

Joseph Brodsky: On "Home Burial"

In "Home Burial" we have an arena reduced to a staircase, with its Hitchcockian banister. The opening line tells you as much about the actors' positions as about their roles: those of the hunter and his prey. Or, as you'll see later, of Pygmalion and Galatea, except that in this case the sculptor turns his living model into stone. In the final analysis, "Home Burial" is a love poem, and if only on these grounds it qualifies as a pastoral. But let's examine this line and a half

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him

Frost could have stopped right here. It is already a poem, it is already a drama. Imagine this line and a half sitting on the page all by itself, in minimalist fashion. It's an extremely loaded scene—or, better yet, a frame. You've got an enclosure, the house, with two individuals at cross--no, diverse--purposes. He's at the bottom of the stairs, she's at the top. He's looking up at her, she, for all we know thus far, doesn't register his presence at all. Also, you've got to remember that it's in black and white. The staircase dividing them suggests a hierarchy of significances. It is a pedestal with her atop (at least, in his eyes) and him at the bottom (in our eyes and, eventually, in hers). The angle is sharp. Place yourself here in either position—better in his—and you'll see what I mean. Imagine yourself observing, watching somebody, or imagine yourself being watched. Imagine yourself interpreting someone's movements—or immobility—unbeknownst to that person. That's what turns you into a hunter, or into Pygmalion.

So let's watch the deportment of the model

She was starting down, Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again.

On the literal level, on the level of straight narrative, we have the heroine beginning to descend the steps with her head turned to us in profile, her glance lingering on some frightful sight. She hesitates and interrupts her descent, her eyes still trained, presumably, on the same sight neither on the steps nor on the man at the bottom. But you are aware of yet another level present here, aren't you?

Let's leave that level as yet unnamed. Each piece of information in this narrative comes to you in an isolated manner, within a pentameter line. The isolation job is done by white margins framing, as it were, the whole scene, like the silence of the house, and the lines themselves are the staircase. Basically, what you get here is a succession of frames. "She was starting down" is one frame. "Looking back over her shoulder at some fear" is another, in fact, it is a close-up, a profile—you see her facial expression. "She took a doubtful step and then undid it" is a third again a close-up—the feet. "To raise herself and look again" is a fourth—full figure.

But this is a ballet, too. There is a minimum of two pas de deux here, conveyed to you with a wonderful euphonic, almost alliterative precision. I mean the ds in this line, in "doubtful" and in "undid it," although the ts matter also. "Undid it" is particularly good, because you sense the spring in that step. And that profile in its opposition to the movement of the body—the very formula of a dramatic heroine—is straight out of a ballet as well.

But the real faux pas de deux starts with "He spoke / Advancing toward her." For the next twenty-five lines, a conversation occurs on the stairs. The man climbs them as he speaks, negotiating mechanically and verbally what separates them. "Advancing" bespeaks self-consciousness and apprehensiveness. The tension grows with the growing proximity. However, the mechanical and, by implication, physical proximity is more easily attained than the verbal—the mental—and that's what the poem is all about. "What is it you see / From up there always—for I want to know?" is very much a Pygmalion question, addressed to the model on the pedestal atop the staircase. His fascination is not with what he sees but with what he imagines it conceals—what he has placed there. He invests her with mystery and then rushes to uncloak it: this rapacity is always Pygmalion's double bind. It is as though the sculptor found himself puzzled by the facial expression of his model: she "sees" what he does not "see." So he has to climb to the pedestal himself, to put himself in her position. In the position of "up there always"—of topographical (vis-à-vis the house) and psychological advantage, where he put her himself. It is the latter, the psychological advantage of the creation, that disturbs the creator, as the emphatic "for I want to know?" shows.

The model refuses to cooperate. In the next frame ("She turned and sank upon her skirts at that"), followed by the close-up of "And her face changed from terrified to dull," you get that lack of cooperation plain. Yet the lack of cooperation here is cooperation. The less you cooperate, the more you are a Galatea. For we have to bear in mind that the woman's psychological advantage is in the man's self-projection. He ascribes it to her. So by turning him down she only enhances his fantasy. In this sense, by refusing to cooperate she plays along. That's basically her whole game here. The more he climbs, the greater is that advantage, he pushes her into it, as it were, with every step.

