A Feast of Poems:
The Belle of Two Arbors, Frost, Roethke and Auden

Introduction: *Our Story of researching and writing an historical novel late in our lives about Belle and her three great poet friends.*

I grew up in Ann Arbor in the 1950s. My father was a distinguished professor at Michigan and my dear mother the absentee owner of a farm in her birthplace, a crossroads in the heart of the Midwest's corn-belt that reached its population high of 26 on her birth. In summers, when we weren't visiting her farm in Illinois, we rented a cottage up north in Glen Arbor in the shadow of the Sleeping Bear Dunes on Little Glen Lake. I went to college at Amherst where I studied history and worked with original sources. This is also where Emily Dickinson, America's greatest 19th century poet, lived but published only four poems during her life; and where Robert Frost America's greatest 20th century poet taught, lived, composed and campaigned for his poetry for much of his longer life after he resigned in 1926 from a "lifetime appointment as a Permanent Fellow in Letters" at Michigan. I graduated from Michigan Law School in 1969 and spent the next four decades pursuing several different careers trying to avoid being a real lawyer. Ten years ago, I turned to fiction so I could write better endings. Why not research and write a historical novel about places and people I knew something about, even if in the voice and from the perspective of a

reclusive woman poet as the lead character during the period 1913–1953?

Lo and behold, my research soon revealed that Ted Roethke and Wystan Auden, both among the great poets of the English language and Pulitzer Prize winners, also spent much time at Michigan and became competitors and friends with Frost. Thus could the plot thicken with my Belle, as all four battled their different internal demons mostly to a draw and were all driven to compose poems. Over time, Belle became a lifelong friend, colleague and correspondent with Frost, Roethke and Auden.

And if you are going to write a book in which real poets play major roles, and your lead character is also a poet, you better find someone who can compose poems in Belle's distinctive voice. So, I called on my classmate and long-time friend Marty Burh Grimes, who also grew up in Ann Arbor and summered Up North. She has studied, taught and written poems for more than 50 years. Who better to play my Belle as a poet and compose poems that capture the rhythms, sounds and sights of the changing seasons of the dunes, forests and farms on the shores of the Great Lake?

And ten years later, here we are with our Belle of Two Arbors.

This evening we will share "A Feast of Poems" from these four poets. We will start with more pastoral poems about the different seasons of

the year. We will then share how each poet worked with a unique form of poetry, the Villanelle. We will proceed with elegies – in memory poems – from all four poets. Where needed to better understand a particular poem, I will try to offer a bit of context.

I. Seasons of Poems

Belle, "Delight of Life" (1920) p. 51. David Ahgosa, destined to become the leader who resuscitates his dwindling Ojibwe band, also becomes Belle's best friend, first love, and lifelong business partner. Early on in 1920, the duo makes a solemn pact to conserve the Sleeping Mama Bear, her great dunes and bay, as best they can forever ever after. Now hear Marty as Belle read her poem of her first memory of sharing with David:

Delight of Life

We walk along the sandy shore among
piles of pale driftwood, carved smooth, bleached white
by decades of nature's slow and steady strum—
fuel perfect for a campfire any night

with you sitting close beside me to share
a rite of passage as old as Eden's vine;
joined by the slap of waves against the pier
a soft *too-loo* echoing through the pine

the whine of wind against a sailboat's mast;
amidst the burning crackle and shifting fire,
the silver crescent moon rising in the east
the flicker of fireflies sparking love's desire

fading like tiny stars to memory, dear—

as soon the imprint of our bodies here.

Frost, "Spring Pools," (1926) is the lead poem of his West Running Brook (1928) p. 245.* It reflects one of his many ventures botanizing – walking through woods, up hills and down valleys, along streams and lakes, among farms and within towns. Now, as winter falls to spring, see him walking through a forest blot out the first ephemeral flowers.

Roethke, "Waking" (1948) p. 49. Hear a young boy's joy in summer as told by the poet man-child twenty-five years later.

Auden, "On This Island" (1935) p. 130. After years of composing verse plays, musical satires, and operettas challenging Shakespeare, Gilbert and Sullivan, Auden returns to composing shorter poems, including this one about his beloved Island home, England.

