Design[1] - Robert Frost

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right, 5
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth—
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth.
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all? 10
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

Questions for Study and Discussion:

1. In what traditional form is the poem written? (Hint: it is a type of sonnet).
2. Identify and explain the functions of the two parts of this type of sonnet.
3. What else, ironically, could be described with the words "dimpled," "fat," and "white"?
4. What is a heal-all? What color is it usually? How does the fact that this one is white add to the overall atmosphere of the poem?
5. What image does the simile in line three emphasize?
6. What does the metaphor in line four suggest about the events described in the stanza?
7. How does the simile in line six contribute to the atmosphere and imagery of the poem?
8. The first half of line seven is a metaphor. What things are being compared?
9. The second half of line seven is a simile. What image is suggested in the simile?
10. The final line of the first stanza contains two contradictory images. Explain. Are there other contrasting images in the stanza?
11. What does the word "appall" mean in line thirteen?
12. The second stanza is a series of rhetorical questions about the first stanza. In general, what is the speaker suggesting about fate, or design, in these questions?
13. The final line seems to contradict the ideas about fate and design posed in the previous lines. How can this suggestion—that perhaps fate or design does not play a role in human existence—be just as terrifying as if there is a predetermined plan for all of us?
14. What do you think about fate, or design? Do we have free will or choice as human beings? Do we have control over the events of our lives or do things happen randomly often without any seeming reason or explanation?
15. What role does faith play in these types of questions? How do human beings use religion to deal with the questions of fate or design?

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[1] Summary of "The Argument from Design" by Thomas Aquinas

- All things have an order or arrangement, and work for an end.
- The order of the universe cannot be explained by chance, but only by design and purpose.
- Design and purpose is a product of intelligence.
- Therefore nature is directed by a Divine Intelligence or Great Designer.