

Frost was at work on a new book. Poems from Derry were still maturing, some from England were almost ready. He had never succeeded in larruping a poem as one might a horse to make it go. Poems had to come to him in their own ways:

"A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a home-sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words".

Some poems took years to find their words. Among the slow-growers was "Birches." The impulse for "Birches" had been with him from the earliest memories in Lawrence, never changing, always nagging him with the sensations of striving and balance, but always incomplete. Throughout Derry the poem seemed to be waiting a revelation. In England (where no boys swing birches) Frost found the physical act carried through to a spiritual meaning, something to do with Earth and human aspirations. Now, in Franconia, after three full decades, the poem found its thought and the thought worked out its words.

There were other times when words came bubbling like a spring runoff. At such times Frost would often write straight through the night. One spring night a few years later he found the cantankerous drafts of a long satiric poem suddenly turned agreeable, almost doing the writing for him. During five hours he hurried to keep up--images, stories, history, snatches of conversation, phrases flowing together as though following some unseen channel. The poem ran on page after page without serious hindrance right to the concluding ironies. Only then did he look up. Dawn's first graying had begun outside his window; across the road the angular rooflines of a barn were emerging. He realized how tired he was, let out completely.

He got up to make coffee. Opening the door, he watched the light coming and listened to the birds waking up in the trees... Suddenly he knew he had company: in that tranquil moment a new troupe of words began to play through his mind:

Whose woods these are I think I know....

Pine trees, dusk, December, a horse-drawn sleigh, falling

snow--where did these words come from, so unbidden, so self-assured?

His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

Derry again, never-to-be-forgotten Derry. The words drifted down out of the dark memories: a Christmas Eve when, much too late to be selling anything, he had driven into town to peddle milk and eggs in order to buy presents--no one interested, all busy with their own family celebrations--returning home empty-handed. And yet this poem seemed bent on avoiding the personal reality in order to create a new reality of its own. To make matters more difficult the lyric demanded a tighter than usual bonding of rhyme: four rhymes instead of two, and a linking of one stanza to the next: a-a-b-a, b-b-c-b, c-c-d-c ...

This posed an enormous challenge: how to keep such a linkage going. Dante could manage a rhyme-chain in Italian, but in English the weight of crude links usually buried its poem. Frost felt the bind at once. Four times he tried to get into his second stanza; four times the lines collapsed. Going on to explore the third stanza, he had better luck.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake....

Beginning with the right words, the third stanza not only moved freely to completion but showed the poet how to go back and remake the second.

One other test remained: the ending; where and how to cut the rhyme-chain. Leave it dangling? Stop the poem in a final three rhymes? Jam the end with five rhymes? Try to hook the last link back into the first stanza? All were unworthy of the symmetry the poem has promised itself.

Frost tried one line, then another; both were wrong. But half-hidden in the words of the second attempt--"that bid me on, and there are miles"--he saw the shining ending he had been looking for.

The collaboration was done, the unexpected company satisfied. Groggy but elated, Frost could now go to bed. The Sun was just coming up.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a work of pure sorcery. Whatever there is about good poetry--a mystery beyond meter, rhymes, images, metaphor--it throws a spell over the simple scene. An experience of pain and humiliation is wholly transformed. Poet, reader, light, dark, duty, life, love join in an instant of communion. No words or rhythms interrupt the spell. They all move in a planetary harmony. Form and energy become one within the poem, as elemental as the mystery of an atom. The poem is a culminating display of why Frost trusted form.

STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING

Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

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