Frost, "Design" (1922), p. 302. Don't let the summer sunshine and the heal-all flower, moth and "white spider" fool you: nature isn't all beauty and ease.

---

*The poems of Frost, Roethke and Auden may be found at the page number cited in The Poetry of Robert Frost: Collected Poems, ed. E.C. Lathem (1979); The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (1991); and W.H. Auden Collected Poems, ed. Edward Mendelson (1991). The page cites to Belle's poems quoted herein are from Paul Dimond and Martha Buhr Grimes, The Belle of Two Arbors (2017).

Belle, “November Hike” (1953), p. 633. At age 53, and in her last year, hear this poem as Belle remembers her last love but from the distance of the 31 years since they first coupled:

November Hike

Leaves crunch--
forgotten memories
beneath my feet—

I wind up gentle hills
and around the shells of fallen oaks—
watch a squirrel skitter

carrying its cache of acorns
into a hollow trunk—
back and forth it goes--

the birds sang
when we walked this path
one sunny day in April—

we carved our initials
into an elm tree trunk—
it died of disease years ago—

though you clung to me
like lichen to bark,
I journeyed on—alone--

now, autumn is in me—
its crimson, gold, and orange
its rusts and regrets—

the raucous cry of geese
pierces the air--
and I can’t remember

if your eyes were blue

Frost, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (1923) p.224. Too many critics read this as a winter death poem. Now hear it, as Frost’s determined call to get on with what needs to be done.

Roethke, “Big Wind” (1947) p. 39. Roethke grew up in Saginaw under the green thumb of a demanding father who ran the largest set of greenhouses in Michigan, over a quarter million square feet under roof and glass, one larger than three football fields. Now hear this poem about riding out a storm in a greenhouse on land as if a distressed ship at sea.

Belle, “Crystal Moment II” (1950, rewrite of 1926 poem for her lost love, David), p. 596. While saying goodbye to her dying Ojibwe partner in their secret spot on the dunes looking at their beloved Sleeping Mama Bear, Belle reimagines an early love song to him by changing only the final couplet. Remember the pact David Ahgosa and Belle made thirty years before to preserve the dunes and waters of the Sleeping Bear? In Ojibwe lore and tradition, the word “Nibi” describes the sacred water of the Great Lakes that they promised to conserve no matter what “for at least seven generations hence.” Now hear Belle’s love and lament for her dying partner transformed into a timeless call for their heirs and future generations to join in keeping the sacred vow to conserve their natural heritage:

Crystal Moment II
We follow deer tracks into the silent wood,
The crunch of our boots the only sound.
Around us shaggy boughs of pine bend low,

An offshore breeze swirls wisps of snow.

Our campfire ring's a sculpted mound of white
Blazing bright with each shaft of morning light
Filtered through birches and ancient oaks—
Like memories that burn and fade in smoke

A crimson cardinal weaves among the trees,
A snowflake lands upon your ruddy cheek,
You kiss me once, your lips do not linger—
No fire for us this cold December.
Our pledge to Nibi—a promise we will keep—
Secure this sacred land before we sleep.

2. Villanelles.

Marty's shared form: 19 lines, with a rolling and repeating rhyme scheme than ends with the final couplet a refrain from the first and third lines of the first stanza. Sometimes, the great poets who know the rules bend them to achieve a different sound or to convey a more powerful "pang" in the end.

Belle, "Up North" (1926) p. 213. Now hear Belle's perfect villanelle, her anthem for the ages to her unique homeland:

Up North

My yearning for Leelanau is like a disease—
the sun through my window bids me awake:
a chorus of robins sings from the trees

to return to Her bosom, where She offers ease
from the thorns and the thistly losses that ache—
my yearning for Leelanau is like a disease—

The shoreline's now free from its ice-sculpted frieze,

and frothy white waves roll, tumble, and shake.
Five or six finches peek out through the leaves—

I dream of the pond near our bubbling creek,
the nest of a wood duck and her handsome drake—
my yearning for Leelanau is like a disease—

a riot of flowers--the hum of the bees,
the honeyed fragrance of spring in their wake,
a redheaded woodpecker taps on a tree:

Soon Brown-Eyed Susans will sway in the breeze.
The squawk of the seagulls, the bluest of seas—
My yearning for Leelanau is like a disease:
A chorus of robins sings from the trees.

