | tǒ hóld. |  
7 B Hěr eárlǔ léaf's | a fló|wěr;  
7 B Bǔt ónlǔ só | ǎn hóur. |  
6 C Thěn léaf | sǔbsídés | tǒ léaf. |  
6 C Sǒ É|děn sánk | tǒ gríef, |  
6 D Sǒ dáwn | gǒes dǒwn | tǒ dáy, |  
5 D Nóthǐng | góld cǎn | stáy. |

I hope you want to learn scansion, Eli, because it is, I suppose, the only way to catch the rhythm, the beat in each poetic line. For instance we read “Náturě’s,” and the beat or stress falls on the first syllable. The foot is called trócheě, a two-syllable *foot*. The next two syllables are an iambic foot (unaccented-accented) “fǐrst gréen,” and so are the last two syllables: “ǐs góld.” It’s a matter of reading OUT LOUD, and thinking out your feelings for the beat. All REET!

### Coleridge's Jingle on the Beat

The great Shakesperean scholar Samuel Taylor Coleridge was also a popular poet who with Wordsworth wrote *The Lyrical Ballads* and its marvelous democratic preface: "Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink."

But for our benefit, Coleridge also wrote:

Tróchěe | tríps fróm | lóng tǒ | shórt

(2) Fróm lóng | tó lóng | slów spón|dée stálks |stróng fóot |

Yéa ĩll | áblě | évĕr tǒ | keép ũp wĭth | dáctŷl tri|sýllăblě |

Wĭth ă léap | ănd ă boúnd | thĕ swĭft án|ăpĕsts thróng. |

Nŏw Í|ămbs márch | fróm shórt | tǒ lóng |

Dust of Snow\*

4	A	Thě wáy ă crów	(the rest is
4	B	Shöök dówn òn mé	iambic, or
4	A	Thě dúst òf snów	so I think)
5	B	Fròm ă hémlöck trée	
5	A	Hăs gívěn mŷ héart	(note
4	B	Ă chánge òf móod	anapests in
4	A	Ănd sáved sòm párt	Lines 4 and 8)
6	B	Öf ă dáy   Ī hăd ruéd.	

[with a leap and a bound the swift anapests throng]

Frost mailed this to Louis Untermeyer, whom Joan and I knew when we lived in Litchfield – my darkroom days, and hers not bright with light — and Louis read this note: “Simply a little poem recently about me as I am.”

“Dust of Snow” Frost called “The Favor.” “Those nature favors,” Frost said, “serve as metaphors for poems.”

And surely (cf. page 2) this is a synechdoche.

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\*One sentence, of lines that must be carried over into the next, but think out how you *pace* it.

Fire and Ice

Sóme säy the wórld will énd in fíre,  
Sóme säy in íce.  
From whát I've tásted óf desíre  
I hold with those who favour fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

Concise, laconic, perfect, and perfectly savage.

How fine that *suffice*, the final word, encloses the thematic work itself within the poem.

To Louis Untermeyer, when enclosing *Fire and Ice*: “I discovered that do or say my dambdest (sic) I can't be other than orthodox in politics, love, and religion. I can't escape salvation. I can't burn if I was born in this world to shine without heat.” His understatements make the passions more terrifying.

In his *Journals* the great French painter Delacroix writes:  
“The terrible is like the sublime. It is not to be abused.”

### What Fifty Said

- 10 A When Í was yóung my téachers wére the óld,  
10 A Í gǎve ũp fíre fǒr fórm tǐll Í wǎs cóld.  
10 B Ĩ súfferéd líke ǎ métǎl bëing cást.  
10 B Ĩ wént tǒ schóol tǒ agé tǒ léarn thě pást.  
10 C Now I am old my teachers are the young.  
10 C Whǎt cán't bë móldéd múst bë crácked  
    ǎnd sprúng.  
11 D Ĩ stráin | ǎt lěssǒns | fít tǒ | stárt ǎ | sú | tǔre.  
11 D Ĩ gó tǒ yóuth tǒ léarn thě fú | ture.

William Blake:

Do what you will, this life's a fiction.  
It is made up of contradiction.

Frost in 1961 in Israel: “I never know how I feel at the time.  
Immediate things don't do much for me.”

“The Oven Bird”

	10	A	There is a singer everyone has heard,
	10	A	Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
	10	B	Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
carry over	{	11	C He <i>sáys</i> that leáves are óld, and thát for flówěrs
		10	B Míd-sūmměř ís to spríng as óne to tén.
	10	D	He <i>says</i> the early petal-fall is past.
carry over	{	11	C Whěn péar ānd chěrrý blóom wěnt dówn ĩn shów ěrs
		10	D On súnny dáyś a móment ovércást;
	10	E	Ānd comés thāt óthěř fáll wě náme thé fáll.
	10	E	He <i>sáys</i> the híghwāy dúst ĩs óvěř áll.
carry over	{	10	F The bird would cease and be as other birds
		10	G Bút thāt hě knóws ĩn síngĭng nót tǒ síng.
carry over	{	10	F The quéstion thát he frámes ĩn áll but wórdś
		10	G ĩs whát to máke of á díminĭshěd thĭng.

Comments

Edward Thomas writes that this sonnet has “a quiet eagerness of emotion.” I add it’s a valid comfort for all cottonheads, and for anyone sorry that she/he had never once tried to write a poem.

Melville once triple-scored Spinoza's comment: "Our desire is not that nature obey us, but on the contrary, that we obey nature." And in his novel *Mardi*, he writes, "Nature is not against us, and not for us." So what? So we all scratch the backs of all those who've come before us, so we all hug each other's shoulders to make all the world kin.

Note that unorthodox rhyming of this sonnet. Usually it's Shakespearean rhyming: ABAB CDDC for the octave and EFEFGG for the sestet. Or Plutarchan ABBA ABBA for the octave and CDE CDE for the sestet. Frost's Oven Bird as you noticed is AABC BDCD for the octave, and EEFGFG for the sestet.

