Robert Frost: "To Earthward"
(For MK and FT)

Robert Frost's (1874-1963) "To Earthward" is not one of his most widely known poems, not one you likely have read, such as "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," or "Death of the Hired Man," which are or used to be staples in high school curricula and in anthologies. While the first lecture of the academic year, the welcoming lecture, especially for freshmen, would seem to call rather for uninflected enthusiasm and high spirits—and, one would hope, a work polished and finished, instead I am giving you a work in progress, thoughts about this small, beautiful, but sobering poem. I chose it partly because I have loved it for a long time but hadn't pulled together my thoughts about it before now and partly because I believe that there are many ways for the spirit to be lifted up and that this poem belongs to one of those ways. There is the swell of feeling when stirring rhetoric touches what we believe or allows us to envision what someone wants us to believe; there is that lightness we feel when our burdens are comforted by those we love; and there is the expansion of spirit that happens when something that perplexes and unsettles us reaches depths we barely knew we had and unfolds us from within. This last is at the core of many of the books we read at St. John's. Frost has written poems that fit these kinds, along with lots of others. "To Earthward" is one in the last category, a poem that is both serious and bracing.

Coleridge once defined poetry in what he called a "homely" way as the "best words in the best order." Like many homely things, this description is deceptively simple, because it is very hard and requires much intelligence to write the best words in the best order. The

definition is especially apt for Frost's poems, which are also deceptively simple and, some say, homespun. His best words turn out to be simple words that are wrought so as to contain hidden depths and to allow the silences to speak. His diction is almost always direct, not overly rhetorical, surfacely metaphysical, or flashy. There is in his best poems little self-reference, little undermining of language or meaning for its own sake. And yet his language is almost always strangely powerful. Some readers overlook its power or reduce it to everyday talk, as if one could overhear it somewhere, sometime. So we readers must beware: simple words can lead us to skim the surface rather than diving into a poem and, sometimes even if diving in, to want to emerge with a take-away, a nugget, a simple clarity at the end, as if it were a failure that poetry would leave us with paradoxes and ambiguities.[1]

"You need to read good poetry with an attitude that is a mixture of sharp intelligence and of willing emotional empathy, at once penetrating and generous," a good reader of poetry once wrote. He did not mean by that to exclude other kinds of texts but to call attention to the fact that various ways of being attentive—through reason, senses, sensitivities, emotions, and funds of experience—all these are involved in reading good poems. If a poem is a whole made of words, then the goal when reading a poem is to allow the words to reveal all that they present together—sound, formal arrangement, rhyme or lack of it, rhythm, surprises, associations, meanings. So one keeps in mind the following as an ideal:

[1] See, for example, the poem "For Once, Then, Something," a poem about looking in a pool, where at the depth and end of the poem he writes: "What was that whiteness? Truth? A pebble of quartz?"

to be thoughtfully alert, to bring forward and to elaborate moments in the poem, whether the superior, surprising, or seemingly insignificant ones; to embrace some associations and to reject others, so that when all is restored to its place, the poem is, as is commonly said, "saturated" with meaning. It is a tall order and a challenge, since a poem reads you while you read it. Sometimes you find that you've been reading with categories of interpretation already firmly in mind, which can be a detour, often leading to a faint theoretical shadow of the poem or to a dead end that is more about yourself than the poem. I hope, then, that this work in progress won't lead too far astray and that we can consider the aspects of this poem in the question period.

Here is the poem:

To Earthward

Love at the lips was touch
As sweet as I could bear;
And once that seemed too much;
I lived on air

That crossed me from sweet things,
The flow of—was it musk
From hidden grapevine springs
Downhill at dusk?

I had the swirl and ache

From sprays of honeysuckle

That when they're gathered shake

Dew on the knuckle.

I craved strong sweets, but those

Seemed strong when I was young;

The petal on the rose

It was that stung.

Now no joy but lacks salt,

That is not dashed with pain

And weariness and fault;

I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark

Of almost too much love,

The sweet of bitter bark

And burning clove.

When stiff and sore and scarred

I take away my hand

From leaning on it hard

In grass and sand,

The hurt is not enough:

I long for weight and strength

To feel the earth as rough

To all my length.

