December 1986

Robert Frost's Range-Finding

Darrel Abel

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Robert Frost's Range-Finding

by DARREL ABEL

In Frost's poetry man's speculation reaches through the "Whole God-dam Machinery" of "One-O," but his action ranges over only those "zones" that he can physically influence. The space in which men work, their "world of pure experience" in the Jamesian phrase, is a realm of no fixed limits, however; they push against apparent limits persistently and enlarge them gradually. Although they can see neither out far nor in deep, they augment their clearings in nature, build and rebuild their human constructions to maintain "strongholds," and extend roads to connect their "clearings."

Man's designs cannot intend along the full reach of his speculation, nor even extend across the full range of his possible action. In "There Are Roughly Zones" Frost remarked that although man's ambition is to extend his reach, "There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed." The poem figures the limits set by nature on man's action by the narrow temperature range within which terrestrial life exists. Man finds it hard to accept such limits, and continually pushes against them and finds interstices. If he transgresses the laws that must be obeyed, as he does by planting peach trees too far north, it is because of "this limitless trait in the hearts of men."

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind—
That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?

The poem "Range-Finding" considers the discords and overlapping limits between human nature and other parts of living nature inhabiting the same zones that are indifferent to human designs and limits. Men, fighting a human war within nature's perpetual battlefield of species struggling for survival, fire their murderous bullets at each other across

1. The phrases are from the poems "Lucretius Versus the Lake Poets" and "I Will Sing You One-O."
3. "We can make raids and excursions into the wild, but it has to be from well kept strongholds," The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 36. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in text as Untermeyer.
a field full of other species striving for life. A flower, a bird, and a butterfly are stricken, disturbed, and dispossessed as accidental consequences of men firing across their field; and a spider rushes out to "greet the fly" when a passing bullet shakes his web—mistaking the movement for something that has meaning within its arachnoid design for life. A spider's (or white-tailed hornet's, or monkey's) life-design is more elemental and instinctual than man's intelligent and sometimes esthetic and moral life-designs; so the spider can take notice of man's action only in a reductive way that ignores distinctively human "worths." Both spider and man have murderous intent, and the subject of the poem is aggression; but the predatoriiness of the spider is innocent, one of what Thoreau called "those incessant tragedies that heaven allows," for it is part of nature's process of life sacrificed to gain more life; whereas man's heedlessly random range-finding has only a destructive intention. Frost said that "Range Finding belongs to a set of war poems that I wrote in a time of profound peace (circa 1902)," but he saved it because his English friend Edward Thomas "thought it so good a description of No Man's Land." Nevertheless, although it is a war poem, it is like all Frost's war poems in being about the nature of war and the war of nature, not about a war or the War. It is not a topical poem except in its ready applicability, which proves its poetic truth.

Frost noticed the beauty in nature all the more because it is ignored and destroyed by man's indifference to it in his wars. The first thing noted by the poet is the diamond dewdrop that spangles the spider's web and is shaken off by the bullet—something beautiful to the poet but meaningless to the spider. But the designs that express human worths are finally more transient than the life-designs of the spider, a simpler, more enduring embodiment of the life of nature.

In his poetry Frost often used insects (as well as birds and other animals) as epitomes or atomies of man, to simplify and embody qualities of sentience, life-impulse, instinct or intelligence, and conscious will. In "A Considerable Speck" he reduced the situation of consciousness and desire for life facing the challenge of a vast unknown—the theme of the early poem "Trial By Existence" and the late poem "Kitty Hawk"—to its lowest terms. The tiny insect observed by the poet was

A speck that would have been beneath my sight
On any but a paper sheet so white . . .