What I call — a bit too cutely — Frosty’s allusion for the *Oven Bird* is another line from John Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale*: “to cease upon the midnight with no pain.” You must have often heard that the nightingale’s song is the most varied, most liquid, and most entrancing of birdsong. And Eli, do you also know that great poets — like Frost — are said to “sing.” However, the oven bird three times *says* rather than sings because “the highway dust is over all.” But what sentences *say* how gracefully this bird understands his/her diminishing role in the natural course of human and bird affairs: All life does end. Frost himself in another Sydney Cox letter of 1929 writes: “A little of anything goes a long way in art. A little in the fist is all I ask. My object is true form. Is, was, and always will be true to any chance bit of true life.”

“The Secret Sits”

- 10 A We dǎnce aróund in the ríng | ǎnd sǔppóse,  
10 A Büt thě sé|crĕt síts | ĩn thě míddlĕ, | ǎnd knóws. |

Design

- 10 A I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,  
10 B On a white heal-all, holding up a moth  
10 B Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth —  
10 A Assorted characters of death and blight  
10 A Mixed ready to begin the morning right,  
11 B Like the ingredients of a witch's broth —  
11 B A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,  
10 A And dead wings carried like a paper kite.
- 11 A What had that flower to do with being white,  
10 C The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?  
10 A What brought the kindred spider to that height?  
10 A Then steered the white moth thither in the night?  
10 C What but design of darkness to appall? —  
10 C If design govern in a thing so small.

If I am right in my lettering, “Design” is more a Plutarchan sonnet than Shakespearean. Look at page 22, Eli. But who cares about that? It's too much like snobs who claim Shakespeare could not have written his gorgeous plays because he was “a commoner.” The English have always gone ape for “the royals.”

Now compare “Design” with an earlier version Frost wrote.  
He’s “a proper commoner!”

- 10 A A dented spider like a snow-drop white  
10 B On a white heal-all, holding up a moth  
10 B Like piece of lifeless satin cloth —  
10 A Saw ever curious eye so strange a sight?  
10 A Portent in little, assorted death and blight  
10 B Like the ingredients of a witch’s broth?  
11 B The beady spider, the flower like a froth  
10 A And the moth carried like a paper kite?  
11 A What had that flower to do with being white  
11 A The blue brunella, every child’s delight?  
10 A What brought the kindred spider to that height?  
10 A Make we no thesis of the miller moth’s plight.  
10 A What but design of darkness and of night?  
11 A Design, design! Do I use the work aright?

Six questions in eight sentences; too many. Doesn't the earlier version remove the real horror of the chosen "Design" in which Frost is himself caught up within the grisly murder. When does the poem become serious, sinister? I think right after lines 4–5:

“Assorted characters of death and blight  
Mixed ready to begin the morning right”

which sounds precisely the *tone* of a radio advertisement for cornflakes. (*Tone* is the attitude of poet to subject, reader.) Incidentally, the Heal-all is a member of the mint family, brought to America by early homeopathic doctors. Its reputation was as a medicinal herb for all kinds of wounds. The French believed that anyone having a heal-all had no need for a surgeon.

Frost had as his intellectual hero William James, professor of philosophy at Harvard, whose early book *Pragmatism* Frost loved. In it he read: “Some details, if designed, would argue an evil rather than a good designer. God’s designs have grown so vast as to be incomprehensible. If not a blind force but a seeing force runs things, we may reasonably expect better issues. This vague confidence in the future is the sole pragmatic [practical] meaning at present discernible in the terms *design* or designer.”

And now a Frosty Allusion for “Design.”

He found in a Thomas Hardy poem “August Midnight” these lines:\*

“On this scene enters winged, horned, and spined —  
A long-legs, a moth, and a dumbledore  
While on my page there idly stands,  
A sleepy fly that rubs its hands. ”

---

\*A dumbledore is dialect for a bumble-bee.

Now, Grandson, here is my effort (Mother used to say effort 😊) to describe the sonnet “Design.” I hope the brackets will make this paraphrase an expression of its possible meanings in my own words. This is sometimes helpful in getting hold of a difficult poem.

In “Design,” the normally black [beady] spider and the blue heal-all are both wickedly white. The spider, who has cannibalized its moth, conducts a macabre dance of death, a Eucharistic mass for the moth’s soul, as it were. It holds the dead white moth like a rigid piece of satin cloth [or a rigid waxy corpse?]. These characters of death and blight are ready to begin the morning [mourning] right [rite], and thus Frost transforms the cornflakes radio jingle into a brilliant Frostian punning match.

What evil force made the blue flower white, and what malign power brings the black spider into deadly conjunction with the white moth? Frost's dark answer suggests the awful albino death scene which has dead wings carried like a paper kite. A children's happy party, anyone?

The last two lines of "Designs" refute Genesis and St. Matthew (as I recall their convictions). If design does govern in a thing so small, Frost replaces God's design with his own awe-ful logic.

Most of us either don't notice the fate of the wayside blue and innocent heal-all, or they never recover. A froth!

“Beyond Words”

- 11 A That row of icicles along the gutter  
8 B Feels like my armory of hate;  
6 A And you, you . . . you utter . . .  
2 B You wait!

Frost said this poem was about his wife. Elinor White Frost, and it could not be published until after her death. The first two lines make a simile revealing his feelings about her, he said, and the last two lines have *her* “spitting out you, four times.”

They were co-valedictorians at the Lawrence, Massachusetts high school, and they married right after high school graduation. He was years older.

Later we will read another poem about Elinor. He called it “In White.”