Let me begin with some general remarks. The poem consists of eight four-line stanzas, with a rhyme pattern throughout—the alternating lines in each stanza rhyme (abab). It has an established meter or measure. The meter is iambic[2] trimeter in the first three lines of each stanza—that is to say, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable counts as a unit of measure (what we call a "foot"), and it occurs three times in each line; the fourth line of each stanza has only two iambic stresses. This iambic meter acts as an ideal. Sometimes the actual pattern is varied, playing against the regularity of that ideal meter, sometimes fitting it, sometimes not. In this poem the pattern is quite regular, as a matter of fact. Also, since some stressed words have more stress than others, the sounds of the actual poem are also in a kind of "play" with and against exact regularity, which fruitful tension reinforces the poem's meaning and expressive power. For example, the first line of the poem, "Love at the lips was touch," has an inverted first foot (the stress comes first), but the stressed words have almost equal value. That is not so in the ninth line, for example: "I had the swirl and ache," where "had" is less heavy than "swirl" or "ache."

[2] From the Greek, *iambos*, the measure of unstressed/stressed. Orginially from *iapto*—to assail, because the first use of this as a measure was by satiric poets.

The stanza is also effective. Derek Walcott, the contemporary poet, tells us: "Stanzaic structure creates anticipation; and the verbal music, by its chords, its elisions, its caesuras, delights the ear when expectation is confirmed, but with additional surprise." What he says about the stanza is true also of the line, which ends, but is followed by a next line, and the poet often exploits the pause and continuance between lines. So the form itself allows for anticipation as well as departure from anticipation in both sensation and thought. This allows words a kind of life within their frame.

In this poem there are 159 words, excluding the title. 145 of them are single syllable words. They are predominantly Anglo-Saxon words rather than Latinate ones. The poem falls into two parts. The first four stanzas are written in the past tense; the second four in the present tense. There is a shift of focus and feeling, a contrast between the two parts; there is no smooth passage of events leading from one to the other. But two things overtly link them. First, overarching the whole is the now in which the poem is spoken, a now that holds past and present together on several levels as the poem moves from beginning to end. And, second, the two middle stanzas are framed by the word "crave," which occurs in the first line of stanza 4 and in the last line of stanza 5. The word "crave" acts like a brace, holding the poem together at the center, while the now holds the poem together as a whole.

I will start with the title then consider each part in turn, proceeding in stanzas or groups of stanzas. The title, "To Earthward," is not an expression we often hear although it is a very old usage. The preposition "to" usually indicates direction to a terminus. Here the terminus

is “earthward.” But the suffix “-ward” means “in a specific direction.”[3] It has an adverbial sense but is added to “earth” and used as the object of a preposition, so the terminus is also a direction. Thus direction “to” is a direction in a direction, a direction emphasized by the repetition of throaty sounds: EARth-WARd. The terminus is not a stop but a motion towards gravity in more than one sense.

Now “to” in “To Earthward” could also indicate dedication. Think of some odes, like “To Autumn,” (Keats) or “To His Coy Mistress,” (Marvell). This poem could be an ode addressing or even praising “earthward” and we will have to see whether that undercurrent persists and what it might signify. This line of thought suggests that it is at least notable that the direction is not upward, towards heaven, but downward to earth.

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The poem begins:

Love at the lips was touch (1)
As sweet as I could bear (2)
And once that seemed too much; (3)
I lived on air (4)

That crossed me from sweet things, (5)
The flow of—was it musk (6)
From hidden grapevine springs (7)

[3] The suffix derives from Old English via German and pre-German, and was in the beginning primarily adjectival, but became used also as an adverb.

Downhill at dusk? (8)

The title repeats sounds made back in the throat; the first line begins with liquid sounds and a fluid rhythm with the phrase—"Love at the lips was..." But the flow ends with the quick, interrupting sound—"touch." Note how the description so far is gentle and yet reductive. Love, a kiss, we presume, is "at the lips," as on a surface, and love is "touch," mere touch. Touch is contact, and that sheer physical contact is love. As we move to the second line, however, we make a pleasant correction: love at the lips isn't mere contact or, if it is, a sensitive response to the touch supervenes on it. We are in the realm of the senses and of feeling. The two senses, touch and taste, combine; the literal and metaphorical combine, so that the realm of touch is now the realm of pleasure: the touch is sweet; pleasure moves us to metaphor. We have been brought from the reduction of the kiss to touch, to the expression of it as pleasure. The pleasure we as readers take in moving from the end of the first line to the unanticipated meaning in the second line brings us pleasure too, but of a different order: our pleasure comes also from the surprising recognitions that combine our senses, as we appreciate touch and taste, and our perceptive imagination, as we move beyond them.

