

My Neighbor, the Poet

by

Donald Tongue

© 2010 by Donald Tongue

33 Windsor Blvd.

Londonderry, NH 03053

H: (603) 437-3450

C: (603) 264-4041

nhtongues@comcast.net

CAST

(In order of appearance)

HANK Harold Lee, owner of the Frost Acres Auto Salvage Services located at the former Frost farm in Derry, NH, 30s-40s.

LESLEY Lesley Frost Ballantine, daughter of Robert and Elinor Frost, 65.

ELINOR Elinor Miriam White - Frost, wife of Robert Frost, 27-32.

ROBERT Robert Lee Frost, ivy league college dropout, farmer and aspiring poet, 26-31.

SCENE HEADING	PAGE #	LENGTH
SCENE I - FROST FARM, 1964, EARLY MORNING HANK (42), LESLEY (44)	1	8 5/8
SCENE II - FROST FARM (THE MAGOON PLACE), NOV 1900 ROBERT (23), ELINOR (22)	10	5 5/8
SCENE III - FROST FARM, 1964, LATER THAT MORNING HANK (22), LESLEY (22)	16	4 1/8
SCENE IV - FROST FARM, MAY 1904, ELINOR (32), ROBERT (31), LESLEY (1)	21	7 1/8
SCENE V - FROST FARM, 1964, THAT AFTERNOON HANK (31), LESLEY (30)	29	5 6/8
SCENE VI - FROST FARM, DECEMBER 24, 1905, ELINOR (23), ROBERT (23), ROBERT & ELINOR (1), LESLEY(1)	35	5 1/8
SCENE VII - FROST FARM, 1964, THAT AFTERNOON HANK (32), LESLEY (30)	41	7 5/8

SETTING: The Robert Frost farm in Derry, NH

STAGING: The set is split between a simple farm kitchen, stage right, attached to a small exterior porch. The kitchen and porch are joined by a cutaway of an exterior wall, porch roof, and a upstage door between the kitchen and porch. A facade of a barn, with open barn doors, can be seen upstage to the left of the porch. In the kitchen is a small rectangular table with two chairs against the exterior wall next to a window sill. The set should be skewed with the downstage edge of the porch being slightly stage right of the upstage edge of the porch

SYNOPSIS: The story of a small New England farm has many tales to tell. There's the story of the business owner who used the farm to store junked cars. In a previous life, not long after it became a farm, there's the story of a young couple, hoping to make a fresh start, who arrived on its doorstep with their newborn daughter, Lesley. Some sixty years after the couple sold the farm, there's the story of Lesley returning and taking up the cause of reclaiming the farm to restore and preserve the property that embodies many of the images found in her father's poetry - the mending wall; the apple orchard; white birches. These are the tales of, *My Neighbor, the Poet*.

POEM RECITATIONS: The four full poems recited by the four actors are to be done in character, but out of the context of the scene.

POEMS	PAGE
"Desert Places" by Robert Frost - 1936	15
"Flower-Gathering" by Robert Frost - 1915	28
"To the Thawing Wind" by Robert Frost - 1913	40
"A Tuft of Flowers" by Robert Frost - 1915	47

CHARACTER PROFILES

HANK - is a fictionalized character based on Edwin F. Lee, who owned the Frost farm, from the early 1950s to 1964, and actually did operate an auto junkyard on the premises. The encounter between him and Lesley Frost in the play is a fictionalized dramatization, not based on any actual historic moment.

LESLEY - is a character based on Lesley Frost, the oldest surviving child of Robert and Elinor Frost. She was born April 28, 1899, and was a 20 month old baby when the family moved to the farm in November of 1900.

ELINOR - is a character based on Elinor Miriam (White) Frost, daughter of Edwin and Henrietta White, born October 25, 1873 in Acton MA. Her father was a Universalist minister in Lawrence, MA, who later left the ministry and became a cabinet maker.

ROBERT - is a character based on the poet, Robert Lee Frost, the son of William Prescott Frost Jr. and Isabelle (Moodie) Frost, born March 26, 1874, in San Francisco, CA.