“It Bids Pretty Fair”

syllables	rhymes	
13	A	The pláy   seems óut   fŏr ăn ál mŏst ĭndéf inite rún.
12	B	Dón't mĭnd a   líttle thĭng like the áctors fĭghting.
12	A	The ónly thĭng   I wŏrry abóut is the sún.
13	B	We'll bé all rĭght if nóthing goes wróng with the líghting.

Eli, do you notice the scansion? The first line is anapestic, 3, iambic, 2.

Line 3 is anapestic 2, iambic 3. Line 4 is iambic 3, anapestic 2, and it is what they call a feminine rhyme ending (no accent).

Line 2 is a grab bag. The first beat seems like a trochee ( $\text{'} \cup$ ), then 2 iambs ( $\cup \text{'}$ ) than an anapest, finally an iamb, and another feminine rhyme (no accent). I can't believe they call it a “feminine end rhyme.” Women seem so much more confident.

Did you notice that even in a four-line poem, Frost makes the syllable count a **game**: 13-12-12-13. And the rhyme scheme is of course a formal symmetry.

## “A Mood Apart”

syllables	rhyme	
9	A	Ŏnce dŏwn   on <sup>(1)</sup> my knées   to grŏw ĩng plánts
10	B	Ī pródd ed <sup>(1)</sup> the eárh   with <sup>(1)</sup> a láz ỹ tŏol,
10	A	Īn tíme   with <sup>(1)</sup> ă méd ley <sup>(1)</sup> ŏf sótt ŏ chánts
11	B	Bŭt <sup>(1)</sup> becŏm ĩng <sup>(1)</sup> ăwáre   ŏf <sup>(1)</sup> somě bóys   ăt schŏol
9	C	Whŏ <sup>(1)</sup> hăd stŏpped   ŏŭtside   thě fénce   to spý,
8	D	Ī stŏpped   mỹ sŏng   ănd ál mŏst héart,
9	C	Fŏr án ỹ eyé   ĩs <sup>(1)</sup> ăn é vĩl   eyé
9	D	Thăt loŏks   ĩn ón tŏ <sup>(1)</sup> ă móod   ăpárt.

Eli, although it is irritating to mess up the *out loud* reading of any poem with noting the rhythmic beat, if you persevere, the reward Frost gives us is the joy of understanding how he creates the music of sound. The rhyme scheme is governed by the sound of the last syllable in each line of the poem as it progresses from the first line to the last.

The penultimate (next-to-last) word of the third line is *sotto*.

The vertical lines separate the iambic from the anapestic feet in this poem. Writing free verse, Frost said, would be like playing tennis with no net. “In a Mood Apart,” you’ll see all the *anāpēsts* numbered (1) so that you can recognize with *ā* *leáp* | *á* *ánd* *ā* *boúnd*. Why not pay attention to the Beat, the rhythm, Eli? It can help you read poetry out loud — where to emphasize the accented syllable.

Both Hardy (Thomas Hardy the 19<sup>th</sup> Century English poet) and Frost are similar *pastoral* poets. Examples:

Hardy’s “The Breaking of Nations:”

8 A Ónlǿ | ā mán | hárrōw|ǿng clóds |  
6 B Ĩn ā slów | silēnt wálk |  
9 A Wíth ān | ōld hórse | thāt stúm|blēs ānd nódś  
6 B Hālf āsléep | āś thēy tálk. |

[The meter: trochee, iamb, trochee, iamb; two anapests; trochee, iamb, iamb, anapest; two anapests.]

Frost's "The Strong Are Saying Nothing:"

- 13 A Thěre is sél|dǒm móre | thǎn ǎ mán | tǒ ǎ hárr|ǒwed  
piéce |.
- 10 B Mén wǎlk | ǎlóné | their lots | plówed fǎr | ǎpárt.
- 12 A Ōne stríng|ǐng ǎ cháin | ǒf séed | ǐn ǎn ó|pěn créase. |
- 12 B ǎnd ǎnóth|er stúm|blíng áft|ěr ǎ hált|ǐng cárt. |
- 12 A Tǒ thě frěsh | ǎnd bláck | ǒf thě squáres | of eárl|y móld |
- 11 B Thě leaf|less blóom | of ǎ plúm | ǐs frěsh | ǎnd whíte, |
- 14 A Thǒugh thěre's móre | thǎn ǎ dóubt | ǐf thě wéa|thěrr  
is nót | tǒo cóld |
- 12 B Fǒr thě bées | tǒ cóme | ǎnd séve | ǐts beáu|tǔ ǎríght. |
- 10 A Wind goes from farm in wave on wave
- 11 B But carries no cry of what is hoped to be.
- 12 C Thěre máy | bě lǐt|tlě ǒr múch | běyónđ thě gráve, |
- 12 A Bǔt thě stróng | ǎre sáy|ǐng nó|thǐng ǔntíl | thěy sée. |

**“Eli! Subject, technique — the rhythms of deeply felt thought — and the casual homespun tone are intertwined.”**

Brad Leithouser, writing in the *New York Review of Books* on August 8, 1996, exactly 29 years after your grandfather Stillman died, writes: “You might call Frost America’s best 19<sup>th</sup> Century poet (1864–1963), and call Dickinson (1830–1886) and Whitman (1812–1891) two of our best 20<sup>th</sup> Century poets. In the long run, what’s a mere hundred years, one way or another.”

Eli, would you rather read short poems than long? Often they consider youthful memories that old men like to reconsider.

U.S. King’s X 1946

- 10 A Háving | invéntĕd ă nĕw Hŏlŏcaúst, —  
10 B Ānd beén | thĕ fírst | wíth ít | tŏ wín | ă wár, |  
10 A Hów thĕy | mǎke háste, | tŏ crý | wíth fíngĕrs  
cróssed, |  
10 B Kíng’s X- | nŏ fáirs | tŏ usé | ít á|nŷ móre. |

Note the spondee in Line 4 — a strong foot.