But the sweet pleasure is not so simple. The touch is "as sweet as I could bear." This line expands the first line's emphasis on response: sweetness is taste as pleasure felt to its fullest, to the point where it is almost beyond bearing. The touch at the lips was light, but it sweetness is weighty, emotionally weighty. The almost equal stresses in the regular

metrical line (on “sweet,” “I,” and “bear”) reinforce the equivalence: the lightest pleasures are fully felt and yet the heaviness of the moment is light.

With line 3 an assessment of sorts intrudes on the memory. The pleasure at that moment was so full as to be almost destroyed or, as is sometimes the case with pleasure, turned into its opposite, pain. And yet now, looking back, the poet or speaker of the poem implicitly judges the difference: what seemed too much then seems light by comparison. This looking back is not nostalgic, because there is no infusion of longing for the past or dwelling on it. In fact, just the opposite—the description of “love at the lips was touch” is not in the least sentimental. What we learn from line 3 is that pleasure has changed; what satisfies has changed. The poem registers the acute sensitivity as it was felt in the past with its mixture of pleasure and slight pain, and its limitations as it is judged now. There is a hint of tenderness toward the past, unstated and mixed with poignancy, but there is no indulgence in the feeling.

The last line of the stanza, “I lived on air,” is hyperbolic, of course, but is true to the lightness felt in being freshly, wholly responsive. We have all felt this way. We say our “feet don’t touch the ground.” We are hardly affected by solid things. The ephemeral or lightly momentary press us just enough and we are satiated almost to the point of excess. At such times we feel we need nothing more. And yet the sensitivity to pleasure and the rapid intensity of response are excesses that bring resistances and pains and lack of awareness, however slightly alluded to. The experience is at the same time saturated with the sensual

and almost bodiless. More evidence? Look back: the lips are not *his* but *the* lips, yet the sweetness is *his*.

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Although "living on air" ends the first stanza, we do not stop there, literally or poetically. We cannot remain in that element of life; we are not spirit. The flow of the poem and of time continues as the poet enjambs the lines across the stanzas; that is to say, he makes line 4 stride across into line 5 ("enjamb" from the French *enjamber*—literally "to put the leg across"). The former meaning does not die; "living on air" hovers as a layer of meaning with this new turn. He didn't live on air simply, but on air that came from "sweet things." The sweet, invisible fragrance wafting through the air sustained him. And yet the words "the air/ that crossed me" haunt the experience of sweet scent: air is the medium for his pleasure, but to be crossed is to be interfered with, to have something go against one's wishes or even be at odds.[4] While the meaning is primarily about the transit of the fragrances—they crossed over some space to him—the sweet things also work against him through the kind of excess and distention they bring. His connection to sweet things, examples of which he will name in subsequent lines, also disconnects him from his own body. The poet has taken the element in which he lives (air), the unnamed sweet "things," and the sense power (smell) and presented them in a small but potent experience. We are able to experience what he at the time he is describing does not.

[4] The verb is derived from the noun, the cross or instrument of death or torture, with one plank nailed across another. Later there will be a reference to sin.

Note how the flow and stop of sound returns. In line 6 the scent is described as a flow through air. As in line 1, the "flow" of words is stopped—we could say it is crossed—this time in two ways: the memory is interrupted by a question introduced with a dash, and the flow of sound by the sharp word "musk" that ends the line.

Of all senses smell has the strongest power to carry us back to a specific moment. Memories in this poem so far have not been specific—he recalls no persons other than himself, no particular kiss or particular place or moment in time. While the sense of smell is connected more strongly to emotions than are other senses, and smell memory is long and resilient, this poem is not triggered by a scent, or at least does not seem to be. Instead, he is remembering in contrast to the present, and is not so much dwelling on particular moments as remembering a state of being that persisted, a state in which he was almost too satisfied with sweet pleasures.

