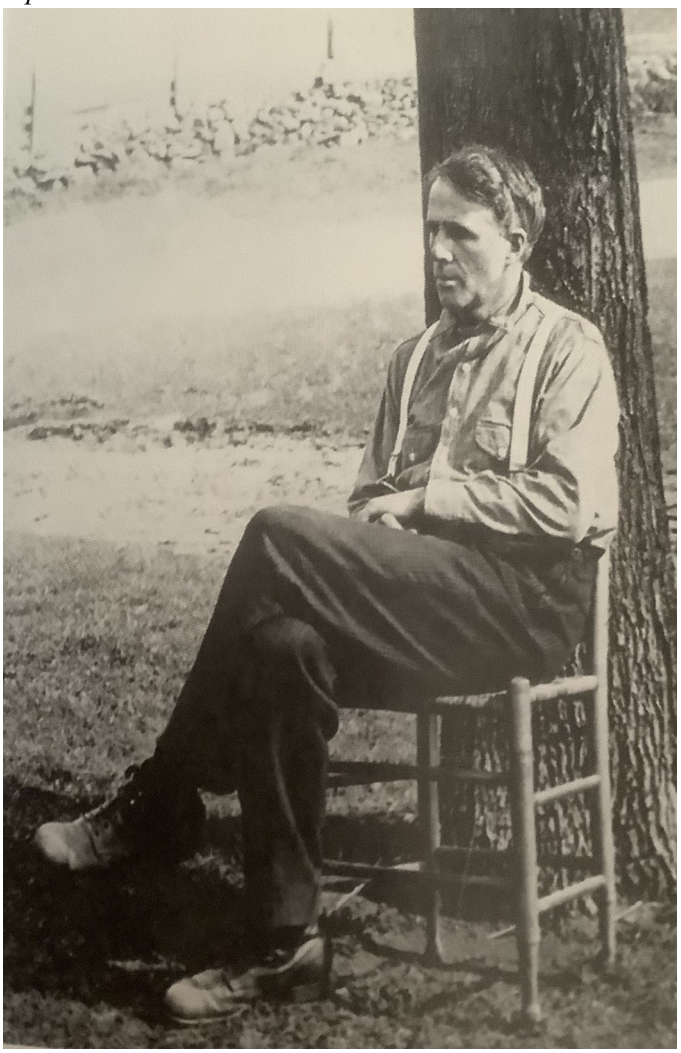
The Barnard Bulletin

JANUARY 2024 Vol. XXXIX No. 1

VERMONT WRITING

BY MARGARET EDWARDS

This column, usually called A VERMONT WRITER, is an offering of the Danforth Library in Barnard. Its original purpose has been to introduce Vermont writers deserving wider renown. But this month's essay examines a single famous poem. Its creator, Robert Frost (1874-1963), is a New England author (not just a Vermont author) whose fame doesn't need any bolstering. However, one of his poems, so often quoted and so very well-known, is in danger of wearing out and fading through repetition.



Robert Frost in South Shaftsbury, Vermont, in 1921.
(Photo courtesy of the Dartmouth College Library)

Composed by Robert Frost in 1922 and published in 1923, this poem was a show-stopper from the start:

