

READER'S COMPANION

for

Carol Frost's

Entwined: Three Lyric Sequences

(Tupelo Press, 2014)

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Biographical Note

Carol Frost is the author of ten collections of poetry, including *Pure, Venus & Don Juan, Love and Scorn, I Will Say Beauty, The Queen's Desertion, Honeycomb*, and most recently *Entwined: Three Lyric Sequences* (Tupelo Press, 2014).

She is a four-time recipient of the Pushcart Prize and has been nominated for that award a remarkable twenty times.

She founded the Catskill Poetry Workshop in 1988 and was its director until 2008. She served as one of two poetry editors for the Pushcart Prize Anthology XXVIII, and has been the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. Her poetry and essays have appeared in hundreds of publications, including *The American Poetry Review, AGNI, Beloit Poetry Journal*, and *Smartish Pace*.

She is presently a professor and holds the Theodore Bruce and Barbara Lawrence Alfond Chair in English at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida.

An Introduction to *Entwined*

by Carol Frost

I'd always been drawn to Keats's poetry and his statements about poetry; for instance, "I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity; it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance." The notions of "fine excess" and "Remembrance" fit with the lyric concentration I felt drawn to, believing that a writer's words could create an intimacy with readers that had lasting appeal.

My youthful critical mind followed my own poems around like Goldilocks in the bears' house. What did I know about beauty? About line and sensory notation? Syntax and sound? It would take more than intuition to find out. It would take time.

The poems collected in the three parts of *Entwined* are the result of my reading and writing lyric and narrative poetry over years, concentrating on the line.

"She sang beyond the genius of the sea" is one of the first lines of poetry I loved as a line. I think it appealed to my equally held love for the singing voice and the natural world, but I loved the word *beyond* nearly as much as *sang* and *sea*, and the phrase *genius of the sea*. Who is that, I wondered — pale Ramon? Or the woman who could sing so beautifully, while I had always wanted to and could not? Was this the sea itself? And then — oh, the sea's genius. The line was and is beautiful to me; it was first beautiful, before I could appreciate the compression and slight logical dislocation, and before I knew what Wallace Stevens was saying.



I started "Voyage To Black Point" after buying a cottage on the Gulf of Mexico in Cedar Key, Florida, where each year I spent months on the water in a kayak and little Boston Whaler. I loved my time alone in the Florida light and air. I kept crab traps and learned the backwaters of the coast. To catch the redfish and trout we grilled and poached, I learned some of nature's essentials — how to read the tides and wind, watch the weather, see the currents above hidden oyster shoals, feel for the bottom. There were sometimes thousands of birds resting on a back bay. There were hammerheads and bull sharks. The flats smelled of lemon and muck. Once a sawfish bumped into my kayak.

To write it all down, I had to forget myself and my way of using language. If I wanted to present the constancy of change in the light and waters around Cedar Key, the richness of the experience, the ways time sped when I was by myself, I'd have to come up with a different syntax. I didn't start with a new syntax in place; I listened to the sounds of the words, and keeping the necessities of the poems in mind, new sentences with different punctuation began to form.

Our next-door neighbors, a Southern couple in their eighties who had fished for mullet, caught scallops, and crabbed in their bird-dog boat for decades, read the Black Point sequence as I wrote it. We'd spent time fishing together, talking about Florida flora and fauna — never poetry — and arguing about politics. One time, I asked them if the colons, and especially the double colons, were in any way confusing in the poems. “No,” was their reply. “The double colon is a link and a stop, and the double colon is stronger,” Mike said. Just so.

The early drafts of the first “Abstraction” poem that I wrote (“The Past”) were narrative, but the sense of things seemed too fixed, the language predictable. I started in again with a question, which led to a second, longer question, and I wrote in free verse lines of varying length to help create the fluid, even turbulent, sense of time that I wanted to convey, without using so many words. I left out most of the details I knew about the family that had owned the farm the century before, and I imagined a man named Martin in a straw hat scything a field.