Auden, "If I Could Tell You" (1940) p. 314. Now hear a gay man speaking through this villanelle for all who may hold a deep but difficult love, whether secret or not.

Frost, "Acquainted with the Night" (1928) p. 255. Frost loved searching the heavens for stars, planets and the moon and wondering about clock-and bell-towers reaching up into the night sky, including in many of his poems. Now hear his sonnet with many of the rolling rhymes and final refrain of a villanelle, all put to the speaker's walk in the dark of night.

Roethke, "The Waking" (1953) p. 104. Now hear Roethke's perfect villanelle, his Pulitzer wining title poem by another poet long acquainted with the dark of night.

3. Elegies.

In the opening scene of the novel, only a few days after Belle's thirteenth birthday, we find her ice-fishing on the frozen Sleeping Bear Bay with her invalid mother and her 6-year old-brother who Belle has raised since his birth crippled their mother. A rare natural disaster – a seiche – strikes: a huge wave from an earthquake breaks the thick ice. As their wood shanty begins to sink into the deep water, the mother pushes Belle away to swim their little boy to shore. As she swims on side, her little brother perched high with one arm and her other arm pulling and her legs and feet pushing her through the cold of Sleeping Bear Bay, Belle's limbs begin to feel like frozen slabs. Yet when she finds the rhythm in this odd sidestroke, Sleeping Bear Bay's deep, cold water she has always loved buoys her up again.

Belle, "Blue Salvation" (1913) p. 13. Weaned by her mother on Emily Dickinson's wild verse, and suffering from hypothermia and grief the very night after her mother's tragic death, now hear Belle's first wild gasp composing an elegy for her Mama:

> Your lips are
> Blue Salvation —
> flowing over my
> hills and valleys
>
> cooling the red heat
> of my Passion —
> soothing summer balm
> after the wintry storm —

At the mother's memorial service a few days later in the white clapboard Presbyterian church Kirk the Ojibwe built six decades before overlooking Omena and Grand Traverse Bay, the minister reads one of Emily Dickinson's already most popular poems: "There's a Certain Slant of Light" (Belle, p. 16):

> There's a certain Slant of light,
> Winter Afternoons —
> That oppresses, like the Heft
> Of Cathedral Tunes —
>
> Heavenly Hurt, it gives us —
> We can find no scar,
> But internal difference —
> Where the Meanings, are —
>
> None may teach it — Any —
> 'Tis the seal Despair —
> An imperial affliction
> Sent us of the Air —
>
> When it comes, the Landscape listens —
> Shadows — hold their breath —
> When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
> On the look of Death —

Auden, "Funeral Blues" (1936) p. 141. This is perhaps the most widely heard of any elegy, so passionately said by the surviving partner for the love he lost in the acclaimed movie, "Three Weddings and a Funeral."

Belle, "Mary Bell's Death" (1920) p. 36. Hear Belle's second try at an elegy for her mother:

Mary Bell's Death

water below ice
spilling from our fishing hole—
sly silence — and then —

one long lonely Crack!
our fishing shanty's heaving sigh—
spinning silver shards—

brother 'neath my arm—
her gloved hand waving toward shore:
Mama's gray good-bye—

frozen arm flailing
reaching for life, pumping hard
through unforgiving gray shock—

now stroking steady
in peaceful rhythmic splendor:
O! Blue Salvation

In her first year at Michigan, Belle recites this poem aloud to Frost and he replies, "It makes a good song read aloud but like, many of Miss Dickinson's, Good Lord is it Poetry?!" He also asks whether there is something missing from the poem and suggests that Belle, "Keep it around for a while and deepen it, deepen it." Not taken aback, Frost's star-struck student challenges him to compose a better elegy for his mother, who shares the same nickname, "Belle."

