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## Frances Frost, 1905-1959 Sketch of a Vermont Poet

*By* MARGARET EDWARDS

Frances Frost is a compelling if neglected poet of Vermont. Since the 1950s her work has been consigned to America's cultural attic, although the best of her poems deserve to be returned to the parlor. She has no real connection to Robert Frost; she was not his wife, child, or cousin. She merely shared his last name. This may surprise readers, because her poetry, like his, is satisfyingly traditional, with regular rhymes and meters. Also like his, her poetry is deceptively simple, using rural metaphors to speak of complex psychological states.

In "Advice to a Trespasser," with a voice remarkably reminiscent of famous Robert's, Frances Frost proclaims:

There are several ways of crossing barbed-wire fences  
According to your inner differences . . .

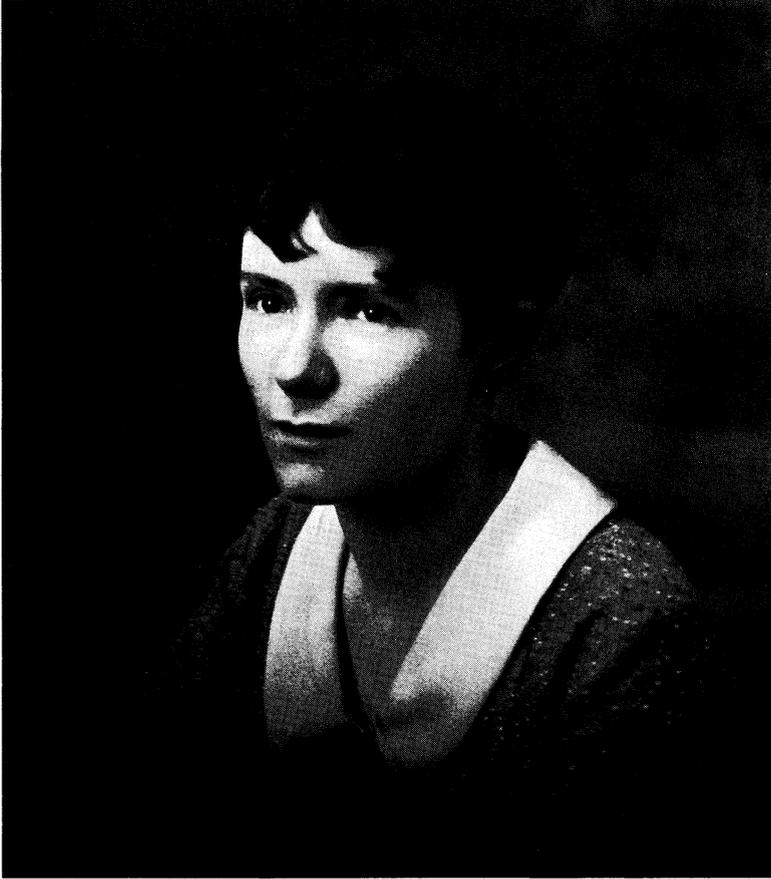
One way is to "climb and teeter," then jump. Another is to "spread the wire." There is a third, which is her favorite:

In search of stargrass or blackberry plunder,  
I always drop to earth, roll quickly under,  
And come up sandy, grass-stained, nearly whole.  
But he who trespasses must heed his soul,  
Find his own devilish and delightful knack  
For crossing fences—and for getting back.<sup>1</sup>

In her life she could be said to have crossed fences quite often. She was prone to spring loose of any confining relationship or constricting regulation. She bobbed her hair to an elfin shortness, wore mannish clothes, smoked (when ladies didn't), got divorced, and had numerous affairs. Her "inner difference" surely would have proved too overpowering and too visible in a small community in Vermont; therefore it is little wonder that as soon as she matured she would "drop to earth, roll quickly under" and be off to metropolitan places.

She developed not only the "knack / for crossing fences," but also, as

No “small journeyings” were sufficient for Frances Frost, who seemed from the start to understand she would make her living intellectually. She did not learn the hard way, by doing any farming herself, that her source of inspiration and her source of cash would not be the same.