## “Qúestiöñing | Fácēs |” (never published)

syllabic	rhyme	
count	scheme	
10	A	Thě wín těr ówl bānked júst   ĩn tíme   tǒ páss
10	A	Ānd sáve   hěrsélf   fróm bréak   ĩng wín dǒw gláss
10	B	Ānd hěr wíngs   stráining   súdděnlǎ   āspréad
10	B	Caught cól ǒr fróm   thě lást   ǒf éve ning réd
10	C	Īn ā   díspláy   ǒf ún děrdǒwn   ánd quíll
10	C	Tǒ glássed   ĩn chíl drěn át   thě wín dǒw síll.

–1962. Frost was 88

I hope you scanned two examples of the extremely rare dactylic trisyllable: First in the poem’s title, with a tròchèe thrown in for good measure, and the prepositional phrase *for good measure* is MY PUN-for fun.

The second dáctýllíc trísýllāblě is in line 3, along with an anapest, a trochee then *súdděnlǎ*, and last foot in line 3 is the faithful iambic.

Notice the theatrical scene set often in nearly flawless iambic couplets: Lines 1 and 2 and 5 and 4 and 6 and 5 except for the first foot trochee. The motionless open-mouthed children staring rapt at the gorgeous veering wings on the owl’s swooping 6 inches from their equally unconscious absorption.

Which world is the more intent upon its own inward-purposes? Which is more mysteriously unfolding? Gotcha! Except that I don't know any more than you do, except that I know you are thinking "Oh Bud, you're too old to find the answers to your own questions. It's not surprising that you took up teaching. You're all the same."

"An Answer" [Implied]

A 10 Büt Ís|lānds óf | thĕ Bléss|ĕd, bléss | yǒu, són.

A 10 Ĩ né|vĕr cáme | ŷpón | ă bléss|ĕd óne |

After the first Bléssĕd comes a *caesura*, a word deriving from the Latin, meaning *a cutting*, breaking into a probable singsong reading of the poem. Try reading the two iambic pentameter [5 feet  $\cup \prime$ ], and you'll love the caesura. We've passed up I imagine 50 of them. The tone of voice of the speaker? I feel it to be tender, amused, regretful, and respectful.

“A Question”

- 8 A Ā vöice sáid, | Loók mĕ | ĩn thĕ stárs |  
8 B Ānd téll | mĕ trú|lŷ, mén | ōf eárth |  
8 A Īf áll | thĕ sóul|-ānd-bód|ŷ scárs |  
8 B Wĕre nót | toō múch | tō páy | fōr bírth. |

From a Middlebury, Vermont, *Campus* interview: “If no surprise in the poet, there won’t be any in the reader.”

“A Question” deliberately echoes the Epitaph [Words inscribed on a tomb] from *The Greek Anthology*: “I, Dionysius of Tauros, lie here, Never having married, — and I wish my father had not.”

“In A Poem”

- 10 A Thĕ séntĕncíng gōes blíthelŷ ón ĩts wáy,  
10 B Ānd tákes | thĕ pláy|fúllŷ | ōbjéct|ĕd rhýme  
10 B Ās súde|lŷ ás | ĩt kéeps | thĕ stróke, | ānd tíme |  
10 A Īn háv|ĭng ĩts | ūndé|niá|blĕ sáy. |

(Note the pun in the second word of the poem.)

The “playfully objected” [casually following the rule of scansion] in “In a Poem” has an ABBA rhyme scheme and its “stroke” is Frost’s iambic [⊔ / = unaccented (⊔) and accented (/)], a two-syllable foot.

Frost told *The Boston Post* of February 14, 1916, the year he brought his family home from England, “I hear everything I write. All poetry to me is a matter of sound. I hear my things spoken. I write verse that might be called ‘free’ — the free-versers have accepted me! — but I believe, after all, that there must be a cadence, a rhythm, to be poetry at all. I don’t mean jingle. I hate jingle. I hate rhyme for itself.”

I hear the sound of Franklin D. Roosevelt in those words: “And now they’re attacking my poor little dog Fala.” Or: “Where are they now? Mahrtin, Bahrton, and Fish!”

“I hate jingle. I hate rhyme for itself.” So confident that his mockery has beneath it a laughing generosity. Isn’t that his *tone*? [attitude of writer to subject and to reader] And seven years later, he was telling a *New York Times* reporter:

“Sometimes my objection to free verse is that it’s a pose. It’s not honest. When a man sets out to consciously tear up forms and rhythms [syllabic count and rhythms] and measures [feet] then he’s not interested in giving you poetry. He just wants to perform. He wants to show you his tricks. He will get an effect. Nobody denies that, but it is not a harmonious effect.”

Eli, when you were thirteen and set out to sculpt your beautiful naked girl, you made her harmoniously effective lying so easily graceful, unlike the blobs all angles and senseless that the Museum of Modern Art claim to be aesthetically triumphant.

Selected Letters of Robert Frost, page 418:

“One can safely say that after 6 to 20,000 years of experience that the evident design is a situation here in which it will always be equally hard to save your soul. If you dislike hearing your soul mentioned in open meeting, say your decency, your integrity.”

## “The Road Not Taken”

syllable	rhyme	
9	A	Twó róads   dīvĕrged   ĩn ă yĕl lŏw wŏod,
9	B	Ānd sŏr rĭ Ī cóuld   nŏt trá vĕl bóth
9	A	Ānd bé   ŏne trá vēĕr, lŏng   Ī stŏod
9	A	Ānd lŏoked dŏwn ŏne   as făr ă Ī cóuld
9	B	Tŏ whĕre   ĩt bĕnt   ĩn thĕ ún dĕrgrŏwth;
9	A	Thĕn tŏok   thĕ ŏth ĕr, ă ĵúst   ă făir;
9	B	Ānd hăv ĭng pĕrhăps   thĕ bĕt tĕr clăim,
9	A	Bĕcaúse   ĩt wă ĝrăss ĭ ănd wănt ĕd wĕar;
8	A	Thŏugh ăs   fŏr thăt   thĕ páss ĭng thĕre
9	B	Hăd wŏrn   thĕm réal ĭ ăbŏut   thĕ sáme.
9	A	Ānd bóth   thăt mŏrn ĭng é quăĭĭly lăy
8	B	Īn leăves   nŏ stĕp   hăd trŏd dĕn blăck.
10	A	Ōh, Ī   képt   thĕ fĭrst   fŏr ănŏth ĕr dăy!
9	A	Yĕt knŏwĭng hŏw wăy   leăds ŏn   tŏ wăy
10	B	Ī dŏubt ĕd ĭf Ī   shŏuld é vēr cŏme băck.