Still, he is climbing: in "he said to gain time" he does, and also in

"What is it you see?" Mounting until she cowered under him. "I will
find out now—you must tell me, dear

The most important word here is the verb "see," which we encounter for the second time. In the next nine lines, it will be used four more times. We'll get to that in a minute. But first let's deal with this "mounting" line and the next. It's a masterly job here. With "mounting," the poet

kills two birds at once, for "mounting" describes both the climb and the climber. And the climber looms even larger, because the woman "cowers"—i.e., shrinks under him. Remember that she looks "at some fear." "Mounting" versus "cowered" gives you the contrast, then, between their respective frames, with the implicit danger contained in his largeness. In any case, her alternative to fear is not comfort. And the resoluteness of "I will find out now?" echoes the superior physical mass, not alleviated by the cajoling "dear" that follows a remark—"you must tell me?"—that is both imperative and conscious of this contrast.

[quotes ll. 13-20]

And now we come to this verb "see." Within fifteen lines it's been used six times. Every experienced poet knows how risky it is to use the same word several times within a short space. The risk is that of tautology. So what is it that Frost is after here? I think he is after precisely that tautology. More accurately, non-semantic utterance. Which you get, for instance, in "Oh," and again, "Oh." Frost had a theory about what he called "sentence-sounds." It had to do with his observation that the sound, the tonality, of human locution is as semantic as actual words. For instance, you overhear two people conversing behind a closed door, in a room. You don't hear the words, yet you know the general drift of their dialogue; in fact, you may pretty accurately figure out its substance. In other words, the tune matters more than the lyrics, which are, so to speak, replaceable or redundant. Anyway, the repetition of this or that word liberates the tune, makes it more audible. By the same token, such repetition liberates the mind—rids you of the notion presented by the word. (This is the old Zen technique, of course, but, come to think of it, finding it in an American poem makes you wonder whether philosophical principles don't spring from texts rather than the other way around.)

The six "see"s here do precisely that. They exclaim rather than explain. It could be "see," it could be "Oh," it could be "yes," it could be any monosyllabic word. The idea is to explode the verb from within, for the content of the actual observation defeats the process of observation, its means, and the very observer. The effect that Frost tries to create is the inadequacy of response when you automatically repeat the first word that comes to your tongue. "Seeing" here is simply reeling from the unnameable. The least seeing our hero does is in "Just that I see," for by this time the verb, having already been used four times, is robbed of its "observing" and "understanding" meaning (not to mention the fact—draining the word even further of content—that we readers are ourselves still in the dark, still don't know what there is to see out that window). By now, it is just sound, denoting an animal response rather than a rational one.

This sort of explosion of bona-fide words into pure, non-semantic sounds will occur several times in the course of this poem. Another happens very soon, ten lines later.

Characteristically, these explosions occur whenever the players find themselves in close physical proximity. They are the verbal—or, better yet, the aural—equivalents of a hiatus. Frost directs them with tremendous consistency, suggesting his characters' profound (at least, prior to this scene) incompatibility. "Home Burial" is, in fact, the study of that, and on the literal level the tragedy it describes is the characters' comeuppance for violating each other's territorial and mental imperatives by having a child. Now that the child is lost, the imperatives play themselves out with vehemence they claim their own.

By standing next to the woman, the man acquires her vantage point. Because he is larger than she, and also because this is his house (as line 23 shows), where he has lived, presumably, most of his life, he must, one imagines, bend somewhat to put his eyes on her

line of vision. Now they are next to each other, in an almost intimate proximity, on the threshold of their bedroom, atop the stairs. The bedroom has a window, a window has a view. And here Frost produces the most stunning simile of this poem, and perhaps of his entire career:

[quotes ll. 20-30]

"The little graveyard where my people are?" generates an air of endearment, and it's with this air that "So small the window frames the whole of it?" starts, only to tumble itself into "Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?" The key word here is "frames," because it doubles as the window's actual frame and as a picture on a bedroom wall. The window hangs, as it were, on the bedroom wall like a picture, and that picture depicts a graveyard. "Depicting," though, means reducing to the size of a picture. Imagine having that in your bedroom. In the next line, though, the graveyard is restored to its actual size and, for that reason, equated with the bedroom. This equation is as much psychological as it is spatial. Inadvertently, the man blurts out the summary of the marriage (foreshadowed in the grim pun of the title). And, equally inadvertently, the "is it?" invites the woman to agree with this summary, almost implying her complicity.