*Frances Frost. Courtesy of Margaret Edwards*

I came across Frances Frost’s work as a college student studying Robert Frost. Into my library carrel I took a raft of books on and by him, only to discover that, among them, was a book which I felt he *should* have written. In fact, it annoyed me that he had not. There was one poem in particular that I wanted to include in the paper I was writing. Who was this Frances person anyway? The poem was called “These Acres,” and it concludes with these lines:

she says, "for getting back." Her return was spiritual. No matter where she lived, the farming life of New England drew from her, as it drew from Robert Frost, a deep esthetic response. When her work is brilliant, like his, it unifies the music of verse with actual speech and presents imagery drawn from specific subjects that have been meticulously observed. These lines from her poem "Second Growth" show more than a superficial knowledge of what it means to keep cattle:

Does that hillside, which served as early pasture  
While summer came, feel a strange, bleak regret  
Now that the cows are loosed in lower meadows  
Where haying's ended? Or does it forget,  
Swiftly enough, the thud of hoofs, the cropping,  
Measured and slow, of short and weedy grass,  
The new path-scars cut in by heavy bodies  
Lunging to gates which nightly let them pass?<sup>2</sup>

Yet her reverence for the countryside and her knowledge of it did not spring from birth on a farm. She took her first breath in town, specifically in St. Albans, as the child of Amos and Susan Keefe Frost, on August 3, 1905. Since her father was a locomotive engineer for the Central Vermont Railway, one could say that she grew up surrounded by railyards, not fencerails. Throughout her life, though she visited farms and stayed on farms and obviously loved the rural life, she was never to become a farm owner or a farmer's wife.

Frances Frost had an oblique yet authentic relation to the land in much the same way as Robert Frost. He endured a brief stint as a farmer in Derry, New Hampshire, and having found the actual routines of raising chickens, milking cows, plowing fields, and mending fences not at all to his liking, while at the same time, having discovered the figure of such routines (apple picking, herd tending, hay mowing) essential to his writer's purpose, he moved on. One could say he moved *beyond* the rural life, yet *into* it. His imagination touched it at every point. And so did Frances Frost's.

Her poetry takes many of the same risks that his does. It achieves its impassioned statements by risking sentimentality; it skirts banality, at times, by teetering suspensefully on the edge of wit; and it embraces anachronisms, boldly asserting that the old ways are timeless rather than outdated. She had a talent for setting down clean, unvarnished scenes from simple lives.

There are no charts of these old roads and hills  
Save in the minds of men who trod them down  
Throughout a lifetime of small journeyings  
From barn to pasture and from barn to town.<sup>3</sup>

They will go back,  
They will go back to stand in open windows,  
Smelling the ploughed fields, drawing the windy Spring  
Into their lungs, dreaming of grass and lilacs,  
Dreaming of harvests.  
They will go back to make strong children for these fields,  
To say with harvests what cannot be said.<sup>4</sup>

Long after Frances Frost had moved from Vermont, when she wrote not only poetry but the children's books that earned her a living, she remained true to what she had learned of farm life. In a typical passage from *Sleigh Bells for Windy Foot*,<sup>5</sup> she mentions how they "lowered and shortened the shafts" to fit the pony, then painted the buggy "a shining black with vermilion wheels," and bought a red whip ("for decoration only") which "jiggled gaily in the whipsocket by the dashboard and flaunted its bright tassel in the wind of Windy Foot's trotting." Only if one has ridden in a rig like this does one understand the name and purpose of a "whipsocket" and where it is located in relation to the dashboard. Frances Frost also knew that a pony's "trotting" (never his *running*) created the breeze to blow the tassel. Those tiny, pertinent details, each one correct and lovingly inserted, give her children's books, like her poetry, a delicious rural snap.

Yet for all that she was a native Vermonter, who loved that corner of the earth with undeniable strength of feeling, Frances Frost could not bring herself to live there. Her destiny never shaped itself into a permission to stay. Her education at Middlebury College and at the University of Vermont was followed by her first few jobs in Burlington, but thereafter she found work elsewhere. Her second marriage took her to Charleston, South Carolina. When that love failed, her friends reached out to her from the mid-Atlantic states. And when a relationship formed that smoothed Frances Frost's middle age and made her more productive and less troubled, it was with a woman, and the two of them lived together in the hectic privacy of Greenwich Village.