In the delay before a reader would understand the poem, I told myself, the metaphors and sounds would become the interest. Maybe beauty could reside in the delay.

I remember the pleasure of writing the last lines of “The Past” with their implied menace, shadows fitting themselves around the ankles (of Martin, of anyone) and not letting go.

In the next days I wrote “Her Beauty,” and on the basis of those two poems I came up with the rules and principles of my lexicon of Abstractions. Here they are:

- * Eleven lines
- * Varying line lengths
- * Abstract title
- * Defining an abstract word
- * Appearance in the body of each poem a form of the abstraction (for instance, in “Secrecy”: “a secret”)
- * Unusual sensory detail and imagery (for example, “By now her beauty no longer catches glances like small animals in a gentle snare.”)
- * Omission of all but necessary narrative
- * Associative leaps

I wrote the “Abstractions” until it almost seemed to me that all poems ought to be eleven lines long, even *Paradise Lost* and “Song of Myself.” Then I had to unlearn them by writing the longer poems that followed, which along with a group of the “Abstractions” were published in my book *Love and Scorn*.

With the dislocations of time and logic that dementia involves, the third lyric sequence in *Entwined* (called “Apiary Poems”) needed another formulation: a central motif to keep the poems from being too loosely spoken, but one that allowed for many, many variations. Long before I wrote the first word — rare for me — I decided that each poem in the sequence would refer to bees and beekeeping, the bee hive a metaphor for the mind. Part of the reason for a

metaphorical approach had to have been a need to find a way to move from the very personal (my mother's losses) to the universal. I hoped that my focusing on metaphors in these nerve-wracking poems could help me write with strongest emotion while avoiding a diarist's self-regard.

I wrote "Apiary Poems" over a dozen years, until just before my mother's death. She knew I had been writing them until the last, when she no longer recognized me. I hadn't composed in chronological fashion but when I put the poems together, I saw the sense in creating that chronology — the passage of time, until time itself lost meaning for my mother, and before that loss, her other losses, a dwindling memory and sense of self.

As I re-read the three lyric sequences, written over a period of twenty-five years and previously published separately, I thought again of the Keatsian notion of a "fine excess" and of my passage toward something like an understanding of how the lyric poem speaks. I thought that when gathered together, the three parts of *Entwined* would tell of that journey, in and out of time and space.

How does poetry happen? When and where does it start? Why in our darkest and brightest moments do we read poems, or write them? Is poetry, as in the poem "The Past," a "stepping into dusk"?

A Conversation with Carol Frost: Interview by Tony Leuzzi

Adapted from The KR Conversations, hosted by The Kenyon Review
(<http://www.kenyonreview.org/conversation/carol-frost/>)

Tony Leuzzi: Genesis, particularly the story of the temptation and the fall, is clearly a source text for a number of your poems. Could you discuss your relationship to that text and articulate ways in which it has sparked your creative imagination?

Carol Frost: My initial sense of language as ceremony may have come from the Bible. I grew up Episcopalian, though as a young child was sent summers to Bible school — a free day camp run by Baptists. I gradually lost my sense of biblical truth, but the beauty in the language and in myth continued and continues. Journey, losing one's way, and return are only secular versions of temptation and fall and the possibility of redemption. Another way to say this is that the parts of the Bible that have resonated with me are stories of a natural world — gardens, stars, flesh. I imagine that if I'd been told Homer's stories first, my imagination would have been sparked by the vivid and lasting physicality of that moral universe.

TL: Many of your poems are ekphrastic. Others reference specific paintings and the artists who created them. Could you explain why you have so often turned to the visual arts for material?

