Our Life in Six Lyrical Poems: Robert Frost
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The Philoctetes Center

Levy: Welcome to Our Life in Six Lyrical Poems. I've been told that the human mind matures, that it makes its greatest momentum toward maturity in the first two decades of life and then it's a gradual process by which you've filled up most of the impressions and sensations and there's less impressionability and sensibility developed in the later years. And it was in the first two decades of life, primarily in the middle of my second decade of life, that I met Mike Braziller, who introduced me to the poems of Pound, Yates, Merwin and Strand. It left an indelible impression on my mind, an impression that can't even be explained in terms of the way poetry had an effect on me in later life, but I'm very proud to have Mike here. I'm very proud of him and I'm very proud to have him here and I look forward to this discussion.

Braziller: Thanks, Frank. A couple of things: we have more events planned in this program, and you'll be getting announcements very shortly. We're going to create a link on the Philoctetes website where you can contact us. It's very important that I get your feedback, your suggestions for speakers, for guests that will be joining me, for poets that we talk about, and for responses to the class.

Most importantly, poetry—you know, you can't just talk about it for two hours; it doesn't end. If we are successful tonight, Ed and I will continue thinking about it and many of you hopefully will, too, and new revelations and new questions will arise.

Edward Hirsch has published six books of poems, including *Wild Gratitude*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and *Lay Back the Darkness*. He has published four books of prose, including *How to Read a Poem*, a national bestseller, and *Poet's Choice.* He is President of the John Simon Memorial Guggenheim Foundation and the recipient of fellowships from the MacArthur Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. He is Professor of English at Wayne State University and the University of Houston. When we're done going through what will realistically be six or seven Frost poems, he's agreed to read one of his own poems, which will be a special treat for us, and that will be just before we take questions. We're going to begin with a relatively brief biographical outline of Frost's life and then we're going to go through the poems many of you have in front of you.

Hirsch: Happy to be with you. Glad you're here. We have before us a somewhat complicated case. Pound is a poet who seems more difficult than he is; Frost is a poet who's more difficult than he seems, and a complicated person. I don't know how much you know about his life. I'll say a few things about it. There are three biographies: one is by Lawrence Thompson—three volumes. That's the definitive biography, but unfortunately, Frost made a proviso that Thompson couldn't publish until after Frost died, and he started when Frost was in his seventies. But as you know, Frost lived a long time. So Thompson was in a very weird position—his career was completely on hold. Also, he maybe came to know Frost too well. Anyway, he came to really intensely dislike him. And the three volumes are, I think, a very, very negative picture of Frost. They're probably useful because Frost himself projected such a naïve, folksy, country wisdom kind of figure that was very false, and he was partially responsible for it, but Thompson's

biography is quite vengeful, and I think at every point, puts the most negative interpretation on Frost's life. As a kind of corrective to this, there's a biography by William Pritchard, *Robert Frost: A Literary Life*, and then there's a biography by Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life*. Anyway, this is just to recommend some things to you because I can't go through the full biography. Frost was born in 1874. He died in 1963. You may or may not know that he was born in San Francisco. He's a Westerner: he spent the first eleven years of his life in the West. Then his family moved him east and he adopted New England. But he's an invented person—he invented himself, and his sense of New England roots was something that was very important to him, but it's something that he adapted. He had a choice—he could have decided to be a Western poet, for example. He had a bullying father who was a journalist, who died when he was 11. He had an overprotective mother who was a Swedenborgian and he himself was baptized in the Swedenborgian church and gave him sort of a spiritual side, I'd say. He did very well in high school. In New England, his family was sort of strapped—he went to live with his grandparents, then moved to a couple different towns in Massachusetts. Is this pace okay for you?

Braziller: This is excellent.

Hirsch: Okay, thanks. Just making sure. He met Eleanor White and fell madly in love with her. He had one wife. They had six children: two of them didn't survive infancy; one of them died when he was three—we'll come to that in "Home Burial"—and one died stillborn. They had four children that grew up. Frost in some ways blamed himself because his children never succeeded and I think he was a very stern father. He held a grudge against Eleanor because she wouldn't marry him right away—she wanted to go to college and she went to St. Lawrence University. Frost himself went to Dartmouth and then to Harvard and never really quite made it either. He just couldn't go by other people's schedules. He was really very learned, but he was an autodidact and he didn't like formal schooling. Eventually, he convinced Eleanor to marry him and they had some hard times. The family was sort of hardscrabble. He tried it as a high school teacher—that didn't really work. He was writing poetry intensely; he wasn't getting it published. He made a slight go of it as a poultry farmer—not "poetry" farmer, but "poultry" farmer. It does remind me—when my grandmother was in the hospital once and the person came around with magazines, I asked if they had any poetry magazines, and he said, "Why would I carry poultry magazines?" So, anyway, Frost brought the two together. He went to England and there he sort of made a go of it. He was 39 when his first book was published, *A Boy's Will*. His second book, *North of Boston*, was published, and Henry Holt decided to take him on. Then he came back to the United States. But he made it in England first.

I just want to mention to you a poet named Edward Thomas, because Frost didn't actually love many people, but one of the few people he did love was Edward Thomas. And Edward Thomas is a wonderful English poet who was writing prose before Frost met him and Frost said, "Well, your prose, which knows the English countryside so well, is really poetry." And he turned him into a poet. And Thomas, who ended up dying in World War I as a soldier, was really quite a marvelous poet and wrote fifty or sixty just splendid poems.

Anyway, they came back to the States and Frost started to plan his career and make his career and did some residencies at colleges and started to catch on and thus began the career that you know, the most eminent career in American Letters. He won four Pulitzer Prizes. He published

ten books of poems and two collected poems and a complete poems. He never wanted to write what he called "caviar for the crowd," as Pound did for a small group. He wanted to reach a large audience and he had a sort of canny way of thinking about it.

One of the things we'll talk about when we get to the poetry is Frost's theory of sentence sounds. Poetically, what I want to present to you before we actually start on the poems is to say that Frost had an idea that the irregularity of speech struck intention with regular meter, creating an endless richness for the English language. He always thought that stressed and unstressed language against a regular meter would create a tremendous variety of effects. So he wasn't for the free verse revolution that Pound and Eliot formulated, but he was a modernist. His idea was that there was a sort of sound of sense. That's why he said there are only two meters in English: loose iambic and strict iambic, because he wanted a meter that was very close to speech. In the history of English poetry, whenever poets have wanted to bring poetry close to speech, they've brought it back to iambic pentameter, which is our kind of base rhythm. His idea of sentence sounds, which will help you understand the concept, was: "If you want to hear how it sounds divorced from meaning, you should hear people speaking behind a closed door." It has a kind of rhythm, a pitch, an intonation; it has a kind of music related to speech, but you actually can't tell what they're saying. So that's one of the things Frost was deeply interested in.

Now, the poems I've chosen for today that Michael and I talked about and came up with together, focuse on a different side of Frost. That is, Frost himself projected a kind of folksy, country wisdom—it made him famous. He had a supposedly positive outlook. It made him kind of a national monument. But when you read the poems closely you see that there's something else quite rigorous and strict and much more profound going on. The first person to point this out was Randall Jarrell; he wrote two essays in 1953 that went into a wonderful book of essays called *Poetry in the Age*. One's called "The Other Frost" and one is called "To the Last Sidonians." The idea is that he says there's another Frost besides the Frost that everybody knows, and that's the Frost that we're going to talk about today.

At Robert Frost's 85th birthday, Lionel Trilling, who was the most eminent critic at the time, raised a glass to Frost and said that he was a terrifying poet. And Frost found this extremely disconcerting—he didn't particularly like it. But I think it's completely true. I would just propose to you that what Trilling meant—although he didn't go on to say much about it, except that Frost conceived of a terrifying universe—was not that Frost was a tragic poet, but a terrifying one. A tragic poet is a kind of *fait accompli*—everything is preordained. But terror has to do with the anticipation of man's recognition of his own negative potential, with a sense of what he's capable of. One of the things that I think is very remarkable about Frost's poetry that we'll talk about as we go through the poems is that anything, in my opinion, that you could say against Robert Frost is something that he's already said against himself. He's so strict in his Calvinist self-interrogation. He's so dark in what he looks at in himself and in others that he anticipates a lot of what you might say. So he's a very, very self-questioning, dark, compelling poet, who's sort of running alongside this mask of a folksy, country person. The rhythms and the natural vernacular is very deceptive in that way and that's what we're going to talk about—what are these other, darker psychological issues that are operating in Frost's poetry?