Perhaps he once knew the source of the scent but does not recall; perhaps he didn't know it at the time or did not care, so taken up was he with those sweet things. We have the strong sense that curiosity was much less important to him than feeling. The interruption in the flow of memory is an abrupt sign of the difference between then and now. The desire now to identify the then source of his pleasure informs what he feels now in a way that it did not before. The poet preserves the feeling *then* at the same time as he reinterprets it. In remembering, he is not feeling it as it was felt, so that the past is both preserved and lost.

He imagines the source is something "hidden," secret and natural. "Musk" is the name for a gland of a particular kind of deer that produces a scent, potent during the breeding season—clearly a sexual reference. The gland is used in making perfumes, because of its earthy, redolent aroma. By extension "musk" is said of certain plants, among them the grape. The grapevine springs from out of the earth, shooting forth leaves and tendrils and spreading as if flowing out from that source. The earth is a source of life and growth and sensual pleasure, but it is hidden, yet so is the vantage point of the future. In the past he did not think about the sources of pleasure or about the future, although moments portended it. Springing forth comes from the earth and becomes completed at fruition, followed by a return to earth. When vines are heavy with fruit, they must be held up by supports, lest they fall back to the ground, to where, of course, they will ultimately return. Even the aroma, although spirit and spiriting, is heavy, flowing as a river downhill at dusk. Earthiness was in the very air he lived on but hardly noticed.

Metrically the 8th line—"Downhill at dusk"—repeats the beginning of the first line, with its inverted first foot: "Love at the lips." Both are also alliterated. And "Downhill at dusk" ends the sentence begun in line 1. Thus there is a small completeness in these 8 lines. They are a faint premonition of the progression of the entire poem from air to earth. This is not a simple progression. Air and earth are both separated and together, because in the medium of air of the recalled moment, that element was already flowing down at the end of the day. So the opening 8 lines prevent us from merely separating air and earth, pleasure and pain, youth and maturity, except naively. There's a threshold between these pairs that sustains

him as he asks his question; that is to say, these 8 lines place him and us in the position of maturity, even as they intensely link and distinguish present from past.

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I had the swirl and ache (9)
From sprays of honeysuckle (10)
That when they're gathered shake (11)
Dew on the knuckle. (12)

Intoxication arrives with stanza 3, the swirl and ache from sweet things. Surprisingly, the grape doesn't cause this swirl and ache, as pressed grapes turned into wine might; grapes or wine are only implied in the previous stanza. Another rampant vine, the honeysuckle, is the source. The "sprays" are both the aroma from and the bunches of profuse, small flowers on the vine, whose smell and taste *are* very sweet. He finds this unsteadying and at the least dully painful, yet the pain is attached to no specific part of his body. So pleasure from the sweet brings both physical dislocation and a kind of longing.

The flow of air and aroma caused lightheadedness and dull pain. Again the present intrudes, more unobtrusively this time. Plucking flowers from the vine is a general observation; again we do not have a specific memory. We pause slightly after "shake" at the end of the third line of the stanza, with the sense that the flowers not only shake as one cuts or pulls off a sprig, but that they tremble at being cut from their source. And this affects the

imagined consequence of plucking them, “Dew on the knuckle.” Tiny drops on the hand, barely noticeable one would think, are remarked on here as even the slightest sensation was felt in the past. Drops like dew accompany gathering. This is a side effect introduced from the present, one that is faint, compared to the aroma, but it allows the hand that gathers honeysuckle to find on itself a residue, a mark.

This stanza is the only one that contains extra, unstressed syllables, at the end of lines 10 and 12. Every regular rhyme in the stanza ends in a hard “k” sound, “ache” with “shake” and “honeysuckle” with “knuckle,” the extra syllables, l-sounds, trail off, like a faint memory of the flow that has been present from the beginning. And the dusk of line 8 has given way to the dew of morning.