As if that were not enough, the next two lines, with their stones of slate and marble, proceed to reinforce the simile, equating the graveyard with the made-up bed, with its pentametrically arranged pillows and cushions?populated by a family of small, inanimate children. "Broad-shouldered little slabs." This is Pygmalion unbound, on a rampage. What we have here is the man's intrusion into the woman's mind, a violation of her mental imperative?if you will, an ossification of it. And then this ossifying hand?petrifying, actually?stretches toward what's still raw, palpably as well as in her mind:

"But I understand it is not the stones, But the child's mound?"

It's not that the contrast between the stones and the mound is too stark, though it is, it is his ability?or, rather, his attempt?to articulate it that she finds unbearable. For, should he succeed, should he find the words to articulate her mental anguish, the mound will join the stones in the "picture," will become a slab itself, will become a pillow of their bed. Moreover, this will amount to the total penetration of her inner sanctum that of her mind. And he is getting there:

[quotes ll. 30-35]

The poem is gathering its dark force. Four "don't"s are that non-semantic explosion, resulting in hiatus. We are so much in the story line now?up to the eyebrows?that we may forget that this is still a ballet, still a succession of frames, still an artifice, stage-managed by the poet. In fact, we are about to take sides with our characters, aren't we? Well, I suggest we pull ourselves out of this by our eyebrows and think for a moment about what it all tells us about our poet. Imagine, for instance, that the story line has been drawn from experience? from, say, the loss of a firstborn. What does all that you've read thus far tell you about the author, about his sensibility? How much he is absorbed by the story and?what's more crucial?to what degree he is free from it?

Were this a seminar, I'd wait for your answers. Since it is not, I've got to answer this question myself And the answer is: He is very free. Dangerously so. The very ability to

utilize?to play with?this sort of material suggests an extremely wide margin of detachment. The ability to turn this material into a blank-verse, pentameter monotone adds another degree to that detachment. To observe a relation between a family graveyard and a bedroom?s fourposter?still another. Added up, they amount to a considerable degree of detachment. A degree that dooms human interplay, that makes communication impossible, for communication requires an equal.

[?.]

Remember the hiatus, and what causes it, and remember that this is an artifice. Actually, the author himself reminds you of it with

She withdrew, shrinking from beneath his arm That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs . . .

It is still a ballet, you see, and the stage direction is incorporated into the text. The most telling detail here is the banister. Why does the author put it here? First, to reintroduce the staircase, which we might by now have forgotten about, stunned by the business of ruining the bedroom. But, secondly, the banister prefigures her sliding downstairs, since every child uses banisters for sliding down. "And turned on him with such a daunting look" is another stage direction:

He said twice over before he knew himself: "Can?t a man speak of his own child he?s lost?"

Now, this is a remarkably good line. It has a distinctly vernacular, almost proverbial air. And the author is definitely aware of how good it is. So, trying both to underscore its effectiveness and to obscure his awareness of it, he emphasizes the unwittingness of this utterance: "He said twice over before he knew himself."

[?.]

This whole section of the poem, from "'Don?t, don?t, don?t, don?t?" on, obviously has some sexual connotations, of her turning the man down. That?s what the story of Pygmalion and his model is all about. On the literal level, "Home Burial" evolves along similar "hard to get" lines. However, I don?t think that Frost, for all his autonomy, was conscious of that. (After all, North of Boston shows no acquaintance with Freudian terminology.) And, if he was not, this sort of approach on our part is invalid. Nevertheless, we should bear some of it in mind as we are embarking on the bulk of this poem:

[quotes ll. 36-44]

What we?ve got here is the desire to escape: not so much the man as the enclosure of the place, not to mention the subject of their exchange. Yet the resolution is incomplete, as the fidgeting with the hat shows, since the execution of this desire will be counterproductive for the model as far as being the subject of explication goes. May I go so far as to suggest that that would mean a loss of advantage, not to mention that it would be the end of the poem? In fact, it does end with precisely that, with her exit. The literal level will get into conflict, or fusion, with the metaphorical. Hence "'I don?t know rightly whether any man can,?" which

fuses both these levels, forcing the poem to proceed, you don't know any longer who is the horse here, who is the cart. I doubt whether the poet himself knew that at this point. The fusion's result is the release of a certain force, which subordinates his pen, and the best it can do is keep both strands' literal and metaphorical'in check.