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

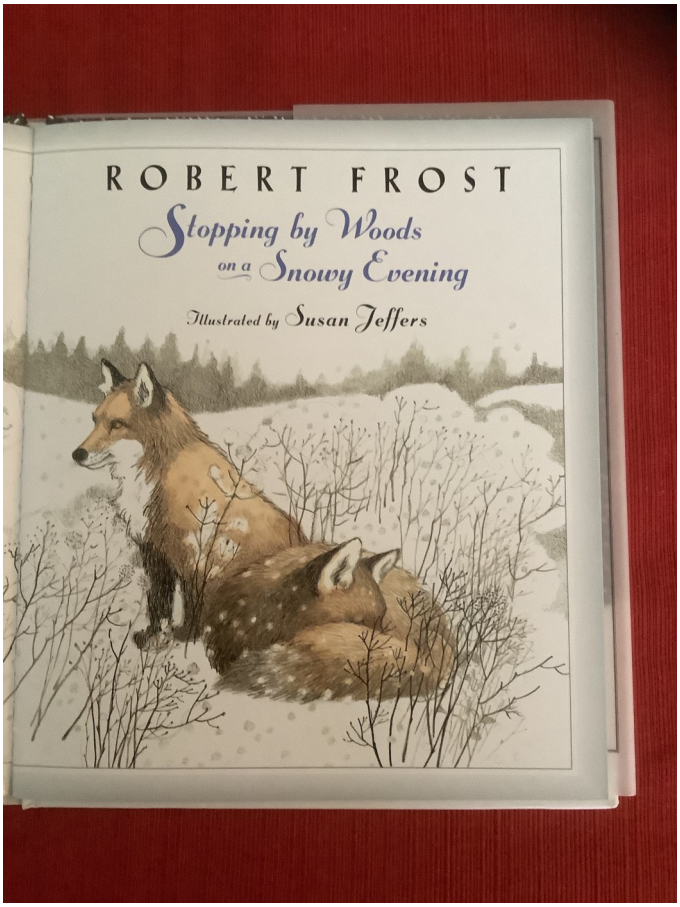
Whose woods these are I think I know,
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

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.

The poem's subtle but brilliant rhymes and its conversational tone are admired by scholars, but its ongoing, soaring popularity transcends any schematic analysis. In 2002, this poem's iconic status in American poetry was secured when it appeared in a scene from the fourth season of the television serial *The Sopranos*. The two children of New Jersey mobster Tony Soprano discuss together "Stopping by Woods…" as part of an English homework assignment.



In 1978, Dutton Children's Books published the entire text of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" with illustrations by artist Susan Jeffers. The popularity of the book led to its being reprinted in 2001.

Cont. next page - Frost

Frost - Cont. from previous page

"Stopping by Woods…" has a motif common to the poetry Frost wrote throughout his life. It features a person, the poem's narrator, who is out and about, alone. Most often this narrator is on a walk. An occasional companion to the narrator may be an animal (here, the horse). Almost always the outing (here, a sleigh ride) occurs in a rural setting.

In every poem of this kind, Robert Frost imagines the narrator pausing to take in a visual scene—to contemplate it first by describing it, and then to draw a revelation from it. Frost's "The Wood-pile" (1914) is a case in point. It begins:

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
I paused and said, "I will turn back from here.
No, I will go on farther—and we shall see."
The hard snow held me, save where now and then
One foot went through. The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall, slim trees
Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.

At this point, the narrator spies "a small bird" that flies just ahead of him and seems to be unduly alarmed. "He thought that I was after him for a feather—/ The white one in his tail." The bird is personified as being like someone "who takes/ Everything said as personal to himself." Then Frost abruptly halts this unfolding scene of a man encountering a bird.

And then there was a pile of wood for which
I forgot him and let his little fear
Carry him off the way I might have gone…

The cord of maple wood—"cut and split/And piled—and measured, four by four by eight"—is all by itself with no tracks near it. Its gray color and its bark "warping off it" suggest it is older than "this year's cutting," and also older than a cutting from a year before, or even a year before that. And what conclusion will the narrator now draw from this laboriously created, then mysteriously abandoned pile of wood?

…I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace…

The narrator deliberately gives an optimistic assessment of the woodsman's reason to forget the wood-pile. The man just got caught up in a "fresh task," no doubt. And that's where we readers might leave it were it not for the poem's two final lines. The wood-pile, falling apart and returning to the earth, seems to exist only…

To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow, smokeless burning of decay.

That ominous wording—the author's leaving us to imagine "the slow, smokeless burning of decay"—suggests that the woodsman likely never returned because he died.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep," — illustration by Susan Jeffers.