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I craved strong sweets, but those (13)
Seemed strong when I was young (14)
The petal of the rose (15)
It was that stung. (16)

This stanza intensifies the contrast that has been present from the first, the difference between the power of sensation in the earlier time and its power now, but it also intensifies the emotion—or whatever we may call it—of the previous stanzas. It introduces strength—the word “strong” occurs twice in two lines, first as a relatively unstressed and second as a stressed syllable. “Craved,” in line 13, is a strong word, a word that leaps out of the seeming

passivity and descriptive receptivity in the previous stanzas. (I am referring to verbs like "*bear*" and "*crossed* me" and "*had* the swirl and ache"). The stanza begins with four almost equal stresses: "I craved strong sweets," interrupted by the lower register that follows—the more lightly stressed "but those." The second line of the stanza, "seemed strong" begins strongly, followed again by a lower register of: "when I was young." The last two lines drop off further: despite the craving and strength asserted at the outset of the stanza, we are left with stress on two soft words, "petal" and "rose," and a weaker, inverted sentence construction: "It was that stung."

The stanza then concentrates the apparent paradoxes that the soft was the strong in the past and that the strength in the past was fragile. The craving is strong, but the rose—no, not even the rose, but the petal of the rose—this is what he felt as strong. Again a surprise: We might have expected a bee sting, since they hover around roses and honeysuckle. We might have expected a sharp stab from a thorn that protects the delicate rose from being grasped. Instead, simply touching the petal without plucking the rose stings, as if the petal itself were active and crossed his craving.

The heavily sweet has turned into an ache then into a sting. The pleasures felt in the past are infused with their own felt limitations and pains, but the awareness that they would be reckoned as they are now—that was only implicit, perhaps even unavailable in the past. He hardly knew then that the sweet things would not serve his craving in the future. He had strength of feeling then, but has not the same kind of feeling about the same kinds of things now. Looking back and looking now, he acknowledges that what once surfeited him

appears slight. Pleasure, even love, was real but superficial. It is a passing seeming. In this part of the poem, he has moved from a brief touch at the lips to the mere petal of a rose, soft and ephemeral, in the course of asserting more strongly his feeling and his pain.

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Part 2

Now no joy but lacks salt, (17)
That is not dashed with pain (18)
And weariness and fault (19)
I crave the stain (20)

Of tears, the aftermark (21)
Of almost too much love, (22)
The sweet of bitter bark (23)
And burning clove. (24)

The turn of attention away from the past to the present happens at stanza 5, with a line that pits rhythm forcefully against iambic regularity. The words are clipped; the rhythm has become choppy, forcing us to slow down and feel the insistence of every word, all of them almost equally stressed, as if we are being struck again and again by them. The poem shifts tense and begins with a negative construction, using three negative words in the first line: "no," "but," and "lacks"—"Now no joy but lacks salt." Notice how from slowly unsettling us in the first part of the poem, the poet increasingly unsettles us as we read this line. At first

we are cast down because now there is no joy. Then the word "but" permits us to think perhaps there is something positive, but even that is qualified: every joy lacks something. The word "joy" does not occur in the first part. In the second part there is joy, but whatever joy there is, is incomplete; it is missing an enhancement of flavor such as that salt evokes from the sweet. The lack felt in present joy influences the past. The merely sweet and soft from the past was lacking, too, lacking in the dimension unnoticed then but felt now.

The next lines flow, but it is a burdened flow. "That is not dashed with pain/ and weariness and fault." The word "dashed" hints at "salt" in the previous line, as though joy is pleasure spiced with pain. The very word that evokes the connection however, works against its becoming simply trite, for "dashed" is also a strong word, expressing an almost destructive violence against joy, by pain and fault. Suffering is together with its seeming counter, joy, and still is not enough.

The two nouns, "weariness" and "fault," carry us further away from the senses, further into his interior. The youth may have felt ache and sting; the older person is fully awake to weariness and deficiency—his strength of body and ease of soul are impaired. We are not told what has happened or how it has happened. We readers are left to fill in—the imperfections of this world, of ourselves, our ignorance of the future, our inability to love. Again the past is altered—the past being remembered and the past of the poem. The effect of gathering honeysuckle, that is to say, the dew on the knuckle, has become a premonition of present self-awareness.