Still, "size is only development," as Whitman said: the speck was "unmistakably a living mite / With inclinations it could call its own," and "Plainly with an intelligence I dealt." Its organs were too microscopic for the unaided human eye to discern, but it somehow sensed the danger of the poet's penful of ink impending over it, as menacing to such a small
creature as a loose mountain or clouds low and hairy in the skies\footnote{For these figures of menace see the poems “A Loose Mountain” and “Once By the Pacific.”} are to the poet, and the peril of the ink not yet dry on the page. “It either drank or smelt,” and although “it seemed too tiny to have feet,” its movements expressed “how much it didn’t want to die.” “It ran with terror and with cunning crept,” and finally cowered with resignation “in the middle of the open sheet.” The open sheet in which the speck cowers is like “the sameness of the wood” in “The Demiurge’s Laugh” in which the dismayed human is checked by the apparently menacing inscrutability of nature.

Human intelligence is more complex than the insect’s; human gestures of bravery and postures of defeat are more various; the field of human consciousness is wider and more diversified; but the basic figure of a spot of intelligent life—cherishing self-consciousness bewildered in an unfriendly world—is the same.

The situation becomes more complicated as one goes up the scale of existence, from plane to plane.\footnote{See Frost’s poem “From Plane to Plane” and discussion of this theme in Frost’s poetry in my essay “Robert Frost’s ‘Flirting With the Entelechies’,” \textit{Renascence}, 32 (Autumn, 1979), 33–44.} The magnitude of the surrounding mystery is amplified, and the responses of cunning and terror are correspondingly multiplied. “To a Moth Seen in Winter” develops sympathy for a threatened creature by describing its visible beauty: “Bright-black-eyed silvery creature brushed with brown.” There is more speculation about the dim motives that impel it to “make the venture of eternity.” It is assumed to be like man in seeking the companionship of its kind, or in asking for some friendly response from its surroundings. It appears unseasonably in winter. The poet remarks,

\begin{quote}
And what I pity in you is something human.
The old incurable untimeliness.
\end{quote}

Obviously the moth has rashly exceeded its limits. The poet’s pity and sympathy move him to offer the “counter-love”\footnote{The phrase is from the poem “The Most of It.”} which he has himself often looked for from some intelligence outside his own species. Impulsively he stretches a hand “across the gulf of well nigh everything.” Nevertheless, he concludes,

\begin{quote}
I cannot touch your life, much less can save,
Who am tasked to save my own a little while.
\end{quote}

Man discovers the manageable potentialities of life by experiment. That is, he measures his human capabilities and the things in nature to which they can adapt by trying “blandishments.”

What has brought about our ability to “do things”? All our adaptability to circumstances? Go back to \textit{Walden} and \textit{Robinson Crusoe}. These experimenters found themselves, when trial came, able to, and \textit{did}, pit themselves naked against an infinitely unfriendly nature, and they provided some part of, no inconsiderable part of, creature comforts sufficient.\footnote{Louis Mertins, \textit{Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking} (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 62. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in text as Mertins. Frost’s remarks as recorded in this book, although not literally transcribed, are evidently recorded with considerable fidelity and accuracy.}
This “ability to ‘do things’” is a primitive instinct rather than a civilized development in man. “We have ways of knowing that human nature doesn’t change much. . . . Human intelligence, for all our worship of evolution, stays pretty much the same” (Mertins 62).

I should hate to think we had educated all the animal ability out of ourselves. A little quail skips out of the egg on the run, unfolded by surprise, and never stops. Snakes have to look after themselves from the day they are hatched out. . . . They have no coddling. I have always maintained that we coddle human frailties too much. We encourage the dish to run away with the spoon. Just set a man against the elements. Let him battle. (Mertins 62-63)

The experimental impulse, being primitive in man, shows itself most plainly in the curiosity of a child. A cluster of several poems in Frost’s *Mountain Interval* (two of them subtitled “As Told to a Child”) variously deal with the subject of encouraging a child’s experimentation with nature. One is struck, in reading Frost’s family letters, by his quickness to encourage and assist childish curiosity whenever his children and grandchildren seemed interested in any natural or scientific question.