CF: How can one *not* turn to painting and works of architecture? Many of my aesthetic lessons when I was young came from looking at art and, to some extent, listening to classical music, which probably makes me sound elitist. When I was nineteen, for instance, I left school to travel in Europe — it was my money, after all. I wanted to look at Roman architecture and to see the grandmother in Vienna I had last seen when I was three or four. I hitchhiked through Western Europe and then settled in Paris in a tiny apartment on Rue de Senlis. I took classes at the Sorbonne, and one afternoon chanced to meet a Canadian friend near the Luxembourg Gardens. We were bored — it was our job to be bored at that age — and wondered what to do. On a kiosk we found that the Hotel Meurice was having a showing of Salvador Dali's painting "Tuna Fishing." . . . The painting had been pirated. . . .

I loved surrealism; it was my job to love surrealism (and existentialism).

Then Dali came into the room. Yes, he had the cape and cane and wonderful mustache. I happened to be carrying a copy of Sartre's *Nausea*. I had been holding the book behind my back, and the curator of the show noticed the cover. He asked me if he could show the book to Dali. After a few minutes Dali

turned toward me and motioned me over. He asked me where I'd gotten my copy of the book. I told him I'd recently bought it at Shakespeare and Company, and Dali asked his assistant to get him a copy. . . . I said, in my rather poor French, that he could have my copy. In return he gave me a copy of the beautiful program, a book with illustrations of the paintings in the show, and he signed it for me. He *drew* my name, I should say, then signed the program. I pored over it when I got back to my place and found a sentence of his that really did teach me my earliest lesson in aesthetics: "*Je ne renonce à rien, je continue.*"

The whole trip through Europe became a time of figuring out the art continuum. Years later I did the same for poetry. Last year I saw the Brueghel and Bosch I'd missed in "Tuna Fishing." I found Dali's copy of Vermeer's "The Lace Maker." Don't get me started on what writers I've seen in other writers! I take from writers and I take from art.

TL: You seem genuinely excited talking about the importance of the visual arts in relation to your work.

CF: Yes, I have had such vivid and extraordinary experiences that . . . made me want to be a part of the world of art. Since I can't draw or paint or sculpt . . . I've done what I could with words. My husband has some fondness for the few watercolors I've attempted, but I think that's mainly because he is my husband. It's freeing to paint badly — I haven't any sense I need to paint well. I paint when the mood strikes.

TL: Michael Waters has called the thirty-five poems that comprise the "Abstractions" section of *Love and Scorn*, and which originally appeared in *Pure and Venus and Don Juan* [and which are gathered all together in the new book, *Entwined*], truncated sonnets. Would you agree with his term for the form you've created for those poems?

CF: I've always found the word truncated to be ugly, and in truth some of the "Abstractions" are longer than the traditional sonnet of fourteen lines or seventy stresses (14 x 5), but the number of lines has less to do with a sonnet being a sonnet than its lyric movement.

Is not a curtal sonnet a sonnet? Are not George Meredith's sixteen-line poems in *Modern Love* sonnets? The "Abstractions" are lyrics, and there are enough of them to seem to be in their own form. I can tell you the aesthetic principles and even a few rules — which I feel free to break — that inform the poems.

The abstract title, usually one word, must appear in some form in the poem. The poems ought to be eleven lines long, and most of them are — but not all. The metaphoric equivalent for the abstract title ought to be surprising: "Her beauty no longer catches glances like small animals in a gentle snare . . ." for example. I try to suppress narrative and to keep changing directions. I try to write in long lines, though it's hard to write a long line that isn't a few short lines

spliced together. I was also experimenting with pace and with where to put the “turn.”

They were brain-breaking to write at first, stayed challenging, then became so much a part of my thinking and metaphor making that I had a hard time quitting writing them. It took me two years.

TL: In a prior phone conversation, you told me one critic dismissed your “Abstractions” as mere imitations of the condensed, long-lined poems C. K. Williams wrote in *Flesh and Blood*. On the surface, your “Abstractions” and his poems look similar (they both favor the long, syntactically complicated verse line and rarely exceed ten to fifteen lines per poem) but your work is, in your own words, far less discursive than his. Could you elaborate on the non-narrative and non-discursive elements of these poems and alternative methods of development?