- 9 A Í shall | bë téll|íng thís | wíth ä sígh |  
8 B Sómewhère | ágēs | änd á|ges hence: |  
9 A Twó roáds | dívérged | ín ä woód | änd Í- |  
9 A Í toök | thě róad | lěss trá|véled bý, |  
9 B Änd thát | häs mäde áll | thě díff|ěrénce. |

Jeffrey Meyer, Frost's last and best biographer, learned that Frost had read and liked Terry Gruber's book of poems called *Cat High* published in New York in 1854, and including a little parody of "The Road Not Taken."

Two mice converged in a wood,  
And I,  
I ate the fatter one,  
And that has made all the difference

Since Frost was born in 1864, *Cat High* must have survived until 1916, the publishing date of "The Road Not Taken."

The name *Cat High* reminds me of Frost's comment in a *Paris Review* interview in the fall of 1960: "I wonder what they're at. There's one book that sounded as if it might be good, *Aw, Hell*. The book was called *Aw, Hell*. That might be something."

Eli, have you read Joseph Conrad's story *The Secret Sharer*? You might like it after you've read Frost's moving letter to Miss Susan Ward:

"Two lonely cross-roads that themselves cross each other I have walked several times this winter without meeting or overtaking so much as a single person on foot or on runners. The practically unbroken condition of the snow for several days after a snow or a blow proves that neither is much travelled. Judge then how surprised I was the other evening as I came down one to see a man who to my own unfamiliar eyes and all in the

dusk looked for all the world like myself coming down the other, his approach to the point where our paths must intersect being so timed that unless one of us pulled up we must collide. I felt as if I were going to meet my own image in a slanting mirror. Or say I felt as we slowly converged on the same point with the same noiseless yet laborious strides as if we were two images about to float together with the uncrossing of someone's eyes. I verily expected to take up and absorb the other self and feel the stronger by the addition for the three-mile journey home. But I didn't go forward to the touch. I stood still in wonderment and let him pass by; that, too, with the fatal omission of not trying to find out by a comparison of lives and immediate and remote interests what could have brought us to the same point in the wilderness at the same moment of nightfall. Some purpose, I doubt not, if we could have made it out."

\* \* \*

Might not Frost have read the opening lines of Dante's *Divine Comedy* before he sat down to write "The Road Not Taken"?

“Midway in the journey of this life I was aware  
That I had strayed into a dark forest,  
And the right path appeared not anywhere.  
Ah, tongue cannot describe how it oppressed,  
This wood so harsh, dismal and wild that fear  
At thought of it now strikes into my breast.”

Even if I have already used both these phrases from Robert Frost and Karl Marx, Eli, it costs us nothing to repeat them:

Marx: “Freedom is the recognition of necessity.” Frost: “Freedom is feeling easy in your harness.” They say the same truth, and if we remember them, we can share the consolation prize.

Another Frosty Allusion, this one William Wordsworth's:

“She dwelt among untrodden ways,  
But she is in her grave,  
And oh, the difference to me.”

— again gratitude to Meyers, who compiled these Allusions.

“Provide, Provide”

syllabic count	rhyme scheme	
8	A	The witch that came, (the withered hag)
8	A	To wash the steps with pail and rag,
8	A	Was once the beauty Abishag.
8	B	The picture pride of Hollywood.
8	B	Too many fall from great and good
8	B	For you to doubt the likelihood.
8	C	Die early and avoid the fate...
8	C	Or if predestined to die late,
8	C	Make up your mind to die in state.

[As you notice, most verses are straight iambic, risking sing song, but effective when harshly mocking. Note page 51. The poem continues:]

- 8 D Máke thě | whóle stóck | ěxchánge yǒur ówn!  
8 D Īf néed | bě ócc | ůpý | ě thróne, |  
8 D Whěre nó | bǒdý | cǎn cáll | *yóu* crǒne |.
- 8 E Sóme hǎve | rěliéd | ōn whát | thěy knéw; |  
8 E Óthěrs ōn | béǐng | sǐmplý trúe, |  
8 E Whát wórked | fǒr thém | mǐght wórked | fǒr yóu. |
- 8 F Nǒ mém | ōry | ōf hǎv | ĩng stárred  
8 F Ātonés fǒr látěr díś | rěgárd |,  
8 F Ōr kéeps | thě énd | fróm be | ĩng hard.
- 8 G Běttěr | tǒ gó | dǒwn díg | nǐfíed  
8 G With bóught | ěn fríend | shǐp át yǒur sidé  
8 G Thǎn nóne át áll. Prǒvíde, Prǒvíde! |

caesura  
after "all"

If I'm right on the Beat, then Frost made an effort to avoid singsong.

Frost said his seven savage triplets were inspired by the strike at Harvard College by women who washed the steps. May be.

What does “Provide, Provide,” mean?

Like everyone, Frost has his dark, mean, disagreeable underbelly of disbelief. “I like to fool. Oh, you know, you like to be mischievous. But not in that dull way of just being dogged and obscure,” as he told the same *Paris Review* reporter in 1960.

Mischief he likes, is that really so?

