Robert Frost

and Describing Natural Scenes

by Robert S. Boone

We don't find any TV sets in the poetry of Robert Frost. And we're not going to read about rugs, elevators, sofas, VCRs, microwaves, computers, or anything else that is made by humans and belongs inside. But we will encounter wheelbarrows, apple trees, horses, sea shores, foul weather, wells, shovels, ladders, leaves, and snow. In the poems of Robert Frost, we meet the world of nature and objects from the outside. Sometimes these objects stand alone; more often we'll experience them through a narrator who is chopping wood, picking apples, staring down a well, or being involved with nature in some other way. However Frost introduces his objects, though, he finds ways to make them vivid and meaningful.

Pure Poetry: "The Dust of Snow"

Sometimes Frost places his outdoor things unadorned, all by themselves, for us to savor. It's as if he expects us to fill in the details and form a more complete picture of what he writes. In "The Dust of Snow," he does not use any modification at all. The crow and the tree simply appear isolated for us to study:

> The way a crow
> Shook down on me
> The dust of snow
> From a hemlock tree
>
> Has given my heart
> A change of mood
> And saved some part
> Of a day I had rued.

Short and to the point. Though Frost does not tell us much about the crow, he does place it against a white background. He has this bird perform one single act, one we can easily perceive. And because the narrator finds this little scene important enough to save his day, we take an extra look ourselves. A single image from nature quietly gathers meaning around itself.

The Tools of Poetry: Figures of Speech

But "The Dust of Snow" is unusual. Most often, Frost enhances his objects by using poetic devices. He almost always, for example, appeals directly to our senses. In "The Runaway," he directs much of the language at our ears as he describes a young horse on the move:

> He dipped his head
> And snorted at us. And then he had to bolt.
> We heard the miniature thunder where he fled . . .

Frost appeals to other senses as well. In the next line, the young horse is too far away to hear, but we

> . . . saw him, or thought we saw him, dim and gray,
> Like a shadow against the curtain of falling flakes.

"A figure of speech," Frost once said, "is saying one thing and meaning something else." He uses a wide range of figures of speech. You have discovered in your own reading and writing both the power and efficiency of similes, metaphors, and other figures. Frost uses them repeatedly to establish clearly the realness of objects that populate his poems. Look again at the line saying the horse is "like a shadow against the curtain of falling flakes." In one line he has used both a simile (in stating directly that the appearance of the horse is "like a shadow") and a metaphor (in calling the backdrop of snow a "curtain").

One tool that Frost uses extensively is personification, the endow-

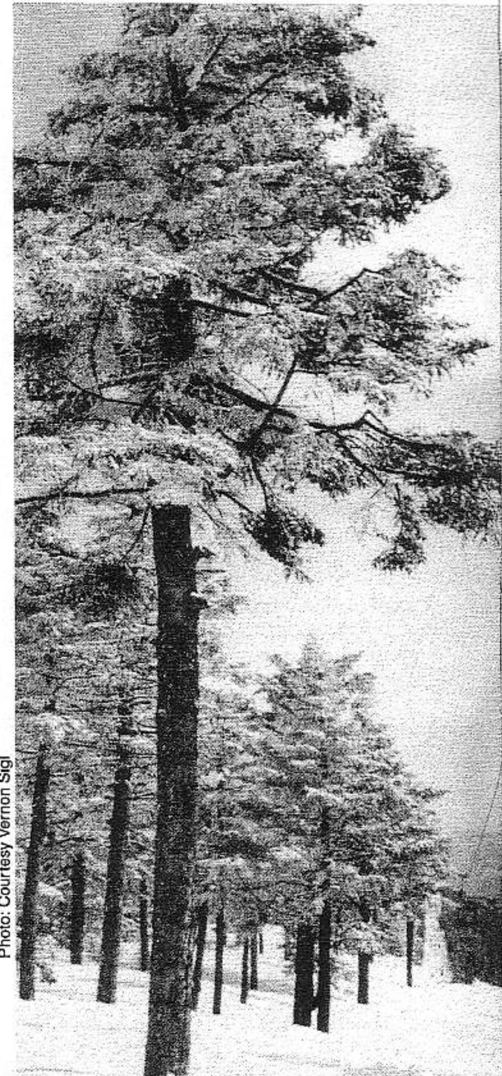
Photo: Courtesy Vernon Sigl

ing of human qualities to objects or animals. He personifies water in "Once by the Pacific":

> The shattered water made a misty din.
> Great waves looked over others coming in,
> And thought of doing something to the shore
> That water never did to land before.

Waves, as far as we know, cannot think, but by pretending that they do, Frost turns them into terrifying monsters.