CF: I like metaphor; it's my mind's worst or best habit. In writing the “Abstractions” I was trying to write a short lexicon based on metaphors for abstract terms. I like the leaps one makes in thought and association, and I wanted to create a poetic that would make leaps part of the experience of the imagination in early form, before story intervenes or discursive thought waters down the effect of a sensory perception associated with another sensory perception.

Then, in revising, one measures the distances between the perceptions and sees what new meanings are possible. It's certainly not the only way to write poetry, but I read a lot of John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins when I was young.

TL: One of the chief pleasures I get in reading the “Abstractions” is seeing how you build up an often-stunning density and concreteness. Each abstraction, for instance, is condensed to a specific context, and you subject that context to remarkable shifts of thought and perception.

CF: I'm gratified that you see this. The shifts were willed at first. We are remarkably linear in thought when asked to be, and I wanted to break free from that social behavior. I'd seen for a long time, probably since childhood, how logic perverts the truth; I lived in fear of hypocrisy and rationalizing. The way for me to trust language has been by balancing images and in this way shifting the moral and emotional ground toward honesty.

TL: Hunting imagery is common in your poems. I understand that you are a hunter as well. Could you talk about the hunt's importance to you and how participation in this ritualistic act informs your poetry?

CF: For me, hunting has less to do with ritual than . . . with the quality of attention you must bring to the hunt, being very much in a physical relationship

with wind, earth, sun, trees, bird-call, and wanting to take responsibility as carnivore for the flesh I could more easily buy in the supermarket. The truth is that packaged meat is animal.

TL: I have noticed the prominence of extended similes in your poems. Can you talk about the simile in your work?

CF: I don't have a theory about simile. In "Lies," for example, the people I'm talking about are self-conscious, so why not write a self-conscious simile? That can be a kind of precision. I don't think that all similes need be natural. And I do think that the attempt to get to something that can't quite be found or said is benign, even if the result seems a bit obscure. A fair attempt must be made. I take pains to try to get it right, but sometimes "it" is out of reach.

TL: In "Secrecy" you write, "It was scarcely explainable / and could not be kept a secret." Ironically, that which cannot be easily articulated insists upon articulation. Would you say this is a statement of your poetics? If so, how do you see the proposition quoted above working through your poems?

CF: That's a wonderful question. I suppose a way to answer you is to say that I've never been particularly interested in the obvious. Oh, I try to work toward clarity, but mystery often exerts a stronger force in my thought. I may even be psychologically unable to fasten on one answer to a question or one resolution to a problem — political, emotional, social, philosophical, epistemological, etc.

I mean, I vote. I voice my opinions to friends and colleagues — sometimes. But poetry seems the realm where something more complex, beautiful, and truthful exists and changes in every little shift of experience or syntax. As for "could not be kept a secret," isn't a writer one who cannot not write? I cannot not write. The universe would be overwhelming.

TL: Let's focus for a while on your . . . book *The Queen's Desertion*, and in particular on the section in that book called "Voyage to Black Point" [now included in revised form in *Entwined*]. What was the impetus for writing these poems?

CF: Some of those poems were a continuation of poems about Florida that I started maybe three or four years before, and published in my previous book, *I Will Say Beauty*. But the more time I spent on the water in Florida, the more it seemed to me that writing about Florida would require some additions to my usual syntax.

That realization was finally as much a part of the project as anything else. Subject matter is always important to me, but coming up with a syntax that would represent the fecundity and richness of the experiences I had on the water along the nature coast and around Cedar Key is what especially pleased me when I was done writing them.

It wasn't until I had ten or so that I began to see this section of the book as a voyage or a journey.

TL: What kind of voyage did you see here?