“What *worked* for them might work for you”

His satire on the humanitarian impulse of F.D.R.’s New Deal — surely the finest moments of America’s 20<sup>th</sup> Century — is an unpleasantly wiseass flash of Frost’s lowest common denominator. Provide, Provide, he liked to read this poem at public readings, after which he would yelp, “Or somebody will provide for you, and how would you like that!” And he didn’t pause for an answer.

Some would prefer to hear Rilke:

“In the end, the only defense is defenselessness.”

Certainly knowledge is not enough when knowledge is understood to mean expedience only.

Who would like to hear what “Provide, Provide” means? On August 12th, 1996, in San Diego, one out of five delegates to the Republican Convention is a millionaire. (*The New York Times*, August 13th). And all the delegates would reveal their frenzy in wild unending applause.

## “Meeting and Passing”

- 10 A As I went down the hill along the wall  
 11 B Thére wăś | ă gáte | Ĩ hăd leáned | ăt fór | thě víew |  
 10 B And had just turned from when I first saw you  
 10 A As you came up the hill. <sup>C</sup>We met. But all  
 10 A We did that day was mingle great and small  
 10 B Foótprints ĩn sŭmmĕr dúst ăś íf wĕ drĕw  
 10 B The figure of our being less than two  
 10 A But more than one as yet. <sup>C</sup>Your parasol  
 11 C Póintĕd | thĕ déc|imăl óff | <sup>C</sup>wĭth óne | déep thrúst. |  
 10 D And all the time we talked <sup>C</sup>you seemed to see  
 10 C Sómethĭng | dŏwn thére | tŏ smĭle | ăt ín | thĕ dúst. |  
 10 D (Óh, ĭt wăś wĭthŏut préjŭdice | tŏ mé!)  
 10 E Áftĕrwărd | Ĩ wĕnt pást <sup>C</sup>whăt yŏu | hăd pássed  
 10 E Bĕfŏre wĕ mét <sup>C</sup>ănd yŏu whăt Í hăd pássed.

“Meeting and Passing” has 12 of its 14 lines in iambic pentameter in the Plutarchan sonnet mode. I’ve scanned the two 11-syllable lines — Lines 3 and 9. Line 10 is up for grabs in scansion, but it is also not orthodox iambic, and the 6 possibilities for caesuras — marked *C* — and two trochees also jar possibilities of singsong. Note the spondees (Page 22) in lines 7 and 9.

But more important than technique is Randall Jarrell's beautiful sentence about "Meeting and Passing:"

"The transfiguring almost inexpressible reaching out of the self to what has become closer and more personal than the self."

And Stanley Burnshaw's memory on page 251 of *Robert Frost Himself* is also of interest:

"When *Mountain Interval* appeared (1916), the widow of an Amherst colleague, assisting Elinor Frost in making sandwiches, asked [about "Meeting and Passing."] 'Don't you think it's beautiful?' 'Beautiful,' she said in a voice close to tears. The time and place was Franconia, 1917, 25 years since the poem each had been writing brought them together."

Perhaps it's "only" another Plutarchan sonnet, Eli; don't you think the subject is delightfully close to your knuckle? I imagine excitement Frost expresses in the final couplet:

"Afterward I went past what you *had* passed  
Before we met <sup>C</sup>and you what I had passed"

I am envious of your young and glowing life, and I only wish I will see you in love.

I also know now what Mark Twain wrote 100 years ago:

"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

## “Mowing” (astonishing Sonnet Rhyming)

syllables	rhymes	
12	A	Thěre wās né vĕr ă sōund   bĕside   thĕ wōod   but one,
12	B	Ānd thát   wās mý   lōng scýthe   whispĕr ĭng tó   thĕ grōund.
12	C	Whăt wās ít   ít whís perĕd? Ī   knów nōt wĕll   mýsĕlf.
13	A	Pĕrháps   ít wās sōme   thĭng ăbōut   thĕ héat   ōf thĕ sún.
10	B	Sōmethĭng   pĕrháps,   ăbōut   thĕ lăck   of sound   —
11	D	Ānd thát   wās whý   ít whís pĕred ănd díd   nōt spĕak.
11	E	Īt wās   nō drĕam   ōf thĕ gĭft   ōf í dlĕ hóurs,
11	C	Ōr eás ŷ góld   ăt thĕ hând   ōf fáy   ōr ělf:
12	D	Ānythĭng   móre thăn   thĕ trúth   wōuld hăve seĕmed   tōo wĕak
11	F	Tō thĕ eárn ĕst lóve   thăt láid   thĕ swále   ĭn rōws,
11	E	Nót withōut   feéblĕ -póintĕd   spĭkes ōf   flówĕrs
10	G	Pále órch ĭsés,   ănd scăred   ă brĭght   grĕen snáke.
11	F	Thĕ fáct   is thĕ swĕet ĕst drĕam   thăt lá bŕ knóws.
11	G	Mý lōng scýthe   whís pĕred   ănd léft   thĕ háy   tō máke.

Check out my scansion to note mistakes.

- Line 1: 2 anapests (U U ′) then 3 iambs (U ′)
- Line 2: 2 iambs, a spondee (′ ′), trochee (′ U), 2 iambs
- Line 3: One anapest, iamb, anapest, 2 iambs
- Line 4: Iamb, 2 anapests, iamb, anapest
- Line 5: Trochee, iamb, and three more iambs
- Line 6: 3 iambs, anapest, and last iamb
- Line 7: 2 iambs, anapest, and 2 more iambs
- Line 8: 2 iambs, anapest and 2 iambs
- Line 9: Dactylic trimeter (′ U U), iamb, anapest, iamb
- Line 10: Anapest 4 iambs
- Line 11: Dactylic trimeter, and 3 trochees!
- Line 12: 4 iambs and a spondee
- Line 13: Iamb, anapest, and 3 iambs
- Line 14: Anapest, trochee, and 3 iambs

and so what? 😊

Frost to the publisher Mosher, 1913: “I like the decision with which you speak, and am content to let you prefer ‘Reluctance’ to anything else I have written. Nevertheless *Mountain Interval* contains a dozen poems that are at least as good in the same kind and for the same reason. In ‘Mowing,’ for instance, I come so near to what I long to get that I almost despair of getting nearer.”