Roethke, "My Papa's Waltz" (1948) p. 43. Another example of the love-hate relationship Roethke has with his rough and tumble father, who dies when Ted is still in high school in Saginaw.

Belle, “Papa’s Goodbye” (1931) p. 329. Now hear Belle’s elegy to the father who always hoped his son would take over his Empire Stove Company but learns in time that only Belle has the will and the wit to become the Chair of the family enterprise:

Papa’s Goodbye

A gentle breeze among the birches sings,
And graying clouds float silently above –
Your wooden casket cold to touch, on wing
Death, blasé Thief of my paternal Love –

And yet your whiskey breath wafts in the breeze,
Your lips – I swear! – caress my tear-stained cheek –
So I turn, slowly, and vainly reach
For your Arm so late I have sought to seek –

And o’er our heads a golden Eagle soars,
Illumined by a single shaft of Sun –
A Sign that You will haunt these Blessed Shores –
That your earthly journey is far from done:

O Woe, its lonely lament fills the Sky,
My Hopes muffled in a mournful Sigh –

Belle, “Goodbye to Mama” (1931) p. 311. Now hear Belle’s third try at an elegy for her mother and how she meets Frost’s challenge “to deepen it, deepen it.”

Goodbye to Mama
water below ice
spilling from our fishing hole—
sly silence—and then—

one long lonely Crack!
our fishing shanty’s heaving sigh—
spinning silver shards—

brother ‘neath my arm—
her gloved hand waving toward shore:
Mama’s gray goodbye—

frozen arm flailing
reaching for life, pumping hard
through unforgiving gray shock—

now stroking steady
in peaceful rhythmic splendor:
lake lips caressing

the hills and valleys
of my cold suffering soul—
O! Blue Salvation…

Frost believes this poem meet his challenge so well he honors Belle for elegy at the first Hopwood awards in 1931.

Six years later Frost shares his perfect sonnet, a loving lilt carried by a single sentence from first line to last, in a letter to Belle. She reads it as meeting her challenge to write a better elegy for his mother, “Belle.” Now hear, “The Silken Tent” (1937) p. 331, the lead poem of Frost’s fourth and final Pulitzer winning book, “A Witness Tree.”

[After saying poem] Near the beginning of the decade-long journey to research and write this novel, I attended my mother-in-law’s memorial service. She had left me an original edition of “A Witness Tree” signed by Robert Frost, I opened the thin volume and saw Frost’s perfect sonnet. At the service, I said “The Silken Tent” as our family’s elegy to her. Maybe I was fated to write this novel.

Now, here's the kicker: In this novel after Belle's death, each of her three great poet friends reads their favorite poem of hers and their best elegy to remember Belle at her memorial service. Frost concludes by reading each of Belle's three elegies for her mother before closing with his "The Silken Tent," as the elegy Belle most loved. I like to think no three poets will never ever again join anywhere, any time, to pay greater respect to a lifelong friend, colleague and poet than Roethke, Auden and Frost do for my Belle.

You may ask how a novel written in the first person singular voice of the lead character can ever cover her memorial service after her death. Although Belle was much loved, she bore no children; but she did raise three children as if her own. Belle led such a private life she never consented to the publication of any of her poems. Instead, she hid her hundreds of poems, more letters, several books of journals and her unfinished story of her life in an old wooden chest. She entrusted the chest to her partner David's Angel daughter – a blessed albino who had become the trusted spiritual leader of her Ojibwe Band – for safe keeping. Only on the death of the last of Belle's brother and his second wife, Belle's three lovers and her three great poet friends in 1976 does Angel give the chest and all its contents to Belle's niece. Belle had raised and loved Ruthie with her brother as if her daughter in the two family houses they shared in Ann Arbor and Glen Arbor. Belle's letter of instructions to Ruthie begins: "You must now decide whether and to

what extent these materials should be kept in the family, lodged with research collections, or arranged for publication." Of course, Belle added, "If you find I wronged you in hiding them all these years, close the chest up and throw it overboard in Sleeping Bear Bay." Belle also advised special consideration for "the locked box at the bottom [with] a large envelope stuffed with the correspondence and poems Robert Frost and I shared." This sealed envelope, advised Belle, could be shared only with Amherst College, the poet's home as "the place that always had to take him in whenever he went back." Thus, this novel ends with an epilogue in Ruthie's first person voice that carries us forward from Belle's death in 1953 to Ruthie's "publication" of this novel in 1977.