Braziller: Great. Okay, it's time now to look at some of the poems. We're going to begin with a poem that is sort of, I think, at the end of your list: "My Butterfly." It's not quite as dark as some of these other ones that we'll be looking at, but I think it's a real treat for you—at least, I hope it is. Frost in many ways considered this the first poem he ever wrote. He was 18 or 19 and it's, I think, the first poem he published. Firstly, it's a wonderful poem. It's very uneven, but it introduces, or certainly gives us a flavor, of the genius and the brilliance that is to come. Just from a public point of view, the poem was published in a small magazine called *The Independent*; it was a husband and wife team that ran it. They started to read the poem to themselves. There was a Congregationalist minister in Lawrence, Mass., where he was living at the time, that became a big supporter. There were high school teachers; there was a local novelist. So this very early experiment or attempt resonated and people took note. It's also a wonderful poem, so here we go.

Braziller reads "My Butterfly":

Thine emulous fond flowers are dead, too,
And the daft sun-assaulter, he
That frighted thee so oft, is fled or dead:
Save only me
(Nor is it sad to thee!)
Save only me
There is none left to mourn thee in the fields.

The gray grass is not dappled with the snow;
Its two banks have not shut upon the river;
But it is long ago—
It seems forever—
Since first I saw thee glance,
With all the dazzling other ones,
In airy dalliance,
Precipitate in love,
Tossed, tangled, whirled and whirled above,
Like a limp rose-wreath in a fairy dance.

When that was, the soft mist
Of my regret hung not on all the land,
And I was glad for thee,
And glad for me, I wist.

Thou didst not know, who tottered, wandering on high,
That fate had made thee for the pleasure of the wind,
With those great careless wings,
Nor yet did I.

And there were other things:
It seemed God let thee flutter from his gentle clasp:

Then fearful he had let thee win
Too far beyond him to be gathered in,
Snatched thee, o'er eager, with ungentle grasp.

Ah! I remember me
How once conspiracy was rife
Against my life—
The languor of it and the dreaming fond;
Surging, the grasses dizzied me of thought,
The breeze three odors brought,
And a gem-flower waved in a wand!

Then when I was distraught
And could not speak,
Sidelong, full on my cheek,
What should that reckless zephyr fling
But the wild touch of thy dye-dusty wing!

I found that wing broken to-day!
For thou are dead, I said,
And the strange birds say.
I found it with the withered leaves
Under the eaves.

Braziller: To get the ball rolling here, I think that the poem deals with something we see again and again—him trying to do a transition of mood. What he's dealing with is the discovery of evil or arbitrariness in nature and the way in which things that are most precious and most beautiful can be just taken away. We were talking earlier about his diction, but the major thing that I just want to stress about the poem is this situation—I think we'll see this again and again with Frost—that he so loves this butterfly, this great, wonderful spectacle that in spring was just wandering on high, with great careless wings and so magnificent, and then it's captured by a cruel, arbitrary wind, and eventually presumably eaten and destroyed. The two moods in the poem—I mean, in a way, *My Butterfly* is sort of his own youth, because he says, "And I remember me/How once conspiracy—." So, it's a transitional poem; it's a very, very beautiful poem. It's a poem in which he seems to be trying to move from the spectacle and beauty of nature and of youth and of magic towards dealing with death, with cruelty, and with loss.
In the second stanza we begin to hear, I think, the diction you were referring to: "The gray grass is not dappled with the snow." In the opening stanza he experiments with an almost religious or spiritual sort of diction, and then in the second stanza we begin to hear a voice we can recognize, which is this plain, more colloquial, magnificent dialect that he uses. I just thought it would be a fun poem to share with you and I think there's something very, very special. When people took note of this poem, for all its imperfections or unevenness, I think it really did announce—they were very wise—there's nothing quite like it. He reaches great, great heights with it.

Hirsch: I think your point about the two stanzas is an important one. If you compare this poem to a later poem like "Design," which has something of the same meaning, you can see that

"Design" is a much greater poem and that Frost is struggling here to a poetic that he doesn't quite have yet. It's very useful to read the first stanza because you remember that he started as a 19th century poet. You hear, "Thine emulous fond flowers are dead, too,/And the daft sun-assaulter, he/That frighted thee so oft, is fled or dead," you see that he's reading Keats and Shelley and Tennyson. It sounds like Tennyson. And this is in a first book, which is called *A Boy's Will*, and he gets the title from Longfellow.

Braziller: Longfellow, yes.

Hirsch: So he's starting as a Victorian poet. And then, in the second stanza, you just get a moment of what's to come, as Michael points out, where you actually hear his voice as he begins to clear away the diction. "The gray grass is not dappled with the snow;/Its two banks have not shut upon the river;/But it is long ago—". We're in another world here. He's about to discover how to bring poetry into the range of the vernacular, which he hasn't done yet. And *A Boy's Will* is a book that's just on the heel of this, where some of the poems look back to the 19th century, and a few of them look forward to the 20th century. Tennyson is very heavy; Longfellow is very heavy. But he's struggling to find something else. If you read in a parallel way a poet like William Carlos Williams, you can see Williams doing the same thing but in free verse, where Williams is on a very parallel track towards the local and towards the vernacular, but he's not doing it through traditional meters. But when you read Williams's first poems, or Pound's, for that matter, it sounds like watered-down Shelley. The reason I'm really glad you can hear this is because when you hear "Home Burial" and "One Minute," you'll hear how radically different it is and how Frost has completely modernized himself in the space between writing the poems that went into *A Boy's Will* and the poems that went into *North of Boston*, which was published only a year later.

Braziller: The other thing is that even when he's using this 19th century diction or even when he's not being that modern, he's incredibly effective, too.

Hirsch: Yes.

Braziller: "Thine emulous fond flowers" and the "daft sun-assaulter"—this is magnificent stuff. But you're absolutely right: then he really moves forward and begins to experiment with his own voice.

Hirsch: If he had gone on writing that way, lovely as it is, we probably wouldn't be reading him today.

Braziller: Right.

Hirsch: He wouldn't have anticipated anything; he would have been the end of something.

Audienc: What year were those two books published?

Hirsch: They were published in 1913 and 1914, but they had a long floor life because he didn't publish until he was 39 or 40. And some of the poems, like "Subverted Flower," which was not published until three books later, were written before *A Boy's Will*. So Frost's chronology in terms of publication is really off because he held a lot of things back, and one of the things he held back were some of the most ruthless and darkest poems, which he would then slip into volumes in various places.

Braziller: "Bereft," which I think we'll look at, too, is a very early poem—right around the same time—that he published much later on.

Hirsch: He saved it for *West-Running Brook.*

Braziller: Yes, you're right.

Hirsch: So the publication doesn't exactly tell you, but it was published in 1913.

Audience: I wonder if either of you have any reaction to the use of negation in the second and third stanzas—also in the first. Is that something that's characteristic of his 19th century rhetoric or to the new Frost?

Braziller: Where?

Audience: For instance, "not dappled," "not shut upon the river," and in each of the stanzas subsequent, there seems to be an image conjured up—

Braziller: "Not on all the land." Well, he's dealing with two different times: he's dealing with probably two periods that are three months apart. He's dealing with this grand spectacle of these butterflies probably in June or July—this unbelievable beauty, which could, again, equate with his youth—and then he's dealing with maybe an October scene, just before the snow in New England. He's dealing with something three or four months later, but it "seems forever," and I think it has more to do—I can't comment on the negative—but I think it has more to do with this contrast, a psychological contrast, between his own magical, youthful state and this awareness of evil and death. So it does "seem forever," but in reality, the poem is about discovering a broken wing, that a bird has presumably killed the butterfly, and it was one of the butterflies that he saw in a completely different mood just three months earlier.

Hirsch: In a first addition of *A Boy's Will*, Frost appended subtitles under the Table of Contents, and under this poem he wrote, "There are things that can never be the same." So maybe that's what has to do with the negation is really—there are things that can never be the same. So it keeps presenting something and then taking it away, showing you it can't be the same anymore. He was only 18. He had no idea.