We learn the heroine's name, and that this sort of discourse had its precedents, with nearly identical results. Given the fact that we know the way the poem ends, we may judge'well, we may imagine'the character of those occasions. The scene in "Home Burial" is but a repetition. By this token, the poem doesn't so much inform us about their life as replace it. We also learn, from "'Don't go to someone else this time,'" about a mixture of jealousy and sense of shame felt by at least one of them. And we learn, from "'I won't come down the stairs?" and from "He sat and fixed his chin between his fists," about the fear of violence present in their physical proximity. The latter line is a wonderful embodiment of stasis, very much in the fashion of Rodin's *Penseur*, albeit with two fists, which is a very telling self-referential detail, since the forceful application of fist to chin is what results in a knockout.

The main thing here, though, is the reintroduction of the stairs. Not only the literal stairs but the steps in "he sat," too. From now on, the entire dialogue occurs on the stairs, though they have become the scene of an impasse rather than a passage. No physical steps are taken. Instead, we have their verbal, or oral, substitute. The ballet ends, yielding to the verbal advance and retreat, which is heralded by "'There's something I should like to ask you, dear.'" Note again the air of cajoling, colored this time with the recognition of its futility in "dear." Note also the last semblance of actual interplay in "'You don't know how to ask it.? 'Help me, then?'"'this last knocking on the door, or, better yet, on the wall. Note "Her fingers moved the latch for all reply," because this feint of trying for the door is the last physical movement, the last theatrical or cinematic gesture in the poem, save one more latch-trying.

[quotes ll. 45-56]

The speaker's hectic mental pacing is fully counterbalanced by his immobility. If this is a ballet, it is a mental one. In fact, it's very much like fencing not with an opponent or a shadow but with one's self. The lines are constantly taking a step forward and then undoing it ("She took a doubtful step and then undid it.") The main technical device here is enjambment, which physically resembles descending the stairs. In fact, this back-and-forth, this give-and-take almost gives you a sense of being short of breath. Until, that is, the release that is coming with the formulaic, folksy "'A man must partly give up being a man / With womenfolk?'"

After this release, you get three lines of more evenly paced verse, almost a tribute to iambic pentameter's proclivity for coherence, ending with the pentametrically triumphant "'Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.'" And here our poet makes another not so subdued dash toward the proverbial: "'Two that don't love can't live together without them / But two that do can't live together with them?'" though this comes off as a bit cumbersome, and not entirely convincing.

Frost partly senses that: hence "She moved the latch a little." But that's only one explanation. The whole point of this qualifier-burdened monologue is the explication of its addressee. The man is groping for understanding. He realizes that in order to understand he's got to surrender'if not suspend entirely'his rationality. In other words, he descends. But this is really running down stairs that lead upward. And, partly from rapidly approaching the end of his wits, partly out of purely rhetorical inertia, he summons here the notion of love. In other words, this quasi-proverbial two-liner about love is a rational argument, and that, of course, is not enough

for its addressee.

For the more she is explicated, the more remote she gets the higher her pedestal grows (which is perhaps of specific importance to her now that she is downstairs). It's not grief that drives her out of the house but the dread of being explicated, as well as of the explicator himself. She wants to stay impenetrable and won't accept anything short of his complete surrender. And he is well on the way to it:

"Don't?don't go Don't carry it to someone else this time. Tell me about it if it's something human."

The last is the most stunning, most tragic line, in my view, in the entire poem. It amounts practically to the heroine's ultimate victory?i.e., to the aforementioned rational surrender on the part of the explicator. For all its colloquial air, it promotes her mental operations to supernatural status, thus acknowledging infinity?ushered into her mind by the child's death?as his rival. Against this he is powerless, since her access to that infinity, her absorption by and commerce with it, is backed in his eyes by the whole mythology of the opposite sex?by the whole notion of the alternative being impressed upon him by her at this point rather thoroughly. That's what he is losing her to by staying rational. It is a shrill, almost hysterical line, admitting the man's limitations and momentarily bringing the whole discourse to a plane of regard that the heroine could be at home on

?the one she perhaps seeks. But only momentarily. He can't proceed at this level, and succumbs to pleading:

[quotes ll. 59-66]

He tumbles down, as it were, from the hysterical height of "?Tell me about it if it's something human.?"

But this tumble, this mental knocking about the metrically lapsing stairs, restores him to rationality, with all its attendant qualifiers. That brings him rather close to the heart of the matter?to her taking her "?mother-loss of a first child / So inconsolably?"?and he evokes the catchall notion of love again, this time somewhat more convincingly, though still tinged with a rhetorical flourish: "?in the face of love.?" The very word?"love"?" undermines its emotional reality, reducing the sentiment to its utilitarian application as a means of overcoming tragedy. However, overcoming tragedy deprives its victim of the status of hero or heroine. This, combined with the resentment over the explicator's lowering of his explication's plane of regard, results in the heroine's interruption of "?You'd think his memory might be satisfied??" with "?There you go sneering now!?" It's Galatea's self-defense, the defense against the further application of the chiseling instrument to her already attained features.