“A Girl’s Garden” (about Frost’s daughter Lesley) tells of an experiment that is “a childlike thing”—planting an “idle bit of ground” with seeds that she “begged.” “She planted one of all things but weed.” The girl’s garden is an experiment in finding out how persons can take advantage of nature’s unflagging pregnancy to procure abundance of commodious growths, just as Frost’s long poem “New Hampshire” describes that state as a rocky sampler of all the bounties that nature affords to man.

“The Bonfire” is Frost’s most impressive poem on the theme of experimenting with the powers of nature. This poem, based on reminiscence of an incident on the Derry farm in 1906, was published in 1916, and the date of publication, together with some reference to war in the poem, indicated to Lawrance Thompson and other critics that it is a “war poem.” But Frost objected to this narrow topical limitation of the poem’s more general theme. When this construction was first proposed, he admitted it with a qualification pointing out its broader meaning: “[M]y poems about this war narrow down to the Bonfire and that is more of New England than of what is going on over yonder.” Twenty years later his dismissal of this topical interpretation was more emphatic: “What disheartened me about this Bonfire was that it made everybody think or so many think that it was saying something on one side or the other of a ‘question of the day.’ Dammit” (Untermeyer 36). Of course, the poem has an application to such questions, but its real theme is the ambivalence of attitude toward man’s release of forces in nature that he may not control once they are released, the sense of this being enhanced by the rigorous conditions of

life in northern New England. The young father in the poem proposes to his children,

Oh, let’s go up the hill and scare ourselves,
As reckless as the best of them tonight,
By setting fire to all the brush we piled
With pitchy hands to wait for rain or snow.
Oh, let’s not wait for rain to make it safe.

He intends to alarm people, to “rouse them all,” by letting wildfire loose. It will not only alarm other people; it will also frighten and endanger themselves, for once let loose it may do

I know not how much more
I mean it shall not do if I can bind it.

When the children inquire, “If it scares you, what will it do to us?” he answers, “Scare you.” This, in fact, is the lesson they will be taught by the almost uncontrolable force of wildfire let loose: that all elemental force let loose is dangerous, yet man’s designs can be accomplished only by letting loose wild forces in nature. The father asks his children, “What would you say to war if it should come?” He contradicts their answer, “Oh, but war’s not for children—it’s for men.” He tells them, “War is for everyone, for children too.” They are to learn the lesson of indiscriminate danger to everything human of all forces of nature let loose—an almost prophetic warning in these times of possible nuclear holocaust.

The best way is to come up hill with me
And have our fire and laugh and be afraid.

“The Bonfire” says that, although man can get where he wishes to go only by hitching a ride on nature, the forces of nature are more easily released than controlled. Perhaps also the poem appeals to a latent pyromania in everyone\(^{11}\)—an itch to experience the sense of power that comes from pulling the trigger of immense energies. This is an impulse that operates in varying degrees all the way from the child playing with matches to the scientists who developed the H-bomb. Robert Oppenheimer said,

If you are a scientist you believe that it is good to find out how the world works; that it is good to find out what the realities are; that it is good to turn over to mankind at large the greatest possible power to control the world and to deal with it according to its lights and values.\(^{12}\)

But in thus “pulling a trigger . . . on an accumulation of potential energy in matter”\(^{13}\) scientists are “as reckless as the best of them.” When Frost

\(^{11}\) There seems to be something like this in Thoreau’s account of his accidentally setting the woods near Concord on fire—initial dismay and anxiety to control the fire, followed by exhilaration at the spectacle of nature’s magnificent wildfire energy when it went out of control.


repeatedly denied that he was a nature poet, what he meant was that he did not regard and present in his poetry images of nature merely as "pretty scenery," and that his deeper concern was with underlying realities.