Now, *North of Boston*, which was published only a year later, is a radical revolution in Frost's work, but also one of the great books of narrative poetry in American poetry. It's still an extremely useful book in terms of these longer narrative poems. He dedicated it to Eleanor and he called it, "This book of people." The strongest element about it, the thing that's most startling

about the book as a whole, is it moves from consciousness of self to consciousness of others. Lyric poets haven't always been so extraordinary at presenting other people besides themselves, but Frost does it with a kind of genius. And *North of Boston*, which is filled with his own feelings, is nonetheless a book of other people. So I'm going to read "Home Burial," which is notable because there's no villain in it. There are two people in it. But I do want to say that behind this was the sudden death of the Frosts' infant, Elliot, who died at three months old from cholera. Frost throughout his life always blamed himself because he didn't consult his own doctor because he consulted his mother's doctor and his mother's doctor said don't worry, there's nothing to worry about.

Braziller: Can I add two little things to that—was he three and a half years old or three and half months?

Hirsch: Three and a half years, sorry.

Braziller: And the other thing is that I think Frost, even though it's obviously autobiographical, I think he claimed that it wasn't, or that he was referring to a cousin who died or something.

Hirsch: Well, there's no way you'd know it's autobiographical because it's presented in the third person.

Braziller: Okay.

Hirsch: I think you can see it as a kind of play. "Home Burial"—should I read it?

Braziller: Yes, please.

Hirsch reads "Home Burial":

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again. He spoke
Advancing toward her: 'What is it you see
From up there always—for I want to know.'
She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull.
He said to gain time: 'What is it you see,'
Mounting until she cowered under him.
'I will find out now—you must tell me, dear.'
She, in her place, refused him any help,
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and a while he didn't see.
But at last he murmured, 'Oh' and again, 'Oh.'

‘What is it—what?’ she said.
    ‘Just that I see.’
‘You don’t,’ she challenged. ‘Tell me what it is.’

‘The wonder is I didn’t see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it—that’s the reason.
The little graveyard where my people are!
So small the window frames the whole of it.
Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?
There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill. We haven’t to mind those.
But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child’s mound—’

    ‘Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t,’ she cried.

She withdrew, shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
‘Can’t a man speak of his own child he’s lost?’

‘Not you! Oh, where’s my hat? Oh, I don’t need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.
I don’t know rightly whether any man can.’

‘Amy! Don’t go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won’t come down the stairs.’
He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
‘There’s something I should like to ask you, dear.’

‘You don’t know how to ask it.’
    ‘Help me, then.’
Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

‘My words are nearly always an offense.
I don’t know how to speak of anything
So as to please you. But I might be taught,
I should suppose. I can’t say I see how.
A man must partly give up being a man
With women-folk. We could have some arrangement
By which I’d bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you’re a-mind to name.

Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.
Two that don't love can't live together without them.
But two that do can't live together with them.'
She moved the latch a little. 'Don't—don't go.
Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.
I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it brought you up to think it the thing
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So inconsolably—in the face of love.
You'd think his memory might be satisfied—'

'There you go sneering now!'

'I'm not, I'm not!
You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead.'

'You can't because you don't know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.'

'I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed.'

'I can repeat the very words you were saying:
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day

Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was in the darkened parlour.
You *couldn't* care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!'

'There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.
The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up?
Amyl There's someone coming down the road!'

'*You*—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—'
'If—you—do!' She was opening the door wider.
'Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will*!—'

Hirsch: Well, it is just an incredibly heart-wrenching, dramatic poem, and I hope you can hear how far he's come from "My Butterfly." He once said, "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic," and this is completely dramatic. Randall Jarrell asked Frost about this poem at the Library of Congress and Jarrell wrote, "I think the best dramatic monologue from a man from the point of view of a woman, of anyone." And he was very interested in this and in Frost and he asked about the woman and Frost said to him, "The woman always loses, but she loses in an interesting way. She brings the whole thing down with her." I think that's what's going on here.

Braziller: I throw this out sort of as a question—as sympathetic as the man is, he's trying to reach into her grief, into her rigidity, into her repulsion towards him or defense towards him. I wonder if at heart the poem isn't most sympathetic to the woman. She gave birth to the child and in a funny way his attempts seem so clumsy. As I said, he comes across very sympathetically, but I wonder if in the end, Frost really didn't feel most—not that this is a competition—but didn't feel the most deeply towards her, or didn't feel certainly very sympathetically towards her.

Hirsch: Towards her?

Braziller: Towards her, yes. Even though she rebuffs him and he's trying openly to engage her, she's had this horrible loss.

Hirsch: Well, it's hard to say, but I think the moral weight is with her. I think the power is with her, and the sympathy is somewhat toneless or neutral, but if you had to go somewhere, I'd say it's with her because she takes the higher road, the deeper road, the grief-stricken road, and she won't be compromised. She sees something that is appalling to her—if you know a famous poem of Frost's, "Out, Out," in a way it's very parallel because the boy loses his arm and then the world turns its back, the world stops paying attention. This is the same instance here, except she won't turn back, she won't bear it, she can't stand it. She's going to be loyal to her grief and the fact that he can turn away from losing his first son to everyday concerns is unbearable to her. But I also would say there that the poet, Robert Frost, holds both positions, as you might say.

Braziller: Right.

Hirsch: But when I say that anything you'd say against Robert Frost, he'd said first against himself, I'd say she makes the case against him with tremendous power. Now, it's not him exactly, but if you wanted to know what his life with Eleanor was filled with, you might say, well, an instance of this might be one theme. You might go on and have a lot of other children and have a full life together, but you wouldn't get over that psychologically, even if you—

Braziller: Also, he says "don't go to someone else again," so there's this sense of—if the poem were to be biographical about it. I often think of the title, "Home Burial"—they buried a child in the backyard, but they say it looks like a "bedroom" out the window. There's this notion of the home itself, or their relationship, being buried, or lost, or dead to one another, and they're talking around each other or as if to ghosts.

Hirsch: I completely agree. I don't know if you know the book by Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* where he writes brilliantly about inside and outside. I think you're pointing to something here—what's going on inside the house—which is so unbearable for her that he's trying to hold her in it. And if you notice that the poem is kind of choreographed in a certain way: she starts at the top of the stairs and he accuses her and she kind of collapses; then he goes up the stairs and she goes down; then he sees out the window and tries to stop her; and, at the end, she's leaving the house and he's trying to hold her. Now, interestingly enough, related to what you just said, Michael, is that most of Frost's poems take place outside. They're often walks in the woods and they're often walks to the edge of the woods and the edge of something. One of the things you ask yourself in the poems that's left out of them is why are they always leaving the house? What's so bad about the house? What's going on that's always leaving you outside? Well, you think about "Home Burial" and you know. I mean, you have some sense of the kind of grief.

Braziller: To take this further, one of the biographies says, "To be fair, it wasn't that bad a marriage." And why?—because they were faithful to one another. But there are all kinds of problem marriages and this is as damaging and aggressive as infidelity and a thousand other—

Hirsch: They stuck with each other. They stuck with each other.

Braziller: Right. And there's a lot to be said for that. But clearly, at a young age—

Hirsch: Yes, there's a huge grief.

Braziller: There's a huge gap. So many of his poems have—

Audience: It's unbearable to him, too. He feels like he's losing her.

Hirsch: Absolutely.

Audience: So, it's a play.

Hirsch: It's a play. And no one wins.

Audience: That's right. Well, she's got what she wants and he's got what he wants; they both don't have what they want. That's what it is: it's a drama.

Hirsch: Yes, the drama is tremendous.

Audience: The drama is tremendous. So you have the words, or poetry, and it's tremendous drama.

Braziller: Drama is a great way of getting—

Audience: He's not taking the point of view of either one of them.

Hirsch: Exactly.

Braziller: As you were saying, he walks up the stairs, she walks back down. Drama is a great way of showing this huge gap or how they don't exist for one another. They cannot talk.

Hirch: Yes. They're at such radical cross-purposes.

Audience: How much later was "Out, Out," because it does seem almost a companion piece. I mean, it's so much starker and simpler, the reaction of the family, and the mother, who's pretty much absent from it—they just all turn back to what they're doing without a moment's thought.

Hirsch: I don't have the date of "Out, Out," but I think it's got to be around the same time. Close. Certainly in the same psychological sphere.

Braziller: It comes back in "Subverted Flower," too, this talk that man must give up being a man and this sort of—is he saying that his sexuality is a problem for her? Is he proposing that they refrain from doing that in order to get back—to get to know one another?

Hirsch: Well, in "Subverted Flower" it's very clear because that's an incredibly sexual poem and it has to do with man's bestiality to woman's frigidity in that poem. So it's hard to read that fully

into this, but there is something—that he has to give up what he is in some crucial way to make an accommodation.

Braziller: Right. And by extension, you could say it was his sexuality that gave them this child and at some level, she just sees "man." She says this somewhere in the poem, and that gave her this grief and the shock that she's in.