Because of its absorbing story line, there is a strong temptation to bill "Home Burial" as a tragedy of incommunicability, a poem about the failure of language, and many have succumbed to this temptation. In fact, it is just the reverse: it is a tragedy of communication, for communication's logical end is the violation of your interlocutor's mental imperative. This is a poem about language's terrifying success, for language, in the final analysis, is alien to the sentiments it articulates. No one is more aware of that than a poet, and if "Home Burial" is autobiographical, it is so in the first place by revealing Frost's grasp of the collision between his *métier* and his emotions. To drive this point home, may I suggest that you compare the

actual sentiment you may feel toward an individual in your company and the word "love." A poet is doomed to resort to words. So is the speaker in "Home Burial." Hence, their overlapping in this poem; hence, too, its autobiographical reputation.

But let us take it a step further. The poet here should be identified not with one character but with both. He is the man here, all right, but he is the woman also. Thus you've got a clash: not just of two sensibilities but of two languages. Sensibilities may merge—say, in the act of love; languages can't. Sensibilities may result in a child, languages won't. And, now that the child is dead, what's left is two totally autonomous languages, two non-overlapping systems of verbalization. In short, words. His versus hers, and hers are fewer. This makes her enigmatic. Enigmas are subject to explication, which they resist—in her case, with all she's got. His job, or, more exactly, the job of his language, is, therefore, the explication of her language, or, more exactly, her reticence. Which, when it comes to human interplay, is a recipe for disaster. When it comes to a poem, an enormous challenge.

Small wonder, then, that this "dark pastoral" grows darker with every line; it proceeds by aggravation, reflecting not so much the complexity of the author's mind as words' own appetite for disaster. For the more you push reticence, the greater it gets, having nothing to fall back upon but itself. The enigma thus grows bigger.

[?.]

[quotes ll. 71-90]

This is the voice of a very foreign territory indeed: a foreign language. It is a view of the man from a distance he can't possibly fathom, since it is proportionate to the frequency with which the heroine creeps up and down the stairs. Which, in its own right, is proportionate to the leaps of his gravel in the course of his digging the grave. Whatever the ratio, it is not in favor of his actual or mental steps toward her on that staircase. Nor in his favor is the rationale behind her creeping up and down the stairs while he is digging. Presumably, there is nobody else around to do the job. (That they lost their firstborn suggests that they are fairly young and thus not very well off.) Presumably also, by performing this menial task, and by doing it in a particularly mechanical way—as a remarkably skillful mimetic job in the pentameter here indicates (or as is charged by the heroine)—the man is quelling, or controlling, his grief, that is, his movements, unlike the heroine's, are functional.

In short, this is futility's view of utility. For obvious reasons, this view is usually precise and rich in judgment: "If you had any feelings," and "Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly / And roll back down the mound beside the hole." Depending on the length of observation—and the description of digging runs here for nine lines—this view may result, as it does here, in a sensation of utter disparity between the observer and the observed: "I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you." For observation, you see, results in nothing, while digging produces at least a mound, or a hole. Whose mental equivalent in the observer is also, as it were, a grave. Or, rather, a fusion of the man and his purpose, not to mention his instrument. What futility and Frost's pentameter register here above all is rhythm. The heroine observes an inanimate machine. The man in her eye is a gravedigger, and thus her alternative.

Now, the sight of our alternative is always unwelcome, not to say threatening. The closer your view of it, the sharper your general sense of guilt and of a deserved comeuppance. In the mind of a woman who has lost her child, that sense may be fairly sharp. Add to that her

inability to translate her grief into any useful action, save a highly agitated creeping up and down, as well as the recognition and subsequent glorification of that inability. And add a cross-purpose correspondence between her movements and his: between her steps and his spade. What do you think it would result in? And remember that she is in his house, that this is the graveyard where his people are. And that he is a gravedigger.

"Then you came in I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't
know why, But I went near to see with my own eyes."

Note this "and I don't know why," for here she unwittingly drifts toward her own projection. All that she needs now is to check that projection with her own eyes. That is, she wants to make her mental picture physical.

"You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own
baby's grave And talk about your everyday concerns. You had stood the spade up
against the wall Outside there in the entry, for I saw it."