Is such a dark interpretation valid? Most who are familiar with all of Frost's work believe that his description of the lovely, dark and deep woods in "Stopping by Woods…" is meant to suggest how seductive the thought of easing up and letting go—of leaving this world entirely—can be. The darkness of the woods inspires a paradox: a temptation to leave this life alongside a determination to resist such temptation. As in "The Wood-pile," death is only obliquely suggested by Frost, not directly named. All contemplation of death is deliberately underplayed from the start of both poems by a fanciful "dialogue" with an animal—in one case, with a horse; in the other, with a bird.

The two poems stress a meditative mood, a monologue to and for the solitary self. For a contrast, a reader can look at this very early poem by Frost, "Into My Own," which he placed as the first poem in his first published volume, *A Boy's Will* (1913):

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,
But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

Cont. next page - Frost

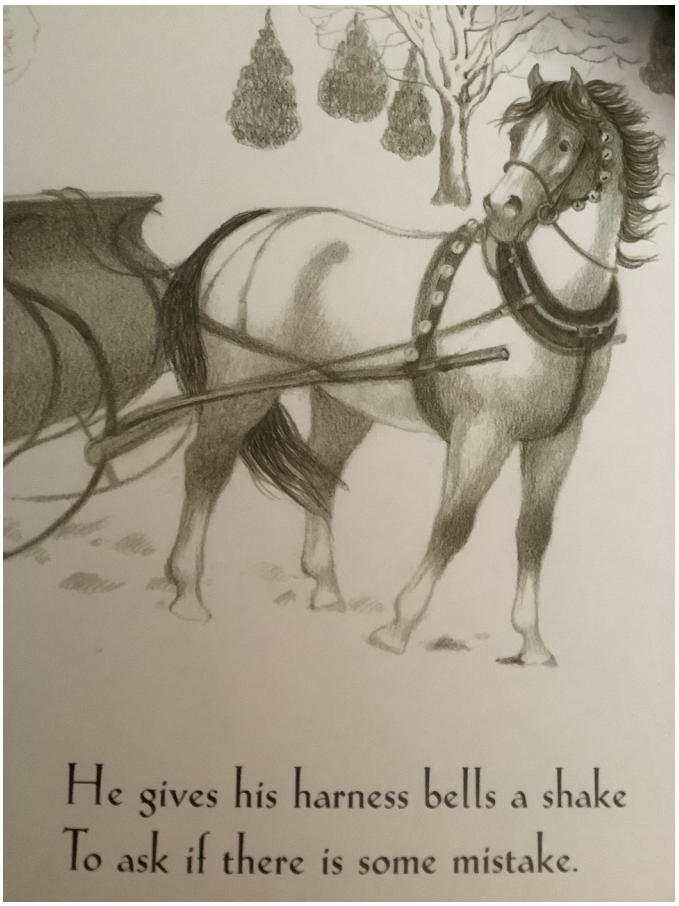
Frost - Cont. from previous page

I should not be withheld but that some day
Into their vastness I should steal away,
Fearless of ever finding open land,
Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

I do not see why I should e're turn back,
Or those should not set forth upon my track
To overtake me, who should miss me here
And long to know if still I held them dear.

They would not find me changed from him they knew—
Only more sure of all I thought was true.

Here Frost is working with the same imagery and themes he will often handle later, but here he's overt, not subtle. He has not yet developed his powers of suggestion. He has not yet eliminated from his composition the 19th century "poetic" elisions such as *'twere* and *e'er*, nor has he put aside vapid Victorian evocations like "mask of gloom" and "edge of doom." This early poem is not a private meditation of a solitary person—but a dramatic public address aimed at those whom the poet means to leave behind when he departs.



"He gives his harness bells a shake/ To ask if there is some mistake." — illustration by Susan Jeffers.