Hirsch: Also, you can hear—just to say a word about the poetry—you hear how close it is to speech now. Frost said that he had made poetry more idiomatic, that he'd made it colloquial even underneath Wordsworth. But I think what's striking about that is it also has tremendous formal simplicity and dignity. So it's not elevated in terms of its diction, but it's got a kind of Shakespearean power.

Braziller: Right. And then a lot of the poems we'll be looking at next are what you were saying earlier in your introduction, where he mingles traditional meter with this kind of plain—

Hirsch: With speech. And this poem is in blank verse, which is very brilliantly done. So it'll start a line and then the second half of the line will be "don't, don't, don't, don't."

Audience: When you said before that Frost gives her the moral force—for me, it's a shifting thing. When she says to him, "I can repeat the very words you were saying/Three foggy mornings and one rainy day/Will rot the best birch fence a man can build," and she's contemptuous: *What does that have to do with what was love?* Well, it has everything to do with it, doesn't it? There are forces of nature, destructive forces, to which we can be helpless. The death of an infant, or the destruction, the deterioration, the nature, are part of the same—it seems to me that the blindness that Frost attributes to her is part of the sort of reciprocal process between them of just passing each other.

Hirsch: Well, he takes a neutral—he takes a third-person, neutral point of view, so I think you're right. I still think the weight is with her, but it doesn't mean there isn't any weight with him at all.

Braziller: There's definitely something for both of them, yes.

Hirsch: It doesn't take sides in this way. One of the things that struck me when you read those lines is how much they sounded like "Birches" or another kind of Robert Frost poem. It sounded very much like the country-farmer Robert Frost.

Audience: This kind of twist is surprising.

Hirsch: Yes, you mean it's sort of—

Audience: That it's so archaic and literary.

Hirsch: Yes.

Braziller: Just let me go to one stanza towards the end, just briefly, because this is going to come back again and again, this problem of evil. You were talking about Trilling calling him a terrifying poet and so forth. "One is alone, and he dies more alone/Friends make pretense," et cetera, "And living people, and things they understand/But the world's evil. I won't have grief so." The world's evil. Let's not forget that the poem is about the death of a child; it's about the hardship of life, the hardship of rural, country life and poor people, working people, and in a way, as in "My Butterfly," this question of—not the question—the reality of evil and of things that are beautiful and give joy one moment and are gone and vanish the next. Frost looks at it again and again.

Hirsch: Neither out far, nor in deep, but the kind of chilling emptiness of the world—that's what's behind this other, darker vision of Frost.

Braziller: That is not the one that we certainly commonly think of. It's different from being a tragic poet—you're right—it's really looking unflinchingly at messy stuff.

Hirsch: On the one hand, there's this sort of folksy, optimistic American guy spewing country wisdom, and then on the other hand, there are these really chilling poems about a universe running with a kind of terror.

Braziller: And he thinks about it a great deal.

Hirsch: He's thinking about it all the time.

Audience: Her saying "evil"—doesn't that place her also in the 19th century, in a way? I see him as a modernist, very neutral about the stuff that you say is running rampant. That he, as a poet, is neutral on these things and he keeps taking them—

Hirsch: Yes, but the world is just empty; it's not evil.

Audience: But her calling it evil—

Hirsch: Yes, I agree with that.

Audience: What makes this a poem? I mean, when you think of Eliot writing plays. Is this a short play by Frost? We were talking about the content of the poem, the imagery of the poem, but it's so narrative—it's such a story. When I read the poem, I said to myself, "It's a play." And you said it.

Hirsch: I would say that there is a sliding scale; there's not an absolute difference. You have on the one hand the movement towards the story or towards narrative, and on the other the movement towards the dramatic or towards the play, and this moves very far in that direction. But at least since Virgil, that's been a crucial. I mean, this poem is a pastoral, in a way: two or three people speaking about rural subjects. There's a kind of continuum in poetry. You could say the same think about Robert Browning: why isn't a Browning dramatic monologue part of a play without the other characters, because it sounds like that. What I would say is that poetry moves

very much in the direction towards the dramatic. You could act it out. It's written in blank verse, but so is Shakespeare. So I think it's a poem, but I wouldn't be upset if you wanted to call it a play because it's clearly—as a play moves towards the lyrical and towards a single voice encapsulated. I mean, I don't think you'd actually—it's not a one-act play; it's not a two-act play; it's a compressed lyric, but it has dramatic values, which is what you're pointing out. So it has elements of the drama, but I don't see how you could play it. There was a television documentary about Frost—I don't know if you saw it—and they acted out "Home Burial." I thought it was just terrible. In other words, the actual dramatization is not in the characters, it's in imagining the characters. I don't think this is definitive, but it's in the space of the mind, not in the space of the stage.

Audience: I think there are exactly ten syllables—

Hirsch: It's totally blank verse. But on the other hand, so is Shakespeare. And when Eliot wanted to write verse drama, he wanted to write blank verse, too.

Braziller: What was the famous cliché? *In Our Time*—Hemingway—you could ask why are they short stories; why aren't they poems? Some of them are so lyrically constructed and dependent so much upon imagery and mood.

Hirsch: Because he wanted to get paid as a fiction writer, not as a poet.

Audience: When you said that thing about the speech being so simple and harkening back to something more classic, or why the space allowed for that dramatic tension, Arthur Miller does that quite a lot, experiments with that a lot. But the other thing you just said about the dramatic line, that there's that sort of friendly terror—very Thornton Wilderesque, you know what I mean?

Hirsch: Well, very American.

Audience: It feels like it located itself in several dramatists, too, so it's the in-the-air kind of stuff that was in America, I guess.

Hirsch: Yes.

Braziller: We'll do one more question and then we'll have questions at the end.

Audience: I have a feeling of who I think it is, but who's coming down the road?

Braziller: Ah. Well, there again, there's this sexuality thing. Certainly when he says to her, "Don't go to somebody else," it crosses your mind that she's been unfaithful to him, but it doesn't really make sense on a practical basis with a small town and with country gossip.

Hirsch: Well, it just doesn't tell you, I'd say.

Braziller: It's suggested.

Audience: If you ask me, I think of death somehow. I mean, somehow it has a Bergmanesque feel that—

Braziller: He says, "Don't go to somebody else." She wants to be able to talk to somebody; they are not talking to each other.

Hirsch: Right.

Braziller: She wants to escape the house.

Hirsch: She's going to someone else for comfort.

Audience: A pastor or some minister—

Hirsch: Or a friend.

Braziller: Yes, exactly. He states it in a way—there's so much sexuality within the poem that he states it in a way that it does sound—but you're right, it is like a minister or she's going to go talk to another housewife or a minister or a teacher. She's going to go talk about her grief and the problem in the house, et cetera.

Audience: But couldn't it also be that he feels some shame that their private grief is going to be exposed to a public person or someone else. And he's saying, stay inside and don't expose yourself.

Hirsch: Yes. Keep it here.

Braziller: It's very un-New England to spill out your problems; you keep that stiff upper lip.

Hirsch: See, if he had been a California poet, he could have handled it.

Audience: A man thinks one way, a woman thinks another way; it's a state of mind of both a man and a woman, and it's different. He's saying man can't speak his own—

Hirsch: Wait, but I don't think we want to say that, but I'd say Frost is saying that.

Audience: Yes, especially in those days.

Braziller: But imagine that: you experience the death of a child and then you're under pressure by the social norms of your community that you're supposed to keep a stiff upper lip and Frost, as we're saying, is looking directly, unflinchingly at horror, at death, at no design, at no God. And then on top of that, you can't talk to people down the street—it's unbearable.

Hirsch: Everyone loses in this poem—that's the theme. Everyone loses: the child dies; the mother has a grief that is unbearable to her and she can't get on with it, she can't turn back to

life, she blames her husband for being able to do that; he has both the grief of burying his own child and then the sense of being cursed because his wife blames him because he's trying to turn back to life.

Audience: I was going to say that I think there's a strong sense of recognition in the poem on both parts, actually, because she recognizes these certain things about her husband that she finds incredibly insensitive, and he sort of sees that there's not much he can do, which is why I think at the end, he says, "I *will*"—he's trying to impose on the whole situation.

Hirsch: Yes, but he's not able to do it.

Audience: He's not, but I think that's what you said—the home burial—I think that's what it is: the relationship.

Hirsch: Yes.

Audience: It's a recognition of that.