By the end of her life, at age fifty-three in 1959, Frances Frost had come a long way. Born in Vermont, she died in New York City, both a success and a failure in the most perplexing combination. She had published seven volumes of serious poetry, some acclaimed as distinguished—yet she had never become renowned. She had won the Yale Prize for her skillful early poems, and the Golden Rose Award of the New England Poetry Club, and the Shelley Memorial Award for what the Poetry Society of America called her "merit and promise." Yet she had never come close to a Pulitzer prize or other national honors. As cancer overtook her, she was still a writer of the same "merit and

promise” that had been recognized by astute critics at the start of her career. She was still a writer whose “lyric quality” inspired applause, whose work as it appeared in print caused reviewers to label her “one of the outstanding younger poets of America.” She seemed always about to solidify her reputation, to write something final and buttressing – yet suddenly she was gone.

How could Frances Frost write so well, yet remain so obscure? She produced poetry, in quantity and quality, often superior to that of more readily recognized figures like Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sara Teasdale. Her son, the poet Paul Blackburn, even though he died early himself, was in a position to be a good custodian of her literary reputation. Perhaps the reason behind Frances Frost’s uneven progress and lost achievement has to do with her temperament. A poem she published in 1929 entitled “Choice” addresses her peculiar psychological pain, a blend of fear, regret, angst, pride, and restlessness.

You may keep your brave and brilliant hours  
Washed, as the white sands are, by turquoise tides.  
You may keep your strange, exotic flowers  
And crags that lift their heaving, purple sides  
Against a somber moon. Give me instead  
A gaunt New England hillside, whose bleak bones  
Hold certain hollows tilted to my head.  
Give me the touch of lichen that loves stones,  
The raucous cries of crows above a field,  
The harsh and stinging tang of spruce-tree bark –  
For something in me craves the sterner yield  
Of a land whose very blossoming is stark.<sup>6</sup>

In a burst of metaphor she chooses for herself the “raucous,” the “harsh,” the “bleak” and the “stinging” over anything more conventionally poetic. She spurns the flashily “brilliant,” the “exotic,” or the “heaving, purple” romantic. “Something in me,” she announces, “craves the sterner yield.” This sentiment is echoed in many of her poems. “Something in me” she calls it, and she does not get more explicit than that.

She takes the rabbit as her totem:

There is a thicket deep in me  
Where I may run and hide,  
Peering with bright and doubtful eyes  
At those who pass outside.  
There I crouch and hear the rain  
Beat on the tangled leaves,  
And if my own heart’s rain drips down,  
Briars conceal what grieves.<sup>7</sup>

It emerges that writing poetry is her solace for disappointment and her comfort for inner tumult. In this same poem, "Rabbit," she writes that "certain things are buried low," but she will "dig them up and look at them." The act of creating, she implies, is half escape and "hiding," half discovery and revelation. When she writes her "Epitaph for a Poet," she describes a wandering, solitary person who has gathered "vehement nourishment" from the natural world, and who, only in death, is "curiously content."<sup>8</sup>

In other poems, Frances Frost characterizes the poet as a "trespasser." The author distinguishes her role and her craft very deliberately from a farmer's farming. In "Confessions to be Read After Death" she writes:

I stole what was not mine to take:  
A black crow-call in a silver brake.  
A mountain cherry tree I took,  
And the undertone of a mountain brook.

On discovering these "losses":

Farmers wondered where orchards went,  
And what their careful stone walls meant  
By disappearing overnight,  
And what blew hen-hawks out of sight.<sup>9</sup>

She goes on to advise farmers to find the missing objects by looking in her poems.

The writing of poetry, even in this playful verse, is depicted as a nocturnal, stealthy, magical, defiant activity. The poet is a sneak, who enjoys baffling "sleepers." Frost speaks of how "impenitent" she felt as she "stole" the imagery she needed — delighted here, as in the poem about defying fences, with the "bright sin of trespass." She always styled herself as an outlaw sensibility, one who roved, observed and moved on, remaining aloof by choice. A biographer, Dorothy Steele, notes that Frost, as a child, announced her ambition was to grow up to be a "lady pirate."<sup>10</sup>

What Frances Frost admired in a landscape was its "starkness," its uncompromising quality, the same as what she admired in herself. She created a small drama out of the ordinary act of eating a plum, in "The Plum Tree." "I tasted the bitter purple," she wrote. Then, "gnawing down," through the "golden flesh, ripened, wild and sweet," she "discovered the hard impenetrable stone."<sup>11</sup> That impenetrable quality of the fruit seems to be what attracts the author, not the sweetness. In "Earth-Rhythms" she makes explicit what "stone" means for her in terms of human personality:

These be temporal—  
Snow and rain,

Thunder-drum and  
Hurricane,  
Leaf and grass-blade,  
Berry, briar,  
April fog and  
Autumn-fire,  
Weed-choked road and  
Mouldering tree, —  
These be the brief-heard  
Melody.  
And these the permanent  
Undertone —  
Arrogant soil,  
Defiant stone.<sup>12</sup>

“Arrogance” and “defiance” were not negatives to Frances Frost. She had her defiant side, which some might even have called her arrogant side. Her devil-may-care flamboyance got her into trouble. From what has been said of her and from what she said of herself, one learns how much she detested social rules, despite whatever stringent metrical rules she was willing to obey in writing verse. She mocked conventional behavior. In letters she wrote to friends, she comes across as someone extravagantly enthusiastic, full of impulse, heedless of consequences. She could be alternately self-indulgent, affectionate, fun-loving, or willful, and she was always, as she said, “out for kicks.”

The problem that would haunt her and impinge on her writing begins to surface in her letters through numerous allusions: “We’re going to celebrate with a bottle of claret.” “I wish the hell you were down here to drink corn liquor with us (it’s very good).” “Sam has made some cherry bounce which bounces your stomach beautifully.” “I’ve finished the novel and am like a collapsed balloon; and I drink and try to get speeded up on poems or something.”<sup>13</sup>

She met propriety head-on as a challenge. Both her marriages ended quickly. She had trouble steeling herself to the routines of mothering and left her young son and daughter for long periods in their grandparents’ care. When she “trespassed” (and rolled under the barbed wire of propriety), she eventually emerged scathed.

Scathed perhaps, but not disfigured. Frances Frost was, by all accounts, an alluring person. She was physically small. People who knew her have described her as short, thin, small-boned, petite.<sup>14</sup> Her remarkably deep, husky voice was all the more startling coming from a person her size. While at the University of Vermont in the late 1920s, she drove a black

roadster with a canvas top, not the most practical vehicle for Vermont winters. When she taught a creative writing course, she lowered the windowshades in the classroom so she and her students could smoke. (It was against rules to smoke in campus buildings.) She was not timid, but quiet. Her voice was low, not loud. She was outgoing to those she wanted to meet or impress, but discriminating. She had a sense of humor that one friend described as “elation and cuteness more often than wit.” “‘Pixie’ is the word,” says her fellow poet Gladys Colburn. “She never really grew up. She had the quality of a child, not childish but childlike.”

An anecdote survives that portrays Frances Frost in her later years. When she called some longtime Burlington friends from New York to announce that she was coming up, they invited her to dinner. At that time, her *Windy Foot* series was doing well, and she had sent the books along to the friends’ seven-year-old son. The boy was greatly looking forward to this live author’s appearance. He had passed the *Windy Foot* books around among his schoolmates, and he had loved reading them.

The night Frost was due, at six o’clock, the husband, wife, and son waited excitedly for her. She didn’t come and didn’t come. Finally, around eight o’clock, she appeared. She had her guitar and sat in the living room singing snatches of tunes and strumming the strings, regarding the boy with an intensity that made him cringe, while she all but ignored her host and hostess.

The boy, who had never seen a drunken person before, was dumbfounded.

“I took him upstairs,” his mother recalled, “and I tried to explain to him what was going on. Because he had once been in the hospital for minor surgery and had had to be sedated, he could remember having felt very strange. So I explained to him that Frances Frost was in the same situation as he had been at that time. I told him that the best thing would be for him to answer her when she talked to him, and that he should take a book down and read and just be with her. He did. Nonetheless it was a disastrous evening.”

This unhappy story suggests why such great promise in Frances Frost’s poetry never developed. Alcohol dependence may have diminished her talent. Even so – and despite her early death and decline in reputation – there is much to admire in what she accomplished. Ironically, her early poems tend to draw their strength from the very pain that later mysteriously overwhelmed her.

There is a knocking at each tall door  
And the ivory inside panels are scarred:  
(I have been beating my knuckles sore  
While night blew down and the hills were starred.)