Reading Robert Frost's poem "Come In" (1942) becomes a multi-layered experience when a reader can understand its relationship to the poet's other works invoking the woods:

As I came to the edge of the woods,
Thrush music—hark!
Now if it was dusk outside,
Inside it was dark.

Too dark in the woods for a bird
By sleight of wing
To better its perch for the night,
Though it still could sing.

The last of the light of the sun
That had died in the west
Still lived for one song more
In a thrush's breast.

Far in the pillared dark,
Thrush music went—
Almost like a call to come in
To the dark and lament.

But no, I was out for stars :
I would not come in.
I meant not even if asked,
And I hadn't been.

In an interesting way, the "little horse" of "Stopping by Woods…" makes an appearance in other poems. In life, Frost once owned and harnessed and drove a Morgan horse, the stocky Vermont breed known as "big for its size." Here he observes a Morgan colt:

The Runaway

Once when the snow of the year was beginning to fall
We stopped by a mountain pasture to say, "Whose colt?"
A little Morgan had one forefoot on the wall,
The other curled at his breast. He dipped his head
And snorted at us. And then he had to bolt.
We heard the miniature thunder where he fled,
And we saw him, or thought we saw him, dim and gray,
Like a shadow against the curtain of falling flakes.
"I think the little fellow's afraid of the snow.
He isn't winter-broken. It isn't play
With the little fellow at all. He's running away.
I doubt that even his mother could tell him, 'Sakes,
It's only weather.' He'd think she didn't know!
Where is his mother? He can't be out alone."
And now he comes again with clatter of stone,
And mounts the wall again with whited eyes
And all his tail that isn't hair up straight.
He shudders his coat as if to throw off flies.
"Whoever it is that leaves him out so late,
When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,
Ought to be told to come and take him in."

Cont. next page - Frost

Frost - Cont. from previous page

The whole purpose of this poem of 1923—a poem that's contemporaneous with "Stopping by Woods…"—seems to be the poet's keen imagining of the very young horse's thoughts, feelings and motives.

The same agile exercise in personification is fundamental to Robert Frost's "A Considerable Speck" (1942), a poem that begins when the poet spots a tiny bug on his sheet of writing paper. The insect's behavior powerfully suggests it has a mind of its own that thinks and fears:

It paused as with suspicion of my pen,
And then came racing wildly on again
To where my manuscript was not yet dry;
Then paused again and either drank or smelt—
With loathing, for again it turned to fly.
Plainly with an intelligence I dealt.
It seemed too tiny to have room for feet,
Yet must have had a set of them complete
To express how much it didn't want to die.

The poet, having recognized a fellow being, will of course show it mercy at the poem's end: "I let it lie there till I hope it slept."

Is there any reason to think that "Stopping by Woods…" should be read more simply? Perhaps a synopsis in prose should stick to the plain facts: *"I've paused my sleigh ride to enjoy watching a snowfall fill up these woods. My horse is impatient to keep going. And since I'm a busy man, I better get on with it."* Would that stripped down, no-nonsense interpretation be sufficient?

The last stanza of "Stopping by Woods…" leaves us with an eerie repetition of "And miles to go before I sleep." That repetition should give a reader pause, for it seems to cast the whole poem as a sort of pep talk the poet is giving himself. In other poems, Frost more clearly shows that he has devised a way of calming his unquiet mind so as to continue living his life. His method of soothing himself involves an intense, imaginative interaction with natural surroundings—as this poem of 1928 makes clear:

Tree At My Window

Tree at my window, window tree,
My sash is lowered when night comes on;
But let there never be curtain drawn
Between you and me.

Vague dream-head lifted out of the ground,
And thing next most diffuse to cloud,
Not all your light tongues talking aloud
Could be profound.

But tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
And if you have seen me when I slept,
You have seen me when I was taken and swep
And all but lost.

That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner, weather.