Braziller: Yes. He doesn't know what to do about being a man—it both threatens her and reminds her. And then in the end, he winds up threatening her, to forcibly stop her, which is the most destructive thing that he could say.

Hirsch: Yes, and what he's not able to do.

Audience: Control—isn't it about male's control?

Braziller: We're going to move forward with questions at the end.

Hirsch: We're going to go outside now and see how nice it is outside.

Braziller: Yes, let's take a nice quiet walk in the woods, take a look at the lake, and get our mind off of things. Now, I'm going to say something before I read the poem because I want to come back to your initial point, which really fascinates me. He's discovered his own voice. I don't know if we're completely clear—he publishes his first two books in England. He went over there and it was the smartest thing he did in his life—incredible move. He was discovered over there; he published these early books in England and then came back from England. He met a lot of people, including the wonderful Edward Thomas. And, by the way, we've got to talk about his wife's books. Have you read—she wrote some memoirs.

Hirsch: Helen Thomas, yes. They're wonderful.

Braziller: He comes back, determined to be Yankee-er than the Yankee, Yankee-er than ever before, so he knows where his place is going to be and he knows he may well be this great and famous poet. But what interests me, and I raise this again as a question: what is this meter about? As we listen to this great and very famous poem—

Hirsch: Too famous.

Braziller: Okay, good, that's a point, and we'll discuss it. There's almost a childlike—maybe deliberately childlike—kind of simplistic line.

Braziller reads "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.

Hirsch: This poem is so famous, it's sort of hard to read. Maybe we shouldn't talk about it too much, but maybe it would be helpful to just think about it in another context, to think about it here in the context of the darker Frost. Instead of a homely wisdom, you find that now that we're outside—we had one poem inside and then all the other poems are outside. Now that we're outside, you see the Frost poems continually walk—continually go to the edge of something and then they stop, they just halt at the edge. They pause. It's not necessary to say what is out there, what is on the other side of those woods, but it doesn't seem very positive. It doesn't seem very hopeful. When Frost first proposed to Eleanor, and she refused—she was in college and she refused—he went on a trip to Virginia to something called the Dismal Swamp, almost a kind of allegory, and he almost got lost in the Dismal Swamp and he almost committed suicide. But he didn't; he got a ride out. Frost poems continually go the Dismal Swamp; they go right to the edge of something that lures him in, which is kind of obliteration.

Braziller: I agree completely.

Hirsch: Here it's beautiful.

Braziller: He says himself, "Whose woods these are I think I know." Somebody lives in town—

Hirsch: And owns this, yes.

Braziller: And owns this. Some wise investor, or something like that.

Hirsch: Someone from New York.

Braziller: Right. What do they call it, the "second home," or "third home." Also typical of Frost—"He will not see me stop here"—when he goes out on these walks, he has an almost kind of adolescent self-consciousness or he thinks he's doing something wrong. "His house is in the village though"—there's this feeling that it's okay while no one is looking. And he's acquainted with the night, where there's also this image of a watchman. On a lot of these walks, there's this feeling—even the horse thinks it's strange—there's this feeling that what he yearns for is so dark that he doesn't want anyone to know what he's doing, that everyone's going to take note or see him. We even have it in "Home Burial," that he's afraid for her to go out—

Hirsch: There's some shame.

Braziller: There's a notion of shame. I qualify it, though, by thinking of this great image in the third stanza: "The only other sound's the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake." This is great. There's the notion that somebody else owns the woods, but there's also the notion of the poet being the great appreciator, the one most conscious of what it has—he really owns it—and of nature's transcendent power. You could say that too much of that—there's something about the appreciation of nature or its transcendent power or being too focused—that can have a dark side, too.

Hirsch: The woods are very alluring here.

Braziller: On a surface level you could say their lure could be the attraction to death and to sleep and to escape and to getting out of the house and staying away from home. But in a lot of these poems we're talking about there's also the great appreciation of the outdoors, too, and great imagery. He's in quest of some sort of bond or some sort of experience out there, some transcendent, spiritual thing, yet it can pull him down to where there's a flip side to it.

Hirsch: Well, what I would say is that what you're talking about is a conflict in Frost between something Emersonian and something more desolate and that—I mean, Emerson himself was a great Swedenborgian and there's some sense—there's some lingering sense that nature has some transcendental power, which is what you're saying. On the other hand, there's also some sense that nature's really an obliterating force, and that there is in Frost this kind of conflict between wanting to spiritualize and also a sense that that's a kind of imposition. I mean, the woods are very alluring here, but they're also dark and deep, and they are a kind of oblivion. And then he turns back. This is the gesture that you'll see in different incarnations, again and again, in these poems—that's what she's accusing of him of in "Home Burial"—he turns back to life. Well, "promises to keep" is a more optimistic way, a more affirmative, a more sentimental way to turn you back to life, but it is that moment of your turn towards something else. Either you turn towards something obliterating, towards some overwhelming grief, or you then turn back to daily-ness, towards the world itself.

Audience: I just wondered what you think of the seamlessness of the form, apart from its multi-faceted possible meanings, achieved in this poem. In this short poem, for me, it's almost perfect simplicity, and you have to work very, very hard to be simple. This just rings like a bell. I just wondered your opinion about the way it's structure begets meaning—the way this thing is structured as far as—you can diffuse that, or am I going a little too far?

Hirsch: I think these poems achieve real greatness in what you're talking about. I have trouble with this particular poem because it's hard for me to read it—it's so encrusted in popular culture that it's hard for me to see it. I wanted to sort of jump ahead to a poem called "Desert Places" in a moment, which I think is not a well-known poem, but I think equally brilliant. I see this formal structure in that poem that you're seeing here very much the same way: there's a kind of pure, clear logic and incredibly clarity, almost mischievous in its tones, but very, very perfectly made.

Braziller: I think I like the poem—it remains fresher for me than it does for you and I know you think it's a great poem, but I think we all had this experience; I don't think it's just a dark Frost. In a way, we all quest this experience with nature, this oneness with it, this great satisfaction or great pleasure or delight in it, or being in it, being lost in it. And yet, what he brings out, which makes the poem as good as you think it is or say it is, is this perhaps death wish that's in it, too. It's a universal thing; it's an amazing universal thing. Why does he not die, why does he not just die there? Because he has promises. It's almost as if it's for others—

Hirsch: Yes, he's keeping his word.

Braziller: He's keeping his word or he's keeping up a good New England front, or a good face. We don't kill ourselves; we just don't do that.

Audience: I notice with Frost that there are so few people. He has promises to keep—

Hirsch: But in *North of Boston*, there are a lot of people.

Audience: But it's so beautiful because he has promises to keep—it's brilliant, the music—

Hirsch: Yes, the music is wonderful.

Audience: The music is absolutely—even if it's popular.

Braziller: To get back to these childlike rhythms—maybe it's that very dark, death-wish undercurrent, that horrible reality is a kind of dissonance with the simplistic, fable-like meter that causes—

Hirsch: That's what makes it so deceptive.

Braziller: —makes it so deceptive and so memorable a poem. Okay, we have to move on. You forgot one poem. The next one is "Bereft"—is that okay?

Hirsch: I think we're going to run out of time.

Braziller: We've got twenty more minutes—at least twenty-five more minutes.

Hirsch: I think we should skip to "Desert Places."

Braziller: Go for it. Then we can circle back to some of these, too. Do you want me to read "Desert Places?"

Hirsch: I'd like to read "Desert Places" because I think it'll make the point of what we're talking about and you may not know this poem as well.

Braziller: "Desert Places."

Hirsch reads:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it—it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less—
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

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.

Braziller: Structurally, it's a lot like "Stopping by Woods." And here is he alone in the woods again and—

Hirsch: Exactly. But the woods are not so lovely now.

Braziller: Right.

Hirsch: But it's the same—that's why I wanted to go right to it, because it's the same structure. If you hear the music, "Snow falling and night falling fast, oh fast"—just a wonderful little moment of mimetic rhythm. "In a field I looked into going past"—I think I like this poem a little better

because I think the rhyme scheme is more inventive. It's not so sing-songy, because if you notice that what he does here is he rhymes A-A, then a third line that doesn't rhyme, and then a fourth line that rhymes with the first two again. So it's A-A-B-A. So it's rhyming, then it strays—it doesn't rhyme with anything—and then it rhymes again. There's this sense of progression here: "The woods around it have it—it is theirs/All animals are smothered in their lairs/I am too absent-spirited to count/The loneliness includes me unawares." And here is, I think, the killer Frost clincher in terms of the view of the universe: "And lonely as it is, that loneliness/Will be more lonely ere it will be less"—it's going to get worse; it's going to be more lonely before it gets less lonely. "A blanker whiteness of benighted snow/With no expression, nothing to express." So now we're not animating the universe. This doesn't have anything to tell us.