I also like what he wrote to Louis Untermeyer in 1917. “It is not fair to farmers to make me out a very good or laboring farmer. I’ve had hard times, but no special shovel slavery.”

I admire a letter he wrote to a former Pinkerton Academy student, John Bartlett, on Dec. 13, 1913: “In *North of Boston*, you are to see me performing in a language absolutely unliterary. What I would like to get so I would never use a word or a combination of words that I haven’t *heard* used in running speech. You do it on your ear. I make myself. War on clichés. My house may be a one-room shack, but it is not the Poor House. It is the palace of Art.” I said this earlier but it’s good. Frost’s tone is casual. Seems he’s true.

In Neglect (from *Boy's Will*)

syllables	rhyming	
9	A	Thěy leáve   us só   tǒ thě wáy   wě tóok  ,
10	B	Ǻs twó   in whóm   thěy wěre próved   mǐstaken
10	B	Thăt wě sít   sǒmetimés   in thě wáy   sǐde nóok,
10	A	With mǐs   chiěvoũs vá   grǎnt sěráph   ǐc lóok,
10	B	And try   if wě cán   nǒt feél   fǒrsǎkén.

Again writing to his barometer Louis Untermeyer: “If you want to test this out on a larger poem — try. I may not be funny enough for *Life* or *Punch*, but I have sense of humor enough to laugh when the joke’s on me.”

Ezra Pound had the first *A Boy's Will*, and Frost never got his hands on it: “You had better run along home. I’m going to review it.” Pound, who had “discovered Hemingway and T. S. Eliot,” wrote to Harriet Monroe at *Poetry* magazine: “I’ve just discovered another American, vurry Amerkn, I think, with the seeds of grace.”

Frost described how the younger man “took a poem of mine, saying, ‘You’ve done it in 50 words, and I’ve shortened it to 48.’

“I answered: ‘And you ruined its meter, my idiom, and my idea.’”

In 10 words Frost shows what he wants most for his poems: The Beat — and formal rhyming. The sounds of authentic people, even if every poem seems another variation of Robert Frost. And ‘*my* idea,’ and never yours, Ezra Pound.

“The Master Speed”

No speed of wind or water rushing by  
But you have speed far greater. You can climb  
Back up a stream of radiance to the sky,  
And back through history up the stream of time.  
And you were given this swiftness not for haste  
Nor chiefly that you may go where you will,  
But in the rush of everything to waste  
That you may have the power of standing still. —  
Off any still or moving thing you say.

Two such as you with such a master speed Cannot be parted nor be swept away From one another once you are agreed That life is only life forever more Together wing to wing and oar to oar.
--

I love this sonnet for the boxed (one sentence) 5 lines because they describe what Joan and I hope and believe can be our fate. We are old enough not to worry about what happened to Paulo and Francesca in the *Divine Comedy*.

The more disinterested might prefer what the poet himself wrote about his flawless Shakespeare sonnet: “All I care about is to catch sentences that have not been brought to book. Rural New England talk set against the venerable iambic line would sing an enduring song.”

But would the old-stone savage spout this dream? I think it probable. This is blank verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter.

### Mending Wall

10 Sómething thěre ís thăt dóēs'n't lóve ă wáll,  
10 That send the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
10 And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
11 And makes the gaps even two can pass abreast.  
10 The work of hunters is another thing: 5  
10 I have come after them and made repair  
10 Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
11 But they would have the rabbit out of hiding  
10 To please the yelping dogs. The gaps, I mean.  
10 No one has seen them made or heard them made; 10  
10 But at spring mending time we find them there.  
10 I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
10 And on a day we meet to walk the line  
10 And set the wall between us once again.  
10 We keep the wall between us as we go. 15  
11 To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
10 And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
10 We have to use a spell to make them balance.  
10 ‘Stay where you are until our backs are turned!’  
10 We make our fingers rough with handling them. 20

10 Oh, just another kind of outdoor game.  
10 One on a side. It comes to little more:  
10 There where it is, we do not need the wall.  
11 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
10 My apple trees will never get across 25  
11 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
10 He only says, ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’  
11 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
10 If I could put a notion in his head:  
10 ‘Why do they make good neighbors. Isn’t it 30  
11 Where there are cows?’ But here there are no cows.  
10 Before I built a wall, I’d ask to know  
10 What I was walling in and walling out,  
10 And to whom I was like to give offense.  
10 Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, 35  
10 That wants it down. I could say ‘Elves’ to him,  
11 But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather  
10 He said it for himself. I see him there  
10 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
10 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed. 40  
10 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
10 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
11 He will not go behind his father’s saying,  
9 And likes having thought of it so well 44  
11 He says again, ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’

\* \* \*

Guay, an Old French-Canadian, first saw “Good fences make good neighbors” on an advertisement for prefab picket fences.”

On September 15, 1915, Frost answered a letter from Walter Pritchard Eaton. No one knows what Eaton asked, except that he must have written about the poet's "Mending Wall" because Frost's response is on the record:

"What bothers people in my blank verse is that I have tried to do with boasting tones and quizzical tones and shrugging tones (there are such). I don't say them to make them, but to *catch* them. They are always there living in the cave of the mouth. They are red cave things living before words were."

Red cave things?

But Frost died long before Montana's Freedom Militia achieved *New York Times* notoriety.