SCENE I - FROST FARM, 1964, EARLY MORNING

At rise, HANK is sitting at the kitchen table, dressed in auto mechanic's overalls, reading the Derry News and drinking coffee.

LESLEY enters stage left wearing a 60's styled dress, hat, stockings, heels. She crosses to the porch and knocks on the door.

HANK

No one's home.

LESLEY

Mr. Lee?

HANK

Shop don't open for another hour.

LESLEY

Mr. Lee. It's Lesley Frost... May I speak with you? ... I'm sorry to disturb you so early,

HANK reluctantly stands, crosses to the door.

LESLEY (CONT'D)

but I wish to discuss the matter of the farm acquisition and the legal proceedings ...

HANK suddenly opens the door, surprising LESLEY.

HANK

Listen, I've already told you.

LESLEY

(flustered)
OH! Excuse me I...

HANK

So, why is it you and everyone else keep bugging me?

LESLEY

If I may have a moment...

HANK

There isn't anything more to say.

LESLEY

Mr. Lee. I know things seem to be at a standstill...

HANK

They *are* at a standstill.

LESLEY

Yes, I understand.

HANK

No. I don't think you do. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here.

LESLEY

(rambling)

Maybe, but I just wanted to talk; see if we can come to an amiable agreement. It doesn't need to be this way. I'm sure we can work this out so that both parties will benefit *and* then we can all move forward with the...

HANK

Will you just cut the crap. I mean, JEEZ! How many times do I have to tell you people? I'm not selling. So... do what you gotta do and save your breath because, believe me, there is nothing you can say that is going to make me change my mind. Okay? ... Okay.

HANK starts to close the door.

LESLEY

No! Please! Mr. Lee. I understand how disquieting...

HANK

(incredulously)

Disquieting?

LESLEY

or upsetting...

HANK

Upsetting?

LESLEY

this must be...

HANK

You're kidding - right?

LESLEY

But if you would just hear me out I...

HANK

You don't listen so well do you.

LESLEY

I don't think you truly appreciate what is at stake here.

HANK

Oh, that's rich. Yeah, poor Hank - I don't get what's going on here. So you have to come and explain it to me.

LESLEY

That isn't what I meant. I was simply trying to...

HANK

Save it. You don't have to draw me a map - I get it. You and all you people come around here telling me to sell my house, my business, just because, what - some big wig *famous* poet used to live here?

LESLEY

It was Robert Frost.

HANK

I know who the poet was.

LESLEY

And this used to be our *farm*.

HANK

Well now it's Frost Acres - Auto Salvage Services. There's no money in farming. But there's plenty of money in harvesting parts from junked cars.

LESLEY

Yes, I can imagine there is, but...

HANK

But what?

LESLEY

Will you at least hear what I have to say?

HANK

No. I'm through talking. So you just go ahead with your emanate domain...

LESLEY

Eminent dom...

HANK closes the door, sits down at the table and continues reading the newspaper and drinking his coffee.

LESLEY is stunned, reluctantly turns to go, then decides to try again, returns and knocks on the door.

HANK

(to himself)

OH you have GOT to be kidding me.

LESLEY

Mr. Lee?

HANK

(shrugs, yells)

Door's open.

LESLEY opens the door and enters the kitchen.

HANK ignores her, continues reading
his newspaper.

LESLEY

(beat)

I was just wondering, if you wouldn't mind, terribly, if I
could have a look around?

HANK

Sure, why not. In fact, I'll make you a deal. As long as you
don't bug me about selling, you can do whatever it is you
want'a do. Knock yourself out.

LESLEY

Thank you.

LESLEY looks around, wanders off
through the upstage kitchen
doorway, beat, reenters.

LESLEY (CONT'D)

Is Mrs. Lee home?

HANK

No. Lois took the kids up to a place we go to at the Lake. We
aren't exactly seeing eye to eye right now.

LESLEY

She wants to sell.

HANK

Something like that.

LESLEY

We spoke on the phone the other day.

HANK

So, was this her idea - having you stop by? Try to talk some
sense into me?

LESLEY

No. We just talked. I did ask if I could stop by for a visit.
I just wanted to see the place.

