

Second Annual Frost Feast of Poetry and Food

Welcome to our second annual Robert Frost Feast of Poetry and Food. Last fall, my poet co-author and I opened the first feast by sharing the story of Robert Frost and the title character of our historical novel *The Belle of Two Arbors* at this house from the spring of 1926. Almost four decades later, Frost at age 88 returned to Michigan for an encore reading at Hill Auditorium and an honorary degree. He spoke affectionately of this “little house on Pontiac [Trail]. It was a very pretty little thing made altogether of black walnut. It was what is called hen and chicken architecture...a large middle with two wings...a very charming house.” And Frost took great delight in Henry Ford’s moving this Robert Frost House from Ann Arbor to Greenfield Village.

Today, this is still quite a *becoming* house. More than just pretty, Frost house is still in the process of *becoming*: A *living legacy* for America’s greatest poet of the 20th century, to engage visitors in experiencing Frost as he lived, composed, spoke, and shared his poems in the spring of 1926...*A place to welcome the great poets of our time*, as we are again this evening... Soon, *a center to inspire young poets* to create great poems for generations to come.

With Vievee’s permission, allow me to share a few of Frost’s thoughts on poetry. He wrote prose as he composed poems, in metaphor. At age 45, he said:

A man who makes really good literature is like a fellow who goes into the fields to pull carrots. He keeps on pulling them patiently enough until he finds a carrot that suggests something else to him. It is not shaped like other carrots. He takes out his knife and notches it here and there, until the two pronged roots become legs and the carrot takes on something of the semblance of a man. The real genius takes hold of that bit of life which is suggestive to him and gives it form. But the man who is merely a realist, and not a genius, will leave the carrot just as he finds it.

Listen to Frost’s “genius” say “Spring Pools,” a poem he composed in this house: [play audio].

Hear now a darker poem Frost shared with his students at this house in the spring of 1926 “Acquainted with the Night.” [Play audio]

At age 63, Frost summarized his view of the “mysterious elements” of creating a poem in an essay titled, “The Figure a Poem Makes.”

First, *Sound and Wildness*: “Just as the first mystery [is] how a poem [can] have a *tune* in such a straightness as meter, so the second mystery is how a poem can have *wildness* and at the same time a subject that shall be fulfilled.”

Second, *Structure and Emotion*: “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.”

Third, *The Spark of Creation*: “The artist must value herself as she snatches a thing from some previous order in time and space into a new order with not so much as a ligature clinging to it of the old place where it was organic...Like a piece of ice on a hot stove, the poem must ride on its own melting.”

Frost summed up:

“Like love, a poem begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events...It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad... It can never lose its sense of meaning that *once unfolded by surprise as it went*.”

Now hear the *figure* Frost’s perfect sonnet makes in “The Silken Tent,” the lead poem of his fourth Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Witness Tree*: [Play Audio]

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Tonight, you will have the opportunity to hear the sounds and tunes of poems by two great poets, Gregory Pardlo after dinner at Eagle Tavern and Vievee Francis here.

It’s appropriate you hear Vievee Francis at Frost House. Her Father is a longtime trustee at The Henry Ford. When Vievee got married at the Chapel here, she and her poet husband stopped at Frost House on the way to count their blessings. Vievee, in her words, is also “a poet in Robert Frost’s direct lineage.” In the third of her very good books of poetry, she won the 2016 Hurston-Wright Legacy Award and 2017 Claremont Kingsley Tufts prize for a *Forest Primeval*. These poems came out of her following her poet husband to cross from urban, inner-city Detroit and Hamtramck to confront the dense forest and wilderness of the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina; it combined two of Frost’s earlier crossings, to the dark and dismal swamp in the low country as a young man and uprooting his family approaching middle age from their New Hampshire to live in England for three years to claim his poetry career. Now, Vievee’s a Professor of Poetry at Dartmouth, where Robert Frost first dropped out of college and then returned to teach in the 1940’s.

Vievee composes poems and speaks in a powerful voice, a resonant sound all her own – born in the wildness of being steeled by throat surgery that cut short her pursuing opera as a career at Fiske University as young woman. Her tune, in Frost’s terms, is a wondrous mystery.

Please welcome the incomparable Vievee Francis home again.