CF: First of all, there is a genuine physical and literal journey from the cove where I have a cottage north to Black Point. The backwaters and marshes are tricky to navigate. I had to pick my way around shoals and sandbars. I had to be aware of the shifting tides. The experience of being on the water by myself, lonesome and in some danger of going aground, losing my way, or hooking a fish as large as my boat, has been thrilling. I'm often out all day and I have had the opportunity to think about a lot of things — the internal journey.

TL: Your decision to create a triple spacing between each line here works wonderfully. As a reader I was inclined to pay more attention to what was happening in any given line, rather than thrusting vertically towards the end of the poem.

CF: Good! I have an idealized notion of the line. I think of it as a unit of integrity. Although grammar, the coherence of the sentence and the way syntax carries meaning are of initial importance, the line itself has the possibility of being any number of things: one, I suppose, is a thing of beauty. I wanted to isolate the line in these poems. I'd tried something like this in *I Will Say Beauty*, when I justified the poems on the right side of the page, instead of the left.

That was a way for me to work against print culture. The print culture is, I think, an aid to reading quickly. I thought I could find some fresh ways of slowing the reader down to regard the line in ways. The line can help to create the ceremony of language poetry aspires to.

TL: The “Voyage to Black Point” poems are not only distinguished by your decision to triple space between each line. You also punctuate these poems in unusual ways. The prevalent colon usage in particular . . .

CF: The colon is for me a very interesting punctuation point. It can be used as a formal introducer, of course. It can be used between sentences almost as an equal sign. I think of it also as an arrow: this leads to that. The double colon, which I favored in many of the poems, is not only a stronger stop, but also a way of sending you forward and backward — and this goes back to the heightening of items in a page of poetry.

TL: When I came across the double colons I tended to value the word that appeared before and after it more than I might have if the punctuation mark were absent.

CF: Just as I prize the line, I prize the word. This comes from my early reading and loving a poet, for instance, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, who created his own

lexicon. While I wasn't creating new words, I was trying to reinvest very ordinary words with something new. A good way for me to try this, I figured, was to find a way to isolate those words.

But then, of course, so much diction having to do with the natural world in Florida includes interesting words. The vocabulary is already enriched. The names of fishes, for instance, like "mako" or "hammerhead." "Sheepshead" is a good case in point. You think of the word as the name of something and not itself. Why would this fish be called a sheepshead? Does it look like a sheep's head? Is it woolly? What does an actual sheep's head look like? One can find this sort of elemental language play in William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," where he writes, "so much depends / upon // a red wheel / barrow." There, he broke the word "wheelbarrow," which allowed me to see for the first time that a wheelbarrow was not just a thing that I could picture in the garden, but a construct of a barrow and a wheel.

Words are, above all, signifiers, not necessarily invitations to contemplation — or even pleasure. Like Williams and Hopkins and countless other poets before me, I had to somehow value the word in a way that would allow it to be appreciated beyond that first function.

TL: Do you have a name for the form you've invented in the "Voyage to Black Point" poems?

CF: No idea. How about "High Lyric with Double Colons and Triple Spacing"? [Laughs] I can tell you this: in the interest of saving space in their magazines, editors or typesetters would want to remove that extra spacing in there, perhaps thinking it was merely an eccentricity of mine. I had to be insistent. It made me think, "Is this just an effete gesture. Will it be read as effete?" I decided to stick to my guns. In doing so, I had some satisfaction that I managed to do what I wanted with these eccentrically spaced and unusually punctuated poems, which had to do with . . . trying to capture the essence of the Florida landscape. It's almost an onslaught of experience when you're in the very hot and humid weather, out on a boat in the beating sun, and suddenly a ten-foot diameter ray will leap out of the water! I needed to find a way to get across that astonishing surprise. I very much prize the experience of looking at that ray alone, with no social obligations, just for itself.

TL: In these poems, I was also getting a sense of how the mind constructs a language in order to understand that environment.