From the beginning of the poem, the inner life of the speaker has been at the center. In the first four stanzas, he was unreflectively in nature; occasions of pleasure came often and satisfied him with a sense of fullness that could not be increased. How different he has become with time and experience. The words and images of the poem in its first part signal that change had been present all along but had been unregistered. Life and love now are filled with much more awareness—acute awareness of pain, of blame, of need, of longing. He now bears more within, and wants strongly, and wants to bear more: pleasure in the former way is both diminished and preserved. It remains lighter and purer, but more like a remembered dream than a reality, as if it were a time of unknowing, lived on the surface rather than a time fused with and bearing the depths of life. This now time cannot be satisfied but with something in kind.

The 4th stanza began with the young man craving strong sweets; the fifth stanza ends with the older one craving "the stain." We pause here at the word "stain." Coming as the companion to craved strong sweets and so soon after the word "fault," it calls our attention—this has been coming all along—to the theological reading of Genesis that stresses fault, a fault that has left its mark. At this word the 4th stanza, and the whole first part, puts biblical Eden in shadow. I say "shadow" because, in contrast, the time past was not pristine or is it set in a story of creation; it was rather a place of high and easy sensitivity to sensual pleasures and a vague awareness of its mixture with pain. Now, it is the reverse. Pain and sorrow are vividly present, so that the soft pleasures seem trivial by comparison, no longer craved; and craving remains, more intense, altered, and alert. Longing has grown and moves in the direction of solidity and self-knowledge.

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The pause between stanzas is not long, for the rhythm carries us smoothly over the line break, so that we may not expect what comes. Dew from honeysuckle he imagined falling on his knuckle; now he wants the residue of salty tears, the impress of "almost too much love," to stain his cheek. We recall line 1: "Love at the lips was touch"—*at* the lips, not upon or on the lips. Surface sensitivity has given way to craving a mark from love, a love that is harder and perhaps truer, harder because not faultless; truer because more realized, more within him. Wanting tears from "almost too much love" makes *him* rather than something outside him a source. He has become less an ecstatic surface and more a body of experience, with love a joy inevitably mixed with failure.

The word "aftermark" reinforces the suggestion of the Fall as leaving the mark of original sin, but it remains only a rich suggestion the poet allows to lurk in the background. The word "aftermark" was not in three dictionaries I checked, but we have little difficulty understanding it. He wants to be marked, not just to feel gently or even to be stung. He wants pressure that lasts. No brush at the lips, no light touch, here in a moment but quickly gone—he wants something stronger, something continual that he can literally bear. Weary and aware of fault, he is yet capable of bearing more than before; his expanded capacity for love and sorrow is in his very bones.

In what I have called the first part of the poem, sensations mixed: touch was sweet and the softly sweet was heavy. Paradox continues more intensely: dried and hard, the bitter bark

and the acrid clove are sweet. The springs of the grapevine have given way to bark, the rough, outer coating of trees, and hints at the medicinal qualities of quinine. The fruit has given way to flower buds culled from the clove tree and dried before they can bloom. In the poem the clove is burning, being destroyed and transformed into ash, its aroma a kind of incense, a source of satisfaction.

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When stiff and sore and scarred (25)
I take away my hand (26)
From leaning on it hard (27)
In grass and sand (28)

The hurt is not enough: (29)
I long for weight and strength (30)
To feel the earth as rough (31)
To all my length. (32)

The first line of stanza 5 began with almost equally stressed words—"Now no joy but lacks salt." The sentence that finishes the thought picks up speed and ends with harsher, mortal sensations at "burning clove" in stanza 6. In the first line of stanza 7, iambic feet, rather than words as in stanza 5, have almost identical degrees of stress and duration, so that the staccato of "Now no joy but lacks salt" has smoothed out into a rhythmic acceptance of the

measure, despite the pain-filled adjectives that compose it: “When stiff/and sore/and scarred.”

He craves stain but he is marked already. The adjectives “stiff and sore and scarred” are piled on rhythmically. Body and soul are joined; he bears experience and age, which makes him less able to feel satisfied by delicate things and less tolerant of them. Living has left marks on him as it takes things from him, but it also brings things to him, regret and weariness—and also joy and love. It brings nothing not unmixed.