HANK

Well, now you've seen it.

LESLEY takes a few beats to look
around the kitchen.

LESLEY

Yes... It's still much the same isn't it? I mean, sure, there
are the new appliances, but it feels so familiar... I
remember there was a large soapstone sink over there, under
the window.

HANK

It's out in the barn.

LESLEY

Oh?

HANK

Yeah, I use it to soak and clean out carburetors.

LESLEY

Oh.

LESLEY notices an antique kerosine
lantern.

LESLEY (CONT'D)

We used to have lanterns just like this one.

HANK

Uh, yeah, *Lois* finds stuff like that - antique shops. More
old junk if you ask me.

LESLEY moves the lantern to the
table, disturbing HANK's reading.

LESLEY

I can remember Papa sitting there, late at night, at a table by that window; sometimes reading; mostly writing. Some nights, when the moon was bright and full? - I'd wake up and there'd be this ghostly pale white light - casting long shadows. I'd sneak out of bed, down the stairs, and at the bottom I'd see it - just a faint glow from the lantern - coming from the kitchen. It was like a beacon from a lighthouse. I'd quietly creep near the doorway and peek in. Papa would be sitting there looking as though he was far away, caught up in a memory. Eventually he'd look up and see me; smile; shake his head. We'd talk a bit, then he'd get me a glass of water and send me back to bed. The whole way back I'd see how far I could get from the kitchen and still see the light - from the lantern - it was like a game.

PAUSE

HANK

(sarcastic)

Well don't stop now. You have some great material there. Heck. You keep this up I just might give you the place.

LESLEY

(annoyed)

That was *not* my intention.

HANK

Yeah? Could have fooled me.

LESLEY

Lois was right. There is no sense in talking to you.

HANK

So. You two were talking - trying to figure a way to get me to sell?

LESLEY

Good-day Mr. Lee.

LESLEY crosses to the door.

HANK

Hold on a second.

LESLEY

What?

HANK

You got me curious about something - something you said.

LESLEY

Yes?

HANK

You see, I know a few farmers and none of them can afford to stay up late. So, how did he get any work done after sitt'n up all night writing?

LESLEY

Well, that was a problem. Papa would sleep in, milk the cow at noon or late at night or... sometimes he'd forget. It is a wonder we got any milk. I suspect the farm and animals would have sorely gone wanting for care if it wasn't for Carl.

HANK

Carl?

LESLEY

Yes. Carl Burrell. He was Papa's friend from High School. He was hired on and lived with us for a while to help out.

HANK

So the farm did pretty well.

LESLEY

No! Heavens, no.

HANK

But it earned enough to have a live-in hired hand?

LESLEY

No. They never earned enough to actually make a living at it. No, the best thing this farm ever produced was what Papa worked on - there - at the kitchen table.

HANK
(thinking it over)

Hmm. I see.

HANK folds his newspaper, stands.

HANK (CONT'D)
Well, I've got work waiting for me in the barn, so if you don't mind...

LESLEY
I'm just going to have a look around the rest of the house, if that's alright.

HANK
Sure. It's a bit of a mess. The *cleaning lady* hasn't been around lately, if you know what I mean.

LESLEY
I'm sure it's fine.

HANK
Yeah. Uh. Just be sure to shut the door on your way out.

LESLEY
I will.

HANK exits through the upstage kitchen doorway, taking his coffee cup and newspaper.

LESLEY exits through a stage right kitchen doorway.

SCENE II - FROST FARM (THE MAGOON PLACE), NOVEMBER 1900, MID DAY

ELINOR enters stage left and quickly crosses to the porch. She is carrying a baby, Lesley Frost, wrapped in a blanket.

ROBERT (O.S.)

Elinor, wait.

ROBERT enters stage left.

ELINOR stops but does not turn to look at ROBERT.

ELINOR

I think it best we check out the house before starting to move in...

ROBERT

I'm sorry...

We need to figure out which rooms things should go into...

I don't know what to say...

ELINOR

(beat)

How about, thank you.

ROBERT

Yes, you're right. I should be thankful but...

ELINOR

But what?

ELINOR waits a bit, then continues crossing to the porch.