Conclusion: *The intertwining of the lives and deaths of Robert Frost and John F. Kennedy, 1959-1963, for posterity.*

With your permission, we'd like to close by sharing a true story from the epilogue that reveals how important a poet, creative writing and the liberal arts can be – not just for the enjoyment of particular audiences and readers – but also to the American spirit. If you will, join with me on October 2, 1960, in the wee hours of the morning on the front steps of the Michigan Union. There, we see the Junior Senator from Massachusetts challenging thousands of young folk to serve the country by joining what will become known as the Peace Corps. Only a few hours later, join me at Ann Arbor's old train station down on Depot

Street. There, Jack Kennedy begins a whistle-stop tour. He ends his stump speech exploring a New Frontier with his rallying cry, yes Frost's refrain, "But I have promises to keep,/ And miles to go before I sleep."

Now, please bear witness with me to a ten-minute documentary of four historic moments over the next three years of Robert Frost's life and death: the first reading ever by a poet for a new President's Inauguration on January 20,1961; Frost's final encores at Michigan to say thank you and farewell in his 88th and last year in the spring of 1962 at Hill Auditorium and our other Big House, Michigan Stadium; and President Kennedy's fated, final address eulogizing Frost in the fall 1963 at the groundbreaking for the Robert Frost Memorial Library at Amherst College. See https://youtu.be/6gpy_pooF0w.

[After screening.] Forgive me for being a bit emotional, but I was there. I met the President and shook his hand. Then he was gone.

Going on 54 years later, I can still safely say this though: No President will ever again so honor a poet for his contributions to American life and democracy.

[Pause.]

One other fated story: The last day of January 1993, I moved to Washington, D.C. to join the new Clinton administration as a Special Assistant to the President for Economic Policy. After a several weeks of

20 hour days, I took a two-day break to visit my daughter in Boston. Also a graduate of Amherst College, and bound and determined to go to Medical School to explore the human mind despite having taken only one science class, she was working part-time and taking all the pre-med classes she'd missed. She'd heard my stories about President Kennedy's eulogy for Robert Frost in the fall of 1963, and assassination too soon thereafter: so we visited the JFK Presidential Museum and Library. It sits on a point overlooking the Boston Harbor and offers a moving, even inspirational tour of President Kennedy's major accomplishments in his too brief tenure and several major addresses, including his eulogy for Frost at Amherst. As we exited the main tour, we walked into the gift shop. A large, framed poster on the wall offered a pose of the President, relaxed in an easy chair, his right hand touching his forehead, his eyes contemplating the address he was about to give. I moved closer so I could read the tiny print above and could read only one line below the quote: "J. F. K. Amherst College, October 26, 1963." Moving closer, I read the most famous line from his eulogy for Frost, Those "who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness, but [those] who question power make a contribution just as indispensable…, for they determine whether we use power or power uses us."

I bought a copy of this large poster, and had it framed, and hung it as the sole picture in my large office in the Old Executive Office Building on the White House grounds. In many respects, perhaps too

many, Bill Clinton shared many of the Jack Kennedy's charismatic traits and gifts for speaking and inspiring, albeit with a different accent. And like any new Administration, we shared many, many know-it-alls, big egos, and sharp elbows. Can you imagine how many times in nearly five years working at the White House such big-shots walked into my office, saw the lone photograph of President Kennedy contemplating the future, and walked over to get a better look. Invariably, each had to butt up close and squint to read the quote. As most finished, there was a nervous laugh, a too quick look away and a shake of the head as if embarrassed by the sharper point of JFK's words.

A full decade before I began this different journey, maybe, just maybe, I was meant to write this historical novel about Belle and her three great friends, Ted Roethke, Wystan Auden, and, yes, Robert Frost.

Thank you.

Q & A