A poem similar in theme to "The Bonfire" is "The Flood," which fatally declares that passions let loose in war cannot always be "impounded safe"; that when once blood "breaks away" it rages as uncontrollably as wildfire: "power of blood releases blood," and "blood will out. It cannot be contained." That is, the elemental forces which rage out of man's control are within himself as well as in external nature; they too are natural energies never altogether tamed. Man's fragile definition of his distinctive human nature breaks down when the humanity which sets him apart is "held high at so unnatural a level."

Recognition of such universality of themes in Frost's poems justifies his remonstrance against reading them as if they had reference merely to contemporaneous and topical realities.

II

Man does not know natural forces directly but experiences them only through their physical effects in the zone and medium in which he lives. They show themselves as cyclic process in the round of the seasons and as incident in weather.

Frost wrote many poems about seasons because the passage from one season to another is a figure for the movement of nature's vital forces. Changes of season are times when what Bergson called "the impetus of life" (Bergson 87) is most impulsive and energetic. And of these seasonal changes those from autumn to winter and from winter to spring attracted him most, for they were the passages back and forth from dormant to active life. "I guess it is easier to write poetry on spring and autumn than on the other two seasons" (Interviews 32). "I somehow have always written more about just that period when the backbone of winter breaks and the thaw starts. Somehow that part of spring seems to appeal to me more. No, I will not say that it appeals to me more, but I just seem to have written more about it" (Interviews 33). He said of "Closed for Good," which describes the first light snowfall after the last heavy leaf-fall: "My favorite moment of all the seasons is shown in this poem, when you can see the shape of leaves under the snow." Underlying the apparent tergiversation of these statements declaring at different times preference for the beginning of spring and the beginning of winter is a consistent attraction to phenomena of transition—the thaw starting, leaves outlined under snow.

Man is aware of weather, the incident and texture of seasons, more

15. The phrase is from "Lucretius Versus the Nature Poets."
than he is aware of the larger rhythms in nature's vital process. Frost thought that the "weather-talk" of "most folks" is not trivial chatter but "a kind of amateur nature poetry," for it expresses their sense of the way their lives are involved in and played upon by nature. Weather not only compels man's acknowledgment that he is subject to nature's large order and incidental disorders; it also enables him by its frequent harshness or unfriendliness to distinguish his human moods and needs which nature does not share, but for which it furnishes corollaries. Thus the poet, looking out the window at his "window-tree," sees in the way the tree is "taken and tossed" by the wind a demonstration of natural forces to which he is likewise subject; but the sight means more to him as a correlative of ways in which his emotional and intellectual life is seized and swept by "inner weather" not touching the tree.

Although weather in the large is manifestation of natural order, in its local and temporary character it appears to be disorder—that is, from the point of view of some special human interest affected by it. When man calls the activity of nature around him "weather," the designation is subjective. Sensations of things in their densest, most pelting assault on consciousness are "dust in the eyes," blinding vision of the remote order of which they are effects. Unphilosophical persons live in a world of weather only and, as in the poem "Dust in the Eyes," accuse the poet of getting "overwise" if he waits to watch the water clear or patiently looks for his "old skymarks in the blue." Such persons recommend as remedy for the poet's attending too little to weather "some dust thrown in the eyes." But if the poet is to be blinded by any deluge of reality, he asks that it be not earthly, but from farther out:

Let it be overwhelming, off a roof
And round a corner, blizzard snow for dust,
And blind me to a standstill if it must.

Such an experience would enable him to "make a connection" \(^{17}\) with reality farther out than ordinary terrestrial dust. The poem "Dust of Snow" tells how, on a day he "had rued," his heart lifted when

```
a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree.
```

When asked to explain this poem, he said that the incident described in it was "similar to 'good news in the morning paper'" \((\text{Interviews 171})\). Despite the traditional macabre associations of the imagery (a contradiction of convention which lends force to the statement), the incident is like the "message from the dawn" in "The Tuft of Flowers" and the "great wave going over us" in "Two Look at Two"—a figure for the momentary

---

17. "My ambition has been to have it said of me: He made a few connections," Untermeyer, p. 189.
impression, however pathetically fallacious, of at-one-ment with nature.