He focuses on his hand, the same hand with which he would have grasped the honeysuckle and that would have been splashed with dew. He was so airy in the first stanza of the poem that his body is hardly there. The hand now is his; *his* joints and muscles, and skin are stiff, and sore, and scarred. He leans on his hand exerting pressure against the coverings of the earth, even as he is using it for support. The hand supporting his body seems to stand for his ability to feel pleasure altogether—it requires exertion. He is gradually lowering himself to and being lowered by a pull to earth.

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The long, introductory clause of the previous stanza leads to a very short, but powerful main clause, which is then expanded in the final three lines. He wants physical pain, his body to be heavy and strong and to be felt to be so. We might have thought that leaning on

his hand in the previous stanza was a sign only of weakness—now he leans whereas before he walked on air—but it is also a sign of strength, his ability to resist the earth in order to feel the earth. When young and strong, he felt light things strongly but did not feel strong things. Now older and less strong, he has strength to feel and, more aware of his failures, longs for truly strong things to feel, almost in order to match or even soothe those failures.

We think back to the fluid first 5 words of the poem, which were interrupted by an abrupt, quicker sound, "touch." Touch has persisted, but become internal and heavier and thorough: he longs to feel the earth as rough all along his body pressed against it.

We feel our weight only under certain conditions. Most of the time we don't feel that we are pressing the earth, or that it is pressing back, even when we are lying down; in fact, we feel it more when we are reclining with our full weight on our hands than when we are lying on the grass. By longing for weight "to all his length," he is longing for something that cannot be finally fulfilled. He wants to be lying down feeling his weight against the rough earth, but the image is of him lying as he will be in his grave, when he will be at first only a heavy body, when he can feel nothing, soon to become one again with earth itself. This harsh truth is signaled by the shortness of the word "length." All his length—of body, of time—is not very long.

I have said that this poem falls into two parts, and that those parts do not divide into neatly separate categories, for the movement of the poem toward earth occurs all along. The parts divide into past and present, held together by the awareness in the present. The perception

of the changes occurs not as they are happening, but in the reflection on the past and its comparison to the present, that is to say, in the gathering of past and present into a pattern. As the poet speaks about past and present, we follow a movement from surface to depth, an expansion from simple to complex, and a change from sweet to bittersweet. The unfolding of these changes in the poem is in part an analogy with the pattern of plant life—from out of earth, to bud, to bloom, to fruit, to return. In part the unfolding is a dis-analogy to that pattern. The dis-analogy comes from the fact that it is a poem about love, about the unfolding of love in the sentient, self-aware fusion of body and soul capable of love, which is the human being. Furthermore, it is not about love in all its manifestations: not about love as it looks, either to sight or to mind or spirit, or how it is idealized, but about how it *is* in flesh and blood. The senses of smell, taste, and touch—the less articulable senses—predominate in the poem not as "external," separate senses but as combined within, taking visceral shape in the living being and expanding earthward.

I have said that we should beware trying to condense a poem into a nugget of insight. This poem simultaneously tempts us to and resists us doing that. Let me cite just two examples. The story of Genesis hovers around the poem, tempting us to assimilate it to that story, especially through the awareness of fault and what could appear to be a need to do penance; but it resists because there is no other person, no prohibition, no temptation *in* this poem. It invites us to regard the story of Eden and the Fall as a presence standing alongside it, invoked by association, as about our moral and mortal nature.

The second example is the temptation to regard it as a case study. By that I mean that one could think the person uttering the poem has become disappointed by experience and so is despondent, incapable of joy or real love, seeking pain instead. That direction, too, the poem resists, partly because it omits any particular event or events that precipitated such a shift as we see between parts one and two; also, because the capacity and desire for love increase. The first word of the poem is "love," but love becomes richer by the time it is mentioned again, in stanza 6. The way he realizes his life as a living being, his longing in that life, the way the past purity of feeling is so lovely, but made to seem tenderly superficial, means there is no simple ascension in purity of love but, rather, enrichment and expansion through clear-eyed acknowledgement of limits and sorrows, of failures and yearnings; through descent, or acceptance of what appears to be descent, without triumph or embellishment. Frost's artistry has harnessed the power of the right words in the right order to bring this aspect of love, this phenomenon, which is in so many ways not available in words, to us for our realization and wonder.

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