The poet got back on track in his letter to good old Louis Untermeyer who with his wife Bryna had a house not far from Litchfield, Connecticut:

"I'm in favor of a skin and fences and tariff walls. In favor of reserves and of individuals with some age in their time apart. The trouble with everybody's minds is that everyone's caught up in the big forum when all you have to do to be saved is to steal off to one side to see if you are any good at anything."

Were really eclogues — pre-Industrial Age pastoral poems. Out of them came “Mending Wall.” The country dweller shows his rustic naiveté versus the great rich world.”

\* \* \*

“Neither Out Far Nor In Deep”

Syllables	Rhyme	
7	A	Thě pé ǒple älong   thě shóre
6	B	Äll túrn   änd loók   óne wáy.
7	A	Thěy túrn   thěir bácks   òn thě   lánd,
7	B	Thěy loók   ät thě séa   äll dáy.
7	A	Äs lóng   äs ít takés   tǒ páss
7	B	Ä shíp kěeps ráis ing its húll;
6	A	Thě wétt ěr gróund   likě gláss
6	B	Rěflécts   ä stánd ing gúll.
6	A	Thě lánd   mǎy vár y móre
8	B	Büt whěre é věr thě trúth   mǎy bé —
6	A	Thě wá těr cómes   äshóre
8	B	Änd thě pé ǒple loók   ät thě séa.
6	A	Thěy cán nǒt loók   oüt fár
6	B	They cán nǒt loók   ìn deép.
8	A	Büt whén   wäs thăt é věr ä bár
6	B	Tǒ á ny wáтч   thěy kěép.

Eli, which opinion about “Neither Out Far Nor In Deep” gets the booby prize, and which do you prefer? Why not write me a careful paragraph about both?

1. Randall Jarrell: “It would be hard to find anything more unpleasant about people than this last stanza!”
2. William Blake (1757–1827, but pretend he was born in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century): “If the fool persists in his folly, he would become wise.”
3. Lionel Trilling: “The most perfect poem of our time.”

“Devotion”

For no apparent reason, the unaccented last syllable is named a *feminine* rhyming.

9 A Thě héart | cǎn thínk | ǒf nó | děvó|tiǒn  
10 A Gréatĕr | thǎn bé|ǐng shóre tǒ thě ó|cĕan. |  
9 A Hóldǐng | thě cúrve | ǒf óne | pǒsí|tion  
9 A Cóuntǐng | ǎn énd|lĕss ré|pĕtí|tiǒn.

Is the woman “the shore woman” or is the man “the shore man” or are they each, at different times, both? Frost said, “And yet there are times when you have to quit like a man.” And he also said, “The least can mean most.” Are either or both of these comments helpful in understanding “Devotion”? Did you notice and approve the tróchĕes in Lines 2, 3, and 4? And what about the “feminine ending”?

“The Most of It”

In another interview which might as well be called an inner view, Frost said:

“A poem which indicates as well as I can a truthfulness, a willingness to admit the falseness of the cliché ‘Make the most of it,’ and the falseness of the contradiction of the cliché. If the universe never gives us a black and white one that is somehow not an answer at all, still it’s inhuman — not — answer exceeds any answer that we human beings could have thought of or wished for.”

Someone, perhaps Coleridge or Emerson, describes human despair as “jets of chaos.” Brilliant, I think.

But I always go to the etymological Latin, always grateful that I passed my doctoral test in the language. Despair in Latin is literal: *de spero* means “away from hope,” making “jets of chaos” yet more graphic.

So Make “The Most of It”

- 10 A He thought he kept the universe alone;
- 10 B For all the voice in answer he could wake
- 10 A Was but the mocking echo of his own
- 10 B From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.

10 C Some morning from the boulder-broken beach  
10 D He would cry out on life, that what it wants  
10 C Is not its own love back in copy speech  
10 D But counter-love, original response.  
10 E And nothing ever came of what he cried  
11 F Ûnl  ss it w  s th     mb   | d  m  nt th  t cr  shed  
10 E In the cliff’s talus on the other side.  
10 F And then in the far distant water splashed,  
11 G But after a time allowed for him to swim,  
10 H Instead of proving human when it neared  
10 G And someone else additional to him,  
11 H As a great buck it powerfully appeared,  
10 I Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,  
10 I And landed pouring like a waterfall,  
10 I And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,  
10 I And forced the underbrush — and that was all.

The alleged distinguished Stanford University professor Yvor Winters had this to say about “The Most of It”: “The poem deals a protogorist who seems to have cultivated solitude, like Robert Frost.

Not good enough.

Eli, after a few OUTLOUD readings of these 20 lines, *THINKING OUT YOUR FEELINGS* as you go, please read again the last 12 lines — from “And nothing ever came of what he cried” to “And forced the underbrush — and that was all.”

On the final page of this little book, I wish you’d tell me your feelings about a few questions.

And except for the rhyming, no grrrrs!

## Questions

1. What did you think of “the inner view?” My answer. A terrific précis of “The Most of It.” Have you done précis writing at Dalton? Précis Rules:

I think 1/3rd of its word count, using the most accurate words you and *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* can summon up. Using different words than Frost’s. I used to enjoy the exercise, and most of my students benefited from it. Like ferociously concentrating a lawyer’s brief. Frost’s “The Most of It” has 202 words. His précis has 74 words. Isn’t that splendid?

2. What words in the poem seem most forceful **in their context**?

I choose *embodiment* (Line 10, half way through the poem (11 F)). Because we are in Connecticut visiting, I have to use *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* 😊 which has this for *embodiment*: “form into a body; include, comprise.” By the way, *Roget’s Thesaurus* is excellent as supplement to *Webster’s*.

I choose *additional* in Line 15 (10 G) for its **in context** transhuman metaphorical ambiguity.

And I choose all of the context of Line 17 (10 I), and especially the modifiers *pushing* and *crumpled*, for their unique power.

I haven’t time to ask about syllables and rhyming.