Ignorant, inexperienced creatures, who have not learned by exposure and survival that harsh weather is merely a temporary flaw in nature's rough providence, are frightened by it, taking it to be elemental chaos. The Morgan colt of "The Runaway," frightened by the first snowfall, never having experienced winter before, can become wiser only through experience:

I doubt that even his mother could tell him, "Sakes, it's only weather."

The poem "Once By the Pacific," a reminiscence of a childhood experience near the Cliff House in San Francisco, exemplifies nature's threatening appearance in the congregated might of vapors impending over a solitary child walking on the beach when a lowering sky threatens a storm that will overwhelm the land:

"I was very small and very impressionable—a child full of imagination and phobias. . . . The sea seemed to rise up and threaten me. I got scared, imagining that my mother and father, who were somewhere about, had gone away and left me in danger of my life. I was all alone with the ocean water rising higher and higher. I was fascinated and terrorized watching the sea; for it came to me that we were all doomed to be engulfed and swept away. Long years after I remembered the occasion vividly, the feeling which overwhelmed me, and wrote my poem 'Once By the Pacific.' " (Mertins 6)

In the poem the angry sea epitomizes the vast elemental turbulence of nature, the shore is the demarcation of what man finds stable and secure (the quatrain "Devotion" begins, "The heart can think of no devotion / Greater than being shore to the ocean"), and the child is the simple embodiment of humanity facing unfriendly nature. The poem neatly sums up the sense of the imminence of possible annihilation in its reversal of God's fiat in Genesis, Let There Be Light:

There would be more than ocean water broken
Before God's last Put out the Light was spoken.

Nature's unfriendly weather appears to self-regarding man to threaten him especially in stormy equinoctial times, for the vital impulses of nature move in only roughly regular rhythms of alternate surging and subsidence, not agreeing with the exact requirements of species and individuals. Although nature's benefits are equal to the sum of her creatures' needs, they are distributed with only approximate equity and punctuality.

A passage from Bergson's Creative Evolution explains the kind of order that Frost saw in nature, which admitted of, but was not merely constituted of, the local and temporary disorders of weather: "The wind at the street corner divides into diverging currents which are all one and the same gust. Harmony, or rather 'complementarity,' is revealed only in the mass, in tendencies rather than states" (Bergson 51).

Frost's poem "I Will Sing You One-O" dramatizes the same idea in the same figure of winds dividing at a street corner. The poet, securely housed
and warmly bedded during a sleepless night of howling blizzard, listens apprehensively to the "whirling frenzies" of the storm:

Two winds would meet,
One down one street,
One down another,
And fight in a smother
Of dust and feather.

The listener fears that this noisy elemental strife may shatter nature into a heap of jarring atoms, and his thought cannot easily ascend from the surrounding blizzard to imagination of the "one and the same gust" from which these violently opposing currents diverge. The one and the same is at last affirmed for him by the clock whose striking he anxiously listens for, which chimes with the less audible striking of more distant clocks. Their measured ineluctable striking together through the whirling frenzies of storm assures him of their obedience to some remote prime center of energy and law. Hours and days, seasons and climates, are superior to weather and guarantee the regularity of the Whole Goddam Machinery.

Winds, waters, mountains, heat and cold are elemental manifestations of nature's force which when mustered in intense and abrupt concentrations as storms, tides, cloudbursts, drought, landslides, and blizzards remind man of nature's "unfriendliness." More infrequent and remote, if more regular and tremendous, are recurrent seasonal threats such as the New England winter and enormous perturbations of the sun. But the weathers that appear most threatening to man are those nearest to him and most likely to destroy his shores and shelters, such as tidal waves and blizzards.