So what do you think she sees with her own eyes, and what does that sight prove? What does the frame contain this time? What does she have a close-up of? I am afraid she sees a murder weapon: she sees a blade. The fresh earth stains either on the shoes or on his spade make the spade's edge shine: make it into a blade. And does earth "stain," however fresh? Her very choice of noun, denoting liquid, suggests accuses blood. What should our man have done? Should he have taken his shoes off before entering the house? Perhaps. Perhaps he should have left his spade outside, too. But he is a farmer, and acts like one—presumably out of fatigue. So he brings in his instrument—in her eyes, the instrument of death. And the same goes for his shoes, and it goes for the rest of the man. A gravedigger is equated here, if you will, with the reaper. And there are only the two of them in this house.

The most awful bit is "for I saw," because it emphasizes the perceived symbolism of that spade left standing against the wall outside there in the entry: for future use. Or as a guard. Or as an unwitting memento mori. At the same time, "for I saw it" conveys the capriciousness of her perception and the triumph of somebody who cannot be fooled, the triumph of catching the enemy. It is futility in full bloom, engulfing and absorbing utility into its shadow.

"I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed. I'm cursed God, if I don't believe
I'm cursed."

This is practically a nonverbal recognition of defeat, coming in the form of a typical Frostian understatement, studded with tautological monosyllables quickly abandoning their semantic functions. Our Napoleon or Pygmalion is completely routed by his creation, who still keeps pressing on.

"I can repeat the very words you were saying: ?Three foggy mornings and one
rainy day Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.? Think of it, talk like that at
such a time! What had how long it takes a birch to rot To do with what was in the

darkened parlor?"

Now, this is where our poem effectively ends. The rest is simply denouement, in which our heroine goes rambling on in an increasingly incoherent fashion about death, the world being evil, uncaring friends, and feeling alone. It is a rather hysterical monologue, whose only function, in terms of the story line, is to struggle toward a release for what has been pent up in her mind. It does not, and in the end she resorts to the door, as though only landscape were proportionate to her mental state and thus could be of solace.

[?.]

So what was it that he was after in this, his very own poem? He was, I think, after grief and reason, which, while poison to each other, are language's most efficient fuel?or, if you will, poetry's indelible ink. Frost's reliance on them here and elsewhere almost gives you the sense that his dipping into this ink pot had to do with the hope of reducing the level of its contents, you detect a sort of vested interest on his part. Yet the more one dips into it, the more it brims with this black essence of existence, and the more one's mind, like one's fingers, gets soiled by this liquid. For the more there is of grief, the more there is of reason. As much as one may be tempted to take sides in "Home Burial," the presence of the narrator here rules this out, for while the characters stand, respectively, for reason and for grief, the narrator stands for their fusion. To put it differently, while the characters' actual union disintegrates, the story, as it were, marries grief to reason, since the bond of the narrative here supersedes the individual dynamics?well, at least for the reader. Perhaps for the author as well. The poem, in other words, plays fate.

[?.]

If this poem is dark, darker still is the mind of its maker, who plays all three roles the man, the woman, and the narrator. Their equal reality, taken separately or together, is still inferior to that of the poem's author, since "Home Burial" is but one poem among many. The price of his autonomy is, of course, in its coloration, and perhaps what you ultimately get out of this poem is not its story but the vision of its ultimately autonomous maker. The characters and the narrator are, as it were, pushing the author out of any humanly palatable context: he stands outside, denied re-entry, perhaps not coveting it at all. This is the dialogue's?alias the Life Force's? doing And this particular posture, this utter autonomy, strikes me as utterly American. Hence this poet's monotone, his pentametric drawl a signal from a far-distant station. One may liken him to a spacecraft that, as the downward pull of gravity weakens, finds itself nonetheless in the grip of a different gravitational force: outward. The fuel, though, is still the same? grief and reason. The only thing that conspires against this metaphor of mine is that American spacecraft usually return.

From *Homage to Robert Frost* by Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1996. © The Estate of Joseph Brodsky.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Robert Frost [2]

Author:

Joseph Brodsky [3]

Poem:

Home Burial [4]

Tags:

love [5]

Wonderful [6]

Hunter [7]

Prey [8]

Drama [9]

Source URL: <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/joseph-brodsky-home-burial>

Links

[1] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/robert-frost>

[3] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/joseph-brodsky>

[4] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/home-burial>

[5] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/love>

[6] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/wonderful>

[7] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/hunter>

[8] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/prey>

[9] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/drama>