Braziller: This is the terrifying—

Hirsch: This is the terrifying emptiness that is just there. It's up against it. This is very, very American—it's one of the reasons I like this poem. Remember Emerson says, "There are two absorbing facts: I, and the abyss," which is why there are no people. In this particular confrontation, if you want to read a poem by Whitman that's in the very same place, you can read "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," where he goes out to the ocean and hears the sound of these birds going "death, death, death, death." And he sees in that particular poem the beginning of his poetic vocation, by the way, but that's another story. But here, Frost comes up to this place of absolute emptiness, beautifully expressed, by the way, in beautiful Wordworthian language, but with a kind of relentlessness of vision, which is that there's nothing out there, not going to pretend there is. And then a very, very extraordinary moment, I think, where he turns it inward, and this is why I say you couldn't say anything against him that he hasn't said against himself: "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." I mean, there's sort of a Hemingwayesque moment. You think it's scary out there? You can't scare me. It's scarier in here.

Here I just want to say something else—Frost said that style is how a man takes himself, and one of the things that I think is so extraordinary about this is that I find this rhyming somewhat playful. So you get, "They cannot scare me with their empty spaces/Between stars"—that's a sort of Pascalian wager, right? Is there something between the infinite starry spaces or is there not? "On stars where no human race is." I think that rhyming "spaces" and "race is" is playful. And that playfulness is Frost-poetic, if you will. I mean, he says I think in "Two Tramps in Mudtime": "poetry is play for mortal stakes." And I think that's what we got here: play for mortal stakes. So at the moment where he's saying the world outside is desert places and then, inside, even greater desert places, what do we have? Poetic-making, creation, something joyous. Then he goes on: "I have it in me so much nearer home/To scare myself with my own desert places"—it's got a kind of relentless turning. But that moment is very emblematic for me of rhyming "spaces" and "human race is," because it means: I'm going to play in the face of this desolation.

Audience: It's interesting that you talk about play. I can't remember which essay it is that he talks about his formal verse and that he prefers to play tennis with a net—

Hirsch: Well, what he says is that writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net. I don't think that's right, by the way, but I think he believed it.

Audience: This blankness that he's talking about—he's often talking about an empty page where there's no expression, nothing to express. It's possibly doubt or fear of not being able to write.

Audience: The emptiness.

Audience: The emptiness, right. And then this playfulness is his attempt at showing that he can—

Braziller: I think that's definitely here. It's a fact. If we wanted to continue in the same vein, we could look at "Design."

Hirsch: Yes.

Braziller: There's a lot of whiteness in imagery, this terror, this emptiness, and it could well be a nuance—

Hirsch: And blankness.

Braziller: —or blankness.

Audience: It's kind of like laughing at the dark; you're trying to laugh when it's dark, you know what I mean? To not scare yourself. Something like that.

Hirsch: Well, I think laughing might be overstating it, but you might say smiling.

Audience: When I think of this poem and "Stopping by Woods," I feel that this poem is less terrifying; the poet isn't tempted to just end himself.

Hirsch: That's true.

Audience: He's dealing with it and he's facing this in himself and all its very desperate—not desperate—it's dark. But it's not frightening the way "Stopping by Woods" is because "Stopping by the Woods" is compounded by the childlike rhythm.

Hirsch: Well, I think there are two different kinds of fear, maybe, as you say. "Stopping by Woods" has this fear that you might go over—it might pull you in. This doesn't have that. On the other hand, "Stopping by Woods" doesn't have a kind of interior desolation. It doesn't point to it. This points to it to say not only is it desert place out there, it's as desolate inside.

Braziller: You could say this is more frightening in a way with this—"Loneliness includes me unawares." It catches him—he's out there moving along and—

Hirsch: He's part of it; it's not aware of him.

Braziller: He suddenly realizes that this desolate landscape and the desolate interior world come terrifying, quickly at him. You could say “Stopping by Woods” is more about a kind of longing for death or almost kind of a pleasure in it.

Hirsch: Well, behind both poems is the sense that nature doesn’t care about us.

Audience: And I don’t care about—

Hirsch: And you don’t care about nature, sure, but that’s something different.

Audience: It’s winter solstice, isn’t it?

Braziller: It’s the last day—that’s right. That’s right. And presumably, Christmas, other festivities, a social life—those are his promises. And he pushes the horse forward. It’s maybe his bleakest day of the year and it also is the shortest day of the year.

Hirsch: But what I wanted to show you is a series of poems where Frost just comes right up to the edge of this nothingness and that’s the place where—he’s a very profound poet because at that space he just decides how to make human meaning, right up at the edge of the abyss is where he makes human meaning. The poems keep bumping up against it. They keep bumping up against this void and they keep finding different kinds of dramatic parables to do it.

Braziller: Well, the mere fact that he’s putting into form and into language these very dark moods and feelings reflects some hope or some redemption.

Hirsch: Some playfulness.

Audience: An interesting contrast with “Stopping by Woods” is that it’s about darkness in a kind of seductive way; this doesn’t have darkness in it at all—

Braziller: No, it’s about blankness. It’s about emptiness. It has night falling, just night falling.

Audience: Yes. I think the dark and the white—actually the white is more frightening.

Braziller: Okay, now another poem. We have a few more minutes and then we can do even more questions and answers, but staying on this, I’ll read “Acquainted with the Night.” We’ll see if we get to “Subverted Flower,” but at least “Design,” which is very much in this sense of evil, this white—

Hirsch: Or maybe we should—if we’re going to end, maybe we should end on something more joyous. No? Okay.

Braziller: I can leave it up to the audience. Do you want to end on a black Frost poem or a—

Audience: Yes!

Braziller: See? These people can deal with it.

Hirsch: They can take it!

Braziller: Okay, we're really getting black now.

Hirsch: We're really seeing their profession.

Braziller: "Acquainted with the Night." But "Design" seems to have another element of this spooky stuff that we're—

Hirsch: Yes, that's even more ominous.

Braziller: "Acquainted with the Night." He's putting these terrible, dark solitary—he's putting them to music; he's putting them to art.

Hirsch: Yes.

Braziller: Or making art out of them. And he's making great art—the most famous, the best-known American poems that we have.

Braziller reads "Acquainted with the Night":

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;
And further still at an unearthly height,
A luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Braziller: Where is this poem? It's a strange kind of a setting; it really is. It's somewhere—some eerie suburb of some city—but there's something dreamlike or surreal or hallucinatory to me.

Hirsch: Magritte-ian.

Braziller: Yes. And this "interrupted cry from another street"—it's more of some internal state gone wild, or imagined.

Hirsch: This is one of those poems that in this context takes on richer meaning because it's sort of toneless, in a way. He doesn't tell you why he's going. He doesn't tell you what's in the house. He doesn't tell you quite where he's going. He's just formerly acquainted with the night and with darkness. Can I say one thing about it formally, which is it's a terza rima sonnet, which is very extraordinary; there aren't so many in English, although Shelley does it most brilliantly in "Ode to the West Wind," where there is a series of them. But one of the things about this, if the form has any meaning: terza rima is a rhyme scheme that Dante invented for the *Inferno*, where the first and the third lines rhyme and then the middle line rhymes with the first and the third line to the next stanza. It's a little bit like a staircase, where you're always going forward by looking back. I can't help but think that Dante invented this for the *Inferno* and that therefore there is something infernal in calling it up as a kind of rhyme scheme, if meters have a memory that way. They may not. But if they do, then it is something that Dante invented for the infernal realms and it works quite naturally in English, here, because of the simplicity of the diction.

Braziller: Yes, this really is a descent into some—

Hirsch: I always liked the word "acquainted" here, because I think "acquainted" is sort of either a slightly neutral or slightly formal word; you're not on close terms with the night, but you have known it, you have met it.

Braziller: Or you could say you know it quite well, but you don't wish to get to know it any better.

Hirsch: Point taken, yes.

Braziller: Another thing, this "furthest city light"—it sounds almost more like England. "I've looked down the saddest city lane"?

Hirsch: He's on the edge of some kind of town. I think he's on the edge of some kind of town and he walks past the edge of that town.

Braziller: Right.