Naturally enough for a New Englander, the rigors of weather and seasons are often expressed in Frost's poems by extremities of cold with snow and wind. Such conditions purify and test human qualities by their stringency. In "An Empty Threat" Frost describes man's endurance at the northern limit of his zone, "where there's not a soul / For a windbreak between me and the North Pole." The speaker imagines staying there in the company of Henry Hudson's ghost, sharing his defeat of trust, which is better than "life's victories of doubt." "In the Long Night" imagines a snug house of crystal (an ice igloo) shared with a solitary friend. The person of the poem subsists on the simplest of bodily and mental fare, but

As one rankly warm insider
To another I can say,
We can rest assured on eider
There will come another day.

The trust which is man's chief strength is a willingness to expect nature to "favor life a little" and thus to assure survival of the hardiest. "Good-By and Keep Cold" shifts the figure from human to vegetable existence. The poet bids his young orchard to keep cold during the long winter, for
to break its dormancy and arouse it to premature active life would be to expose it to killing cold. Therefore, it is made secure, if possible, by setting it out on a northerly slope, less likely to thaw unseasonably. No human care can do more for it. "Something has to be left to God."

"Who cares but for the future of the bud?" Frost asks in "The Wind and the Rain." But God's care is not the intelligent special solicitude described in the inventory of possible harms to be averted that the poet details in "Good-By and Keep Cold." Here and elsewhere Frost's God is not the Hebraic-Christian deity whose Providence is a loving dispensation of benefits to His creatures. Frost once wrote to Louis Untermeyer:

Elinor has just come out flat-footed against God as conceived either as the fourth person seen with Shadrack, Meshack, and Tobedwego in the fiery furnace or without help by the Virgin Mary. How about as a Shelleyan principal or spirit coeternal with the rock part of creation, I ask. Nonsense and you know it's nonsense Rob Frost, only you're afraid you'll have bad luck or lose your standing in the community if you speak your mind. Spring, I say, returneth and the maple sap is heard dripping in the buckets. . . . Like a woman she says Pshaw. (Selected Letters 244)

All that Frost contended for in his identifying God as "spirit coeternal with the rock part of creation" is eternal and therefore reliable and usable consistency in the process of nature. When an interviewer asked him, during his good-will mission to Britain for the State Department in 1957, about some of his writing "in which sensitivity to the beauty of nature is allied with poignant awareness of suffering within the natural order," Frost countered with the question, "Where is there any benevolence of purpose?" But he said that he was "hopeful about the future of mankind" because "[W]hen a tree is cut down, another grows" (Interviews 165). This is apparently reminiscent of Job's saying,

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.

Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground; Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant.

Frost's poem "Something for Hope" is a treatment of this theme. It calls attention to the regenerative life-cycles of nature, which eventually restores what it takes away; so the poem concludes with a recommendation of "foresight" and "laissez faire":

Patience and looking away ahead,
And leaving some things to take their course.
Hope may not nourish a cow or horse,
But spes alit agricolam 'tis said.
Frost admitted to seasons of discouragement, when the times seemed bad. There are times, he said, "when you sometimes wonder if it is worth it, all the pain. . . . Sometimes I feel one way, and sometimes I feel the other" (Interviews 162). The quatrain "A Question" expresses such a mood of wondering whether life is worth the pain:

A voice said, Look me in the stars
And tell me truly, men of earth,
If all the soul-and-body scars
Were not too much to pay for birth.

But such moods were only lapses from his normally wanting "life to go on living." "Birches" sets such questionings in a frame of life-affirming certainty:

It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood

I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.

The poem concludes that "Earth's the right place for love."

This reiterates the idea in his reminder to Elinor nearly four decades earlier that spring returneth and the maple sap is heard dripping in the buckets. "The Last Word of a Bluebird," one of the "lessons" told to his daughter Lesley, offers the same idea, in the message repeated by the crow (perhaps the same crow who gave him a heartening sign in "Dust of Snow") that the bluebird driven south by the winter "would come back and sing" in the spring. Frost once posed a question to David Brinkley in a television interview: "You know what God's great big joke on us is? The answer is the spring of the year. It begins in delight and ends in we don't know what kind of a crop" (Interviews 163). God's providence is so blind and rough that man is never sure of a result, although like the hopeful birds in "A Winter Eden" we are "content with bud-inspecting" and "presume to say which buds will bloom and fruit." The uncertainty of God's providence is the thought in a couplet which concludes a group of poems called "Cluster of Faith" in Frost's last book, In the Clearing:

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee
And I'll forgive thy great big one on me.