I am the keeper of wall and sill,  
I kneel on the hearth to a tempered fire:  
(Flesh that was wild can learn to be still,  
But what of a heart that was born to briar?)<sup>15</sup>

She couldn't "be still." Her heart was "born to briar." Nothing could comfort her. Beauty wasn't enough. Poetry wasn't enough. Yet the beauty in her poetry is what she left behind.

Readers the world over are familiar with Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," in which he implies that the road "less traveled by" is the heroic choice requiring more sacrifice, more courage, and more imagination. That same figure of the way "less traveled by" occurs in Frances Frost's work, but it is given a different, darker twist. Consider her poem "Dare":

The wood's-edge thicket holds a path  
Twisty enough for any seeker  
Of thorny ways, and hides a thrush,  
And offers shelter to the bleaker  
Crow-calls. But it is a dare,  
And if you're one whom brambles shake  
To fright, best go the long way round  
Or find another road to take.<sup>16</sup>

There is no doubt that Frances Frost considered herself a "seeker / of thorny ways" and equal to the dare. She would take not just a road less traveled but a "twisty" path, where the brambles grew thick. She admires the "crow-calls"; and in her poem "Crow" she speaks as a crow saying: "Black my heart, / Black my wing, / And black the voice / That cannot sing," celebrating the bird who meets "the fierce horizons."

What has disturbed me in preparing this sketch of her life is how quickly her figure has slipped beyond history's "fierce horizon." There are very few published sources of biographical information about her, and each year that goes by eliminates more of her oral historians. She does not seem to have been the sort who burnished her own image while she lived, or made much provision for it after her death. Improvident of the future, she prided herself instead on her immediate, intense connection to the present. The Beinecke Library at Yale provides a safe sarcophagus for only a small body of her letters, notebooks, and manuscripts.<sup>17</sup>

In the poem "Capture," we read Frances Frost lamenting how difficult it was for someone like herself to be reconciled to any chore or discipline, even the most innocuous. Incessant rituals like housekeeping "tethered" the creative spirit that always wanted to be loose and wandering ("I have been beating my knuckles sore"). She did not seem to learn from rough

treatment and hard knocks. She felt a great pent surge of energy, never a wise caution.

Under my ribs lift tattered cries  
Where only a guarded heart should be.<sup>18</sup>

She never had a “guarded heart.” Such lines, read in conjunction with a review of her circumstances, “capture” all the sadness of a woman’s life lived passionately and without pragmatism, a life that yielded much to be valued in poetry that has been too little acknowledged.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frances Frost, “Advice to a Trespasser,” *Hemlock Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Frost, “Second Growth,” *Hemlock Wall*, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Frost, “Uncharted,” *Hemlock Wall*, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Frances Frost, “These Acres,” *These Acres* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Frances Frost, *Sleigh Bells for Windy Foot* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1948).

<sup>6</sup> Frost, “Choice,” *Hemlock Wall*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Frost, “Rabbit,” *Hemlock Wall*, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Frost, “Epitaph for a Poet,” *Hemlock Wall*, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Frances Frost, “Confessions to be Read After Death,” *Blue Harvest* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> This fact is drawn from the typescript of a book chapter on notable Vermont women, written by Dorothy C. Steele of St. Albans, Vermont, for the American Association of University Women in April, 1979. See *Those Intriguing Indomitable Vermont Women* (The Vermont State Division of the AAUW, 1980), pp. 52-54.

<sup>11</sup> Frances Frost, “The Plum Tree,” *Road to America* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Frost, “Earth-Rhythms,” *Hemlock Wall*.

<sup>13</sup> From photocopies of privately held letters written by Frances Frost to her friend Gladys LaFlamme Colburn of Burlington, Vermont, 18 March, 1934 (from Soutrière, St. Lucia, B.W.I.), 8, 10 January, 1935 (from Folly Island, Charleston, S.C.).

<sup>14</sup> This information and much that follows comes from an interview with Gladys LaFlamme Colburn, taped by the author on May 11, 1987. A transcription of the interview is in the Archives of the Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont.

<sup>15</sup> Frost, “Capture,” *Hemlock Wall*, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> Frost, “Dare,” *Hemlock Wall*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> My University of Vermont colleague William Biddle, who has examined the Frances Frost papers at Yale, agrees that her poetry has been neglected and deserves more scholarly attention.

<sup>18</sup> Frost, “Capture,” *Hemlock Wall*, p. 35.