Frost biographer Jay Parini in his *Robert Frost: A Life (1999)* reassembles the circumstances in which "Stopping by Woods…" was composed. In June of 1923, Frost had written all night while seated in his farmhouse kitchen in South Shaftsbury, Vermont. He was working on his long poem "New Hampshire." Finally satisfied, he rose from the kitchen table and went outdoors, being careful not to disturb his sleeping family. Then, in air filled with cricket noise, there came to Frost what Parini calls his "most famous lyric" and "the perfection of Frost's art in the straight lyric mode." Inside the kitchen again, he wrote it down "in a rush," as he would describe the moment. His one difficulty was determining how to end it. Only later did he decide on the famous repetition.

"And miles to go before I sleep" — illustration by Susan Jeffers

"To an audience at Bread Loaf," Parini writes, "[Frost] once said that the ominous-seeming last lines don't necessarily mean that" the narrator might be going to do anything self-destructive when he gets home. "On the contrary, [Frost said] he found something comforting in those lines, a promise of coming in from the cold, from the solitude, threat, and wilderness of icy woods, into good company."

Cont. next page - Frost

Frost - Cont. from previous page

The Danforth Library owns two hardcover collections of poems by Robert Frost. The volume entitled *The Poetry of Robert Frost,* edited by Edward Connery Lathem and published in a second printing by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston in 1972, has been used in the writing of this essay.

LOCAL CRYPTOGRAM

A cryptogram is a code in which one letter is substituted for another. For example, the word "Church" could be written BWMSBW. The letter B would be the letter C and would be so throughout the entire message. In this message F = S. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"N E V D P V G N V P A G T D V P W Q P

C Q F N Q W I F U F T' N N E G N Q I P

G U C U F N Q Q E U D E G T A R V C U F F

U N, M I N N E G N U N U F N Q Q Z Q R

G T A R V P V G B E U N."

– C U B E V Z G T D V Z Q

SKATING LESSONS

The Union Arena Skating Club will offer skating lessons for all abilities at Union Arena in Woodstock, VT, starting Tuesday, January 2 and Wednesday, January 3.

Where: Union Arena Community Center in Woodstock Vermont

When: Tuesdays, January 2 - March 5, 2024 (5:30-6:30PM)

Wednesdays, January 3 - March 6, 2024 (4:20-5:50PM)

All skaters will have the opportunity to participate in the annual ice show which takes place the week of March 11!

Levels include:

- Snowplow Sam, for new skaters ages 3-5

- Basic Skills, for beginner and intermediate skaters ages 6 and above

- Pre-Free to Free Skate levels, where skater will learn progressive skating skills, transitions, spins and jumps

To register and get more information visit uaskateclub.com. Find lesson times for all levels under the Registration tab.

Come join us! If you have any questions please reach out by emailing uaskateclub@gmail.com

Union Arena Skating Club

ARTISTREE UPCOMING EVENTS

Acoustic Jam Session

Dec 20, 2023 - May 15, 2024

Here's a chance to play with other musicians. Bring your instrument and a few songs or tunes to play. We go in a circle and everyone gets a chance to call the tune (and a key!) and all of us join in the playing and singing. This is not an open mic – all acoustic and all group participation. Come down and give it a try.

Chad Hollister - Solo Concert

Friday, January 12, 2024 - 7:00 PM EST

Anthony J. Resta (Collective Soul, Elton John, Shawn Mullins) says "Hollisters music is pure sonic alchemy" which means it's damn good in Vermont terms!

Vermont native Chad Hollister has been traveling the globe for over 30 years. He's released six full length recordings , opened for Bob Dylan, Paul Simon and Tom Petty and has shared the stage with Billy Gibbons(ZZ Top), Warren Haynes(Gov't Mule) as well as every PHISH member. His music is a voice for the positive and reminds us that life , family and community are the core of it all. BILLBOARD magazine says "Roots rocker Chad Hollister is cast from the same mold as American greats like Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty and John Mellencamp."

