Robert Frost
Speaks
Departmentally
ON JANUARY FOURTEENTH, 1935

Robert Frost posted a letter from Key West to George Frisbee Whicher in Amherst. "The enclosed," he commenced, "went across my mind the other night like a cloud across the moon. There is nothing appropriate in it to anything down here — nothing particularly appropriate. The events recorded in it took place down here. But they might just as well have taken place in New England. Ants seem to be ants pretty much everywhere. Their characteristics are called forth by sugar on a table cloth equally north and south. If I could not by force or cunning wrest my poem to fit where I am cast away by the doctor on this 50 percent deserted island the question was how was I going to bring it in between me and anybody else. It
wouldn't satisfy the requirements merely to print it in a magazine appropos of nothing. In my desperation casting about, I caught at the last word of the last line to connect it with you trying to be even feebly departmental with English at our Amherst College."

The letter continues, concludes, is signed and dated. Then a final note is added directly above the salutation: "At last moment departmental ditty withheld for emendation under national rehabilitation act and something else substituted." Something else, in the form of a six page leaflet, was an early draft of "A Serious Step Lightly Taken" which, radically altered, was to appear in *A Witness Tree* (1942).

The next letter, written on January 23rd, brought the promised "Departmental," composed, as the previous poem had been, in the form of a leaflet. "Take my word for it
Ran into a staphylin moth
A thousand times his size.
He showed not the least surprise.
His business wasn't with such.
He gave it scarcely a touch.
And was off on his duty run.
But if he encountered one
Of the hive's enquiry squad,
Whose work is to find out God
And the nature of time and space,
He would put him onto the case.
And are a curious race.
One crossing with hurried tread
The body, none of their dead
Isn't given a moment's arrest-
Feeling not even impressed.
But the no doubt report to any
With whom he crosses antennae.
And they no doubt report
To the higher up at court.
Then word goes forth in formic
Death's come to Jerry McConnie
(This is the height of fame
When executing a white name).
Our selfless forager Jerry
Will the special January,
Whose officiit is to bury.
The dead of the community
So bring him home to his people.
Lay him in state on a sepulchre
Wrapped for burial in a petal
Embracing him with cher 3 wattles.
This is the word of your leader.
And presently on the scene
Appears a solemn mortician,
And talking formal position
With feoters calmly atTwiddle,
Seeking the dead by the head,
And hearing him high in air,
Carrying him out of there.
No one stands round to stare.
It couldn't be called uncute.
But now frightfully departmental.
and the internal evidence,” wrote Robert Frost, “my Ant is not a Stinging Ant. He is merely an amusing little piece of nature faking so bare faced that I found I was ashamed of it—was and still am. But after having piqued your suspicions as I evidently have (though unintentionally) I can see that I owe it to you to let you satisfy yourself that it was my scientific and artistic scruples that led me to quash my Ant work and nothing personal about you and departments.”

“Departmental” appeared first in the December 1935 issue of the *Yale Review*. Meanwhile a number of further “emendations” had been made, among them the excision of two lines. Still another, affecting the final line, occurred prior to the poem’s next appearance, in *A Further Range* (1936). A letter of January 22, 1936 to Louis Untermeyer provides a background for this revision.
"But I must write a small letter to put you out of any anxiety you may have given yourself by finding fault with 'frightfully.' To tell you the truth I thought that word was part of the joke—just like 'mortician' and 'out of there' . . ." This to the contrary, thereafter "frightfully" yielded place to "thoroughly."

The holograph which has been reproduced and the first two letters which have been quoted here, are in the Amherst College Library collections, a portion of Mrs. George Frisbee Whicher's gift of the letters from Robert Frost to her husband made in his memory.

This keepsake celebrating the dedication of the Robert Frost Library has been printed at The Spiral Press, New York; the facsimile of Mr. Frost's letter at the Meriden Gravure Company.