Hirsch: If we had all the time in the world or we had a full time seminar, you'd see where we're going. There are another ten poems we could add here that start reinforcing each other and building up their own sort of world, which doesn't have much to do with country wisdom, but you do see, he keeps leaving the house. He keeps walking out to the edge of something, and he keeps pausing on that edge, and then he stops. And there's some shame in it, and there's some darkness in it, and there's some desolation, and there's some facing of blankness. He never explains them away, but he continually puts the speaker of his poems in this same dramatic

position, where you just go to the edge of something and you just come up to some silence, some nothingness, some blankness, and you wait, and you think, and you decide, and you turn back.

Braziller: You were talking before of the popular image of Frost or how many people saw him, but I wonder and believe, really, that a lot of the people that read these poems responded to them and knew the experience quite well. That's the other side to it, too. There's something very bold about doing what you just said. Loneliness and solitude go hand in hand with a kind of shamefulness or self-consciousness.

Hirsch: No one's exempt.

Braziller: Not only is no one exempt, it might be much more prevalent than we in our solitariness care to admit. So there's a sort of universal quality to the very personal, this tremendously self-conscious—and particularly maybe in a small New England town, where can one go?

Hirsch: Also the simplicity is very deceptive because it makes the poem seem immediately comprehensible. What should we do?

Braziller: Well, all of you can help us decide. We have a half an hour to go. We can just throw it open to questions.

Audience: More. Read more.

Braziller: Read more? Then don't you want to do "Design"? Or do you have another choice?

Hirsch: No, I'd love to read "Design."

Braziller: Or we could go to the great "Subverted Flower," which is a long poem.
Audience: Do both. Do both.

Hirsch: Okay.

Braziller: "Design," which is very much consistent with "Stopping by Woods" and "Desert Places." Maybe you want to read "Design"?

Hirsch: Okay. "Design" and then maybe "Subverted Flower"? Okay. I mean, it does seem a group that can handle sexuality. Or perhaps not.

Braziller: Even if the two of us can't.

Hirsch: That's not in this poem, by the way, it's the next one. Don't go looking for it here.

Hirsch reads "Design":

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth

Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth—
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

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

Braziller: Is this another sonnet?

Hirsch: Yes, this is a sonnet. This is a Petrarchan sonnet. You might say "idealized love" is not its subject, but it's got the Petrarchan structure of eight and six, and also keeps the rhymes. It's very hard to do this in English because English is sort of poor with rhymes as opposed to Italian, where—Osip Mandelstam said it, "In Italian, everything rhymes with everything else," like baby-talk. But in English, it doesn't. So the thing about the Petrarchan sonnet is it has three rhymes and so you see: white, blight, right, white, height, all the way through there, and then you've got moth, cloth, and then you've got small, appall. It's got the three rhymes as in a Petrarchan sonnet and it's got the asymmetrical structure that you get in a Petrarchan sonnet, of eight and six, and of building the case, and then the resolution of the case in a kind of argument.

This poem, I think, is even scarier than the ones we've been looking at because now he suggests that there's actually some intention, here. Normatively in Frost you don't get that; you get some sense that it's a blank or whiteness of benighted snow with no expression, nothing to express. But here, you're getting something—well, maybe the darkness actually has some design, some evil design to appall. I mean, *if*—this sort of very tricky *if*—"If design govern in a thing so small." Does this version of God, does this designed spirit get down to things so small? I can't really say, he says, but if it does—it sure looks like it does here.

Braziller: And the question, going back to "My Butterfly"—did something, did the same God or design that allowed for that great beauty, did it also allow for the butterfly to be snatched by a bird, to fall behind? Or was there just no purpose, was there no reason, was there no design?

Hirsch: That's the question. And which is worse? I mean, either there's nothing out there designing it, or there is something designing it—which is worse? And those are the two options you get in this poem.
Braziller: "Witches broth"—it's almost as if—

Hirsch: Yes. Well, there's some evil—

Braziller: —he's debating—

Hirsch: He's debating.

Braziller: —whether it's being designed or stirred up.

Hirsch: Right. Is it accidental, or is it being designed and stirred up? Is there some intention behind this evil? Then, again, it's so deceptive, because if you read it, it's a beautiful sonnet—beautifully structured; the rhymes are quite lovely. It's quite a beautiful scene, but behind it is this thing that's governing, this large metaphysical question with this lovely little parable: is it nothingness, or is there something worse, some kind of evil design behind the way the universe is operating? Behind this cruelty, in terms of this predatory cruelty, is it just accidental, or is there something actually behind it that's governing this? It's sort of like the inverse of Pascal's wager. In Pascal's wager, there's either nothing or there's something. But here, there's either nothing or there's something, but the something is even worse.

Audience: And yet he parses in a little comic relief like Shakespeare: "Mixed ready to begin the morning right."

Braziller: There's that playfulness and humor there again.

Hirsch: I think that's one of the things that's most deceptive about the style. On the one hand, it's willing to take a look at the darkest things there are, the darkest questions about the universe. At the same time, it's playful in the light of it, the face of it. It's a very extraordinary body of work and very courageous in its own way, where it finds itself confronting very, very dark, human issues and playing in the face of them.

Braziller: He is a big studier—he did take many walks and they weren't all dark, bleak walks. He was a scientist—

Hirsch: He knew nature. He knew nature well.

Braziller: He was a great study of plants and of botany.

Hirsch: I've skewed the evidence here in terms of these poems because I wanted to present you a Frost that you might not have known as well, but we could have taken Frost poems that were maybe a little more neutral—I wouldn't say positive, but a little more neutral—and that were really more about the need of being versed in country things and the accuracy of naming things botanically. If you think of a poet like the great rural 19th century poet John Clare, Frost is really very much like Clare. I mean, Clare was a peasant poet, but with Frost it's very crucial to get the names of things right and to be accurate about the natural world.

Braziller: A lot of these names here, it's very, very precise—this "white heal-all" and "flower like a froth" and "the white moth thither in the night."

Hirsch: Yes, but the beauty of it is even more awful.

Braziller: Yes.

Audience: But the weapons he uses—the knowledge of these things, plus the weapon of being the poet he is, that's what gives him the courage to look at this dark side so much. He has the weapons.

Hirsch: Yes.

Braziller: Plus great classical training and his remarkable assortment of things—

Audience: This is so much reminding me of Emily Dickinson—you approach nature and know nature; the nearer to hurt and death, the less you know—

Hirsch: One could make the same case about Dickinson, about a Dickinson that seems more approachable, nicer, more positive towards the nature world. And then a Dickinson that's really much more ruthless, that's also underneath a more popular one, is a much more radial poet. I think with Dickinson, she's actually a more radical poet, poetically. I mean in terms of her formal gestures, the way she uses dashes—she's really a much more revolutionary poet than Frost is in terms of her poetic medium. But yes, I think in terms of nature, there are a lot of parallels there.

Audience: I'm not sure about this, but was it Hemingway or Frost who slept with a nightlight on?

Audience: Both, I'm guessing.

Audience: Who doesn't?

Hirsch: Who doesn't—I wish I thought of that. I don't know the answer to that. But I think the answer "both" tells you something about both of them.

Braziller: Should I read "The Subverted Flower"? We have just enough time. I'd like to read "The Subverted Flower." Great poem. I think we've touched upon a lot of things that are here, particularly in "Home Burial." And then Ed will in a leisurely and unhurried way read his own poem.

Hirsch: Leisurely, but succinctly.

Braziller: No, in your usual effective and forceful way.

Braziller reads "The Subverted Flower":

She drew back; he was calm:
'It is this that had the power.'
And he lashed his open palm
With the tender-headed flower.
He smiled for her to smile,

But she was either blind
Or willfully unkind.
He eyed her for a while
For a woman and a puzzle.
He flicked and flung the flower,
And another sort of smile
Caught up like fingertips
The corners of his lips
And cracked his ragged muzzle.
She was standing to the waist
In goldenrod and brake,
Her shining hair displaced.
He stretched her either arm
As if she made it ache
To clasp her—not to harm;
As if he could not spare
To touch her neck and hair.
'If this has come to us
And not to me alone—'
So she thought she heard him say;
Though with every word he spoke
His lips were sucked and blown
And the effort made him choke
Like a tiger at a bone.
She had to lean away.
She dared not stir a foot,
Lest movement should provoke
The demon of pursuit
That slumbers in a brute.
It was then her mother's call
From inside the garden wall
Made her steal a look of fear
To see if he could hear
And would pounce to end it all
Before her mother came.
She looked and saw the shame:
A hand hung like a paw,
An arm worked like a saw
As if to be persuasive,
An ingratiating laugh
That cut the snout in half,
And eye become evasive.
A girl could only see
That a flower had marred a man,
But what she could not see
Was that the flower might be

Other than base and fetid:
That the flower had done but part,
And what the flower began
Her own too meager heart
Had terribly completed.
She looked and saw the worst.
And the dog or what it was,
Obeying bestial laws,
A coward save at night,
Turned from the place and ran.
She heard him stumble first
And use his hands in flight.
She heard him bark outright.
And oh, for one so young
The bitter words she spit
Like some tenacious bit
That will not leave the tongue.
She plucked her lips for it,
And still the horror clung.
Her mother wiped the foam
From her chin, picked up her comb,
And drew her backward home.