ROBERT

I just wish you hadn't gone to Prescott without telling me.

ELINOR

And what would you have said if I had; told you I was thinking of going to your grandfather to ask him for help?

ROBERT

I... I don't know.

ELINOR

Would you have swallowed your pride?

ROBERT

Maybe.

ELINOR

Gone *with* me to ask him for...

ROBERT

No, probably not. But I would have figured something out, some way to...to...

ELINOR

To what? What could you have done? Three months behind on our rent; no place to go. We didn't have time for you to figure something out.

ROBERT

I know, it just... it feels like... don't you see what he's doing?

ELINOR

Yes. I see very clearly. He is trying to give us a chance to...

ROBERT

NO! He's trying to get rid of me. Trying to erase any memory of the grandson who has so disappointed him; leaving Dartmouth; dropping out of Harvard to raise chickens. He had hoped so much for me; to not fail him like my father. Now he has simply given up. Sent me off to Derry New Hampshire, out here in the middle of nowhere...

ELINOR

This is hardly nowhere, Robert. There's a village and a depot - two trolly lines and factories - there is even an academy...

ROBERT

It's far enough away so he doesn't have to think about me anymore.

ELINOR

He wanted to help you, us - he always has. But you can't see it because you don't have the good sense God gives a nesting bird who is thankful for a tree branch. You want to see everything, even good fortune, as a slight, a slap in the face.

ROBERT

You don't know him, Elinor. He is not a kind man. There is always some personal gain in all he does.

ELINOR

He has given us this farm and a yearly stipend and paid for Carl to help us get started - I cannot see what, in heaven's name, he could possibly gain from...

ROBERT

When "My Butterfly" was published - in The Independent?

ELINOR

Robert, that was *years* ago. What does that have to do with...

ROBERT

Prescott told me how *proud* he was. He even offered to support me for one full year, but *only* if I would promise to give up being a writer if, by years end, I was not able to support myself.

ELINOR

Robert, he is a man of business. That is simply how he sees the world.

ROBERT

It was though he was putting my life's work on the auction block.

(mocking, auctioneer)

I have one year, *one* year. Will someone give me twenty? Do I hear twenty? Twenty?

ELINOR

You're a fool.

ELINOR, tired of this nonsense,
again starts to head towards the
porch.

ROBERT

No... I'm a writer... a poet... and Prescott wants to stamp it out of me. He thinks chaining me to this farm for ten years should be sufficient.

ELINOR

Robert, no...

ROBERT

By the time 1910 rolls around he figures I will have given up; have learned to make a *real* living; stopped wasting time on *childish* pursuits...

ELINOR

No one wishes that upon you. I *least* of all... but we have a child and I need you to try and stop making this so so difficult...

ROBERT

alright...

ELINOR

to accept what is and make the best of it for me and...

ROBERT

Alright!... You're right. I'm sorry, Elinor... *I* want to make things right.

ELINOR

Good... Why don't you start unloading the wagon while I go in and look around. I will need Elliot's... Lesley's cradle... and I will...

ELINOR is suddenly overtaken with strong emotions.

ROBERT
(pleading)

Elinor.

ELINOR

just start unpacking.

ELINOR again starts to head towards the porch.

ROBERT

Elliot is gone.

ELINOR

no...

ROBERT

And God knows there is no one more to blame than I.

ELINOR

Don't talk...

ROBERT

A man has to speak of his own child he's lost.

ELINOR

No. You say it all wrong.

ROBERT

Is there anything I can speak of?

ELINOR

no

ROBERT

Say?

ELINOR

I can't bear to hear it.

ROBERT

And I can't bear the silence. It makes my guilt all the more.

ELINOR

And your words make my pain all the more.

(regains composure, softly)

Please. Not now... It's getting cold. I need to get Lesley inside.

ELINOR crosses to the house and enters the kitchen. We see her surveying the kitchen for a moment and cradling the baby in her arms. She then exits through the stage right kitchen doorway.

ROBERT

("Desert Places" by Robert Frost - 1936)

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it -- it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less--
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars -- on stars where no human race is.

I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

ROBERT exits stage left.