

Mr. Robert Frost

Dear Mr. Frost,

Last month on the anniversary of my father's death, I was looking through a book of your poetry and came across "Birches." The familiar ache, still intense after six years, was trying hard to displace the daily televised nightmarish images of violence, suffering, and terror. Your poem echoed my feelings and comforted me. It gave me hope that I could accept the warring emotions and forces of life without them diminishing the tender memories of the past or the joy that is yet to come.

Your words paint reality as both beautiful and frightful, both kind and vicious. The tension between the two forces is not resolved but acknowledged. The acknowledgement is freeing because it doesn't demand black or white perception or action but allows me to welcome openly the contradictions of life. Yes, there is unimaginable horror in this world. Yes, there is extraordinary grace. They live side by side every day. If I deny the horror, I cannot appreciate the grace, and I cannot experience the wonderful possibilities that lie somewhere in between tinted by each. As if this wasn't enough to consider, within the battling forces of reality you add two other powerful and spectacular forces to be honored and embraced, those of memory and fantasy.

The boy in your poem tugged at my heart. He brought me back to a time when I felt content to devise endless solitary play schemes with nature's gifts to keep me company. Who can not remember flying a kite, hoping to be picked off the earth and carried to some unknown destination? But just as the wind begins to gust we become breathless, fearing that our wish will be granted. That was a time of innocence and simplicity not altered by the whims of man or nature. As we mature, these moments of pure joy become secreted away or burdened down by reality. Your poem reminds me that we should unlock these moments and keep them safe in our hearts. These moments can exist in a world that contains darkness and become all the more precious because they do.

Perhaps we are put on this earth to swing on the branches of the birch, to believe for a moment that our wonderful fantasies can cause the branches to permanently bend. Yet in the next instant we can acknowledge honestly the chilling beauty of nature's hand in bending them. Fancy and reality are both essential to our life, each enriching the other.

The clarity and beauty of your words has helped me find an inner peace in a time of confusion. When I am a very old man at the end of a life well lived, I hope I will still hear your words. I hope I will be able to close my eyes and find the bent and crackled white birch trees, silent and steadfast and predictable, like wearied warriors. In my mind I will climb those branches, and against their will they will carry me away from the earth toward my destiny where I will find another swinger of birches, my father.

Thank you for your words that have touched me so much. Thank you for the life you have shared with so many.

Sincerely,

John Sullivan