Upper Valley Partner Dance Night

Friday, February 9, 2024 - 6:30 PM EST

Come on down and dance the night away to all types of partner dance music: two-step, swing (east coast and west coast), waltz, cha cha, tango, salsa… maybe even a line dance here and there. If you're taking the beginning two-step series on Monday nights, here's your chance to put what you learn to good use!

For more information in these and other events, go to https://artistreevt.org/artistree-events

Artistree Community Arts Center & Gallery
2095 Pomfret Road/PO Box 158
South Pomfret, VT 05067
802.457.3500 ext. 111

www.artistreevt.org

Support Artistree at: https://artistreecommunityartscenter-bloom.kindful.com/

BARNARTS EVENTS SCHEDULE

When

February 9, 10, 15, 16, 17 - 7pm

February 11 & 18 - 2pm

Where

Barnard Town Hall

115 North Rd, Barnard

Tickets

Adults - $20

Students - $15

Available in January

Oscar Wilde's beloved satire comes to Barnard this February just in time to laugh away the winter blues and cozy up for a bit of romance. Absurd situations abound as two gentlemen traverse the realities of having multiple identities while falling in love in an age of ideals…not to mention family intruding at every turn. Join us for wit and whimsy that will surprise and delight new and old fans of this classic comedy!

Our Cast

John Worthing	Kevin Donohue
Algernon Moncrieff	Olivia Piepmeier
Gwendolen Fairfax	Kyle Huck
Cecily Cardew	Dory Psomas
Lady Bracknell	Michael Halloran
Miss Prism	Killian White
Dr. Chasuble	Casey Parles
Lane/Merriman	Kaetlyn Collins

Contact BarnArts for more information.

BarnArts Center for the Arts	info@barnarts.org
PO Box 41	802-234-1645
Barnard, VT 05031	www.barnarts.org

CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"The greater danger for most of us isn't that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it."

– Michelangelo

THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the Monday prior to the first Wednesday of every month at 7 PM in the Town Office.

BARNARD CONSERVATION COMMISSION meets the second Monday of the month, 7:00pm, Town Hall.

BEES MEETINGS are held at 6:30pm on the 2nd Thursday of each month in the library at the school.

DANFORTH LIBRARY HOURS: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, 3:00 - 5:00 pm, Saturdays 10:00 am to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi. Contact us: phone: 802-234-9408. Email: charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com.

SELECTBOARD meets the first and third Wednesday of the month at the Town offices at 7:00pm.

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, selectboard@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

ZONING ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, zoning@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

TOWN CLERK office hours are Monday and Tuesday, 8:00am—3:30pm. Public access is restricted. Call 234-9211 for an appointment.

THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARD meets the third Thursday of the month at 7:00pm at the Barnard Town Hall as necessary.

THE BARNARD ENERGY COMMITTEE meets on the 2nd Tuesday of the month, 7:00pm at the Town Hall

BARNARD GENERAL STORE, Monday-Saturday: 7am-7pm, Sundays: 8am-6pm. https://www.facebook.com/barnardgeneralstore

BARNARD LISTSERV: to subscribe please send an email to: barnard-subscribe@lists.vitalcommunities.org

RECYCLING Click here for Hours and Regulations

THE BARNARD INN is running a "Feeding Neighbors & Sustaining Community" campaign. Purchase an e-Gift Card and in turn the chefs will feed neighbors. Whole chicken dinners (serves 4-6) and individual sized meals to help feed Vermonters in need. Thank you and please stay safe. E-Gift Cards are available at www.barnardinn.com.

ECFIBER Governing Board meets the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7pm via. Zoom. Contact the clerk of the District. secretary@ecfiber.net, for meeting information or visit https://www.ecfiber.net/virtual-meetings/

HISTORICAL SOCIETY Programs to be announced. Questions? Email: historicalbarnard1761@gmail.com

DELECTABLE MOUNTAIN QUILTERS (DMQ) meet the 1st Tuesday of every month at the Bethel Library from 1-3pm. Contact: Mary Croft 802-763-7074