In "Good-By and Keep Cold" and other poems by Frost, north is a symbolic direction, for it represents the farthest range of man's trial of conditions, as stars represent the longest reach of his speculation. There is an equation of ratio to threat of nature against man: threat is measured as
force divided by distance. The threat of stars is greatest in force, but is so remote in distance, which means time, that it is slight. In “It Bids Pretty Fair” the poet says that “The play seems out for an almost infinite run,” and “We'll be all right if nothing goes wrong with the lighting.” “People say something might happen to the sun at any time. But you make your peace with things” (Interviews 153). In “Assurance” he defied the threat of flood with like composure. One can follow in the course of Frost's poetic career the process of his gradual mastering of the childish apprehension uttered in “Once By the Pacific” and other early poems about his fears to achievement of the “assurance” and “bravado”18 of his later poems.

The threat of organic nature has less of abrupt force than the threat of cataclysm, and it is within man's power to hold it in check by continual resistance and repair; but it is immediate, pressing, and continual; so it effectually threatens man more than storms and cataclysms do. The threat of seasons is regularly recurrent and can be provided against; the threat of blizzard or tidal wave is infrequent, and such damage as it causes, however heavy, can be repaired; the threat of sand dunes is gradual and man can oppose resistances to it with steady forethought; but the resurgences of nature asserting its wild forms in the midst of human clearings, gardens, and cities are perpetual; so that, although individually they may be small and controllable, in sum they are the greatest threat to human life, with the evident exception of man's self-destructive forgetfulness of the possible fatality of uncontrollable natural forces let loose: “The trees are all I'm afraid of.”

Only when one gets “too much world at once” is nature’s rough providence hurtful. To preserve my life I need defenses “between too much and me.” In “Triple Bronze” the poet describes such defenses as three: his hide, a physical wall too hard “to breach or climb,” and “a national boundary” as a community of interest and strength:

And that defense makes three
Between too much and me.

The “too much” is of course a relative term, for it deals with two variables: the cunning and strength of the threatened subject, and the magnitude of nature's threat.

“The Exposed Nest” discusses the theme in terms of a nestful of young birds in a meadow, suddenly exposed by a mower, so that they have too much world at once. They are imperilled by such exposure, not because it is very great, but because they are so inexperienced and weak; so there is doubt whether they will survive to “at last learn to use their wings.” The human pair in the poem are the young married lovers who figure in so many of Frost’s early poems—derived from Frost himself and Elinor. The

18. See the poem “Bravado.”
DARREL ABEL

You wanted to restore them to their right
Of something interposed between their sight
And too much world at once—could means be found.

The two were touched by

the way the nest-full every time we stirred
Stood up to us as to a mother-bird
Whose coming home has been too long deferred.

The plight of the motherless young birds evokes pathos and pity like that aroused by Whitman's "Out of the Cradle." They showed the instinctive faith of the young that there must be something careful of them in the world; they expected "counter-love." The lovers feared that their interference might make the mother-bird, should she return, reject her young, but it was a risk they had to take, and took. They improvised a screen to shade the nestlings, then "turned to other things," just as in the more hopeless case of "Out, Out —" the persons who saw a young life cut off by accident "turned to their affairs." The lovers never knew whether "the birds lived the first night through." Such an attitude toward tragic life is not the "frostiness" 19 of heartless indifference with which some critics have charged Frost, but is tragic acceptance. One must, though with reluctance, "Yield with a grace to reason" and "let what will be, be."