Frost also personifies animals. In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the narrator reins up his horse for a moment to relish a winter scene. Instead of saying that the horse "acts as if it wants to get going," he enters the animal's mind to share its reactions in human terms:

> My little horse must think it queer
> To stop without a farmhouse near

Frost even personifies abstract qualities in terms of the natural world. In "My November Guest," instead of simply describing the emotion of sorrow, he transforms this abstraction into a thinking creature:

> My Sorrow, when she's here with me,
> Thinks these dark days of autumn rain
> Are beautiful as days can be;
> She loves the bare, the withered tree;
> She walks the sodden pasture lane.

Sorrow, of course, is not something we find outside like a rake or a worm. But by treating it so, Frost finds another way for us to experience nature as he does.

In choosing figures of speech, Frost doesn't stop with personification. In "Bereft," for instance, he unleashes a powerful metaphor by transforming an innocent pile of leaves into a snake. Just when you thought it was safe to go out on the porch. . .

> Out in the porch's sagging floor,
> Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
> Blindly struck at my knee and missed.

Us and Poetry: The Meanings of Nature

Another way that Frost enlivens his outdoor scenes is to place the reader in a unique relationship to nature. In "The November Guest," we look at nature through the eyes of sorrow. In "The Sound of Trees," we consider trees in an equally unique manner. Ordinarily, poets tell us to revere these creatures of nature ("I think that I shall never see. . ."), but Frost, in this poem, asks us to consider them otherwise:

> I wonder about the trees.
> Why do we wish to bear
> Forever the noise of these
> More than another noise
> So close to our dwelling place?

What's he saying? It seems almost sacrilegious for anyone to ask us to "wonder" about trees. But he does wonder, so forcefully that we are forced to consider his point of view.

For Frost, in his poems about the outdoors, is not simply offering us a pleasant slide show of quaint nature scenes. Rather, he *uses* nature to make profound points. He might start with a particular image, but he will invariably conclude with an abstract idea; yet somehow he covers this treacherous space without sounding forced or preachy. Toward the middle of "The Sound of Trees," he compares trees to people who never do anything: "They are that that talks of going./ But never gets away." In the end, the narrator de- →

Photo: Courtesy Michigan Travel Commission

cides that rather than behaving like a tree, he will make a "reckless choice." Maybe he shall have "less to say" than the trees as they sway in the wind, but at least "I shall be gone."

In "Desert Places," Frost moves from a description of a snow scene to a sweeping statement about loneliness as a fact of life. He sees loneliness all around him in the "ground almost covered smooth in snow" and in "a few weeds and stubble showing last." He sees it in the woods and the animals, and he finds it in himself "unawares." And he realizes that he "will be more lonely" still, and ends on this bleak note:

> They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
> Between stars—on stars where no human race is,
> I have it in me so much nearer home
> To scare myself with my own desert places.

"Bereft" reaches the same subject of loneliness. Frost first describes the wind, the "frothy shore," the leaves, and the clouds as he stands "holding open a restive door." Then, he turns these ominous signs into a thought about his own isolation:

> Something sinister in the tone
> Told me my secret must be known:
> Word I was in the house alone
> Somehow must have gotten abroad,
> Word I was in my life alone,
> Word I had no one left but God.

In "For Once, Then, Something," the narrator gazes down a well and wonders about "whatever it was lay there at bottom." And he's not talking about dead frogs. For a moment, he realizes, he just might be looking at an ultimate truth behind the appearances: "Something more of the depths—and then I lost it."

Throughout Frost's poetry, we find such leaps from a specific natural image to a profound abstract question about human existence. In "The Road Not Taken," Frost raises questions about the relationship between what we do now and what we become later on. In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," he wants us to consider the difference between our working lives and moments of leisure. In "Birches," he explains the human urge "to get away from earth awhile/And then come back to it and begin over."

As you read more of Frost's poetry, you will find your own favorites, with scenes that remind you of your own experience and ideas that have occurred to you. You might also find yourself wanting to write poetry as Robert Frost did—beginning with humble objects of nature and the outdoors, and opening up on the endless vistas of the human experience. □

Write Away

I. What object can you recall seeing clearly outside? What was the occasion? Does it represent something to you as you recall it now? In a paragraph, share this object with a reader, trying to show what it is that you find so compelling.

II. Frost is able to move from the specific to the abstract without seeming too preachy. After you describe something from outside, ask yourself: "What does this prove about something bigger?" Then find a way, either in poetry or prose, to develop your point.

III. Write an imaginary discussion among several people. The subject: a single birch tree. The panel should include a representative of a conservation group, the president of a timber company, a toad, Rip Van Winkle, a poet, and so on.

IV. Consider these quotations about nature:

"Never does Nature say one thing and Wisdom another."

—Juvenal

"Nature abhors a vacuum."

—Rabelais

"One touch of nature makes the whole world kin."

—Shakespeare

"So Nature deals with us and takes away
Our playthings one by one, and by the hand
Leads us to rest."

—Longfellow

In paragraphs, respond to any or all of these. Which to you is the most unusual? The most ambiguous? The truest?

V. Frost doesn't write about TV sets or laser discs, but maybe you can. Write a story or a poem about something that is *not* part of nature.