Braziller: It's going to be time to read your poem and answer more questions, but as I understand it, this was one of his very early poems. Eleanor was his childhood sweetheart; they met senior year in high school. And she prevented him or asked him not to publish this within her lifetime. It was published many, many years later. I just throw that out to you. Whether it's autobiographical like "Home Burial"—it probably is very autobiographical. We talked about many of the things in "Home Burial"—well, what is the situation here? Are they finishing something? Are they in the middle of something about to happen? The autobiographical thing, given his own upbringing—this incredible father that he had who died when he was 11: a very, very strict disciplinarian, a very difficult alcoholic. A few years later Frost has fallen in love and is attempting to form a relationship with somebody. They got married; they lived together all of their lives. But he was having a lot of difficulty, I think, in how to deal with courting her and with lovemaking and I think there's a great deal of that—

Hirsch: And so was she. I think you're right—they're in the middle of something. I mean, it's early on in their courtship, but they're already involved with each other; they're in the middle of something and this is a poem about a man's bestiality and a woman's frigidity, in terms of—I'm not saying permanently, but in term of these two people, that's what it looks like it is to me. There they are in the field and he's turning—she sees him and he becomes a kind of beast. His arm becomes a paw and he's bestial in his desire and she's terrified of him and yet, there they are, just within reach of Mother. And he has a kind of demoniacal desire for her. And she's involved with him, but she's just holding him right there, they're just poised in something not happening.

Braziller: They don't know how to handle their passions.

Hirsch: They don't know how to handle their physicality at all.

Braziller: Right. He thinks to force himself, or some form of follow-through with this, some form of entry is going to bring him some form of satisfaction, and she is aware that they're not ready for this.

Hirsch: I think it's worse than that. It's not that they're just not ready; she doesn't want him to do it.

Audience: What is the foam in her mouth? Someone with foam was frothing at the bit.

Audience: That's a little bit confusing.

Braziller: She's spouting off. She's cussing him.

Hirsch: Isn't there something so bestial—I mean these people are being reduced to something really bestial. It's not an uplifting view of sexuality.

Braziller: We asked if you were ready for it.

Audience: What does it mean—"It is this that had the power"? I didn't quite understand.

Braziller: I think that's a good question. "The Subverted Flower"—I think it means that love can have power, can be transforming, can be beautiful, but that it's subverted in some way.

Hirsch: The flower can also be base and fetid. I haven't had any experiences like this myself, so I'm just projecting onto it what it might have meant. I mean, Michael is also only projecting; it's hard for us to understand this poem.

Braziller: There is an almost embarrassing kind of phallic—I think Frost is kind of suggesting and maybe not delivering this notion of the phallic image of the flower.

Hirsch: The shame in sexuality.

Audience: That's what Jarrell said about "Home Burial," that it's told from a woman's point of view.

Hirsch: Well, I think it's told from both points of view, just like "Home Burial," but there may be more sympathy with the woman.

Audience: Yes, but there is that strong factor of his manipulating it as told from the woman's point of view.

Hirsch: He's manipulating it, but if there's anything in the manipulation, it's to accuse the man more. I think he's tremendously accused here. He stands tremendously accused. This is even more so than in "Home Burial."

Braziller: Yes, definitely. He's trying to really force himself and he's not ready for it or doesn't even really want it—

Hirsch: He's totally turned into a beast.

Braziller: Yes. Well, he turns himself into a beast.

Audience: But with the mother's voice behind it, don't you think there's a kind of lightness in it? I exaggerate with the word "manipulate," but he's certainly very clever.

Hirsch: I don't know what you mean by lightness.

Audience: Humor. That there's humor in it at the same time.

Hirsch: I don't see it as so funny myself, but—

Braziller: I think you could even say it's sort of, to me, a little heavy-handed and not as successful as "Home Burial."

Hirsch: Well, it's allegorical.

Braziller: It's trying to be allegorical and Frost is trying to be meaningful about sexuality that maybe isn't all that clear or successful.

Hirsch: He slipped it into *A Witness Tree*—in other words, he held it for 25 years or something. When he slipped it into *A Witness Tree*, I can't help but notice that he put it right after one of his most beautiful love poems, which is "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," which I recommend to you as a really beautiful lyric love poem. I don't think it's as great a poem, but one of the reasons I wanted you to see it is because almost no one knows it. There are two poems of Frost's that I think are very extraordinary: "The Subverted Flower" and "The Vanishing Red," which almost no one knows; people just don't think of it. When I first heard "The Vanishing Red," I thought, "Oh, it must be a poem about a maple tree," whereas in fact, it's about killing an Indian.

Audience: Yes, a murder—

Hirsch: It's a murder poem. It's a poem of murder. And so I just wanted you to see these two other mentions of one, human sexuality, and another, human cruelty, which are also operating in Frost, but they're less well-known poems. But they're very much part of the body of work.

Braziller: Ed will read now. We Xeroxed "Directive"—

Hirsch: Yes, it's a very beautiful poem.

Braziller: That's a great poem. It's much superior, I think, to "The Subverted Flower." I urge you, again—we're going to have this web page and you can read and you can email questions, but there's a poem called, "Directive," which is just incredible. I've come to only in the last year or so.

Hirsch: It's got that "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion."

Braziller: It does. Okay, so Ed will read. There will still be time for questions and answers. Do you want to tell us a little bit because what I requested or asked is that he choose something of his own. By the way, did we get books? We have books, which he would be happy to sign for you. A poem of his own that may have some relationship to the poems we're talking about tonight or in some way might have even been influenced by Frost—that was it and that's all that I know.

Hirsch: This is a poem that's not so much influenced by Frost, but in dialogue with him, I would say, in some way. It's called "The Partial History of My Stupidity," and the thing I'm taking from Frost or at least relating to Frost is I've been struggling very much in the last few years to make my poems more colloquial and to see what would happen if I really worked with this sentence sound because I had been a very formal poet. I wanted to try and capture informality within my natural temperament, which is poetically very formal. I'm not a rural poet, but the thing that I find very powerful in Frost is the keeping strict accounts with himself. You said something before about courage and one of the things I find remarkable about Frost is that it not only takes great skill to be a poet, but it also takes courage. I think there's a kind of ruthlessness in Frost that has been exemplary to me. Not so much the popular figure, but the solitary poet who's really willing to question himself and to see desert places outside and then also desert places inside.

Hirsch reads "A Partial History of My Stupidity":

Traffic was heavy coming off the bridge
and I took the road to the right, the wrong one,
and got stuck in the car for hours.

Most nights I rushed out into the evening
without paying attention to the trees,
whose names I didn't know,
or the birds, which flew heedlessly on.

I couldn't relinquish my desires
or accept them, and so I strolled along
like a tiger that wanted to spring,
but was still afraid of the wildness within.

The iron bars seemed invisible to others,

but I carried a cage around inside me.

I cared too much what other people thought
and made remarks I shouldn't have made.
I was silent when I should have spoken.

Forgive me, philosophers,
I read the Stoics but never understood them.

I felt that I was living the wrong life,
spiritually speaking,
while halfway around the world
thousands of people were being slaughtered,
some of them by my countrymen.

So I walked on—distracted, lost in thought—
and forgot to attend to those who suffered
far away, nearby.

Forgive me, faith, for never having any.

I did not believe in God,
who eluded me.

Audience: Was that published in *The New Yorker*?

Hirsch: It was. Good reading.

Audience: Really wonderful.

Hirsch: Thank you very much.

Audience: How long ago was that?

Hirsch: A couple of hours. I think it was last year.

Braziller: Is it in one of the books?

Hirsch: It's not in one of the books. I have a new book coming out and it's in that. It's a newer poem. It's not part of my published work. So maybe we've already had our conversation about the poems.

Braziller: Okay, well, thank you very much.