CF: Yes, I think that is right. And the journey does take on an interiority: how the mind functions (which is something that has always fascinated me, and which I'm sure I get wrong); how we feel and think; how we are in the world; how we process the information that comes to us, and how we create language out of it. I wanted to be able to talk about the landscape as if there were no intercession of word or thought, which is a paradox because the poems think, and there is language. But somehow I wanted to see if I could give the impression of

transparency, a lack of human intervention. All of these considerations were part and parcel of the project, part of the journey.

TL: You allude to Elizabeth Bishop a few times in the “Voyage to Black Point” poems. Do you see yourself connected to her in some ways?

CF: My relationship to her is complex. As a graduate student, I started out really disliking her poems. I found most of them too transparent and simple. But then I began to appreciate some of the more metaphysical poems. “At the Fish Houses,” comes to mind. Enjoying the metaphysics, I returned to the simpler poems, more ready to appreciate them.

Later I found she and I had a lot in common — and I don't mean to say this by way of praising myself. We both liked to fish. We both lived in the northeast and in Florida. Her interests in maps, in flora and fauna matched mine.

I've been drawn to the syntactic complexity in poems like “The Weed” and “The Monument.” Her whole idea of geographical mirroring, *GM* in her notebooks, is interesting to me — basically writing out of a sense of place. I now own one ninth of her grandparents' house in Nova Scotia, as sort of a literary legacy project.

Because I've done some research on Bishop and possess all of the drafts of “At the Fish Houses,” I decided I would go and try and find where those fish houses were. I found, for instance, the hotel where she stayed: The Ragged Islands Inn. It's now a private residence. The woman who now lives there told me where she thought the fish houses had been — near Lockport. Nothing's left of them, but I recently had a letter from a woman who knew Bishop, which confirms the location. Great Village was a rather large port during the time she lived there. I decided to try to find the wharf and the shipyards, which now are grazing ground for cattle. You can't see or get to the wharf from the road anymore. Everything's grown in. The only way for me to find the wharf was to wade along Great River. I saved a small piece of the caving-in wooden structure for the Bishop place.

TL: Your interest in flora, fauna, and animal life not only connects you to Bishop, but to Marianne Moore and May Swenson.

CF: I feel connected to all writers. One of the loveliest things about writing is this sense of literary continuum. As a writer you are part of tradition and a conversation, and it's very sweet to try to fix yourself somewhere along that line. I suppose what saves us from arrogance in doing so is that the process takes a lot of work, a lot of reading and trying to find out the connections between writers. I have certainly read and enjoyed both Moore and Swenson, but I know less about them than about Bishop. I know about Bishop and Berryman because I have written about them. I have also learned about Moore through her correspondence with Bishop. Those letters are fascinating and wonderful.

TL: Yes. The collection of Bishop's letters in *One Art* shows her to be an excellent and prodigious letter writer.

CF: And now the complete letters of Robert Lowell and Bishop are out. I can't wait to have the time to read the whole collection.

TL: She had a bit of a crush on him, didn't she?

CF: Yes, and he on her. And they both wanted to be fishermen. Actually, she wanted to be a sea captain and he thought he would like to have a fishing trawler. He once sent her a copy of *The Compleat Angler*.

TL: You, too, are fascinated with fishing. Do you see this as related to your interest in hunting?

CF: I suppose so, in the sense that both are activities — like the writing of poetry — you can do by yourself. I don't hunt or fish with other people. I like to have no interference with my experience of being in the natural world, which is the main reason why I fish and hunt. I suppose I could just walk around in the woods or I could just row my boat or take a kayak out and still be in the natural world. But for some reason my attention isn't as focused when I don't have a task. When you're fishing you have to know everything about the tide and the wind and the bottom. Is the bottom sandy or muddy? If it's muddy, you're more likely to catch catfish, which is not a prized fish in the salt waters. By fishing or hunting, I'm required to pay closer attention, which I love to do.

[What follows here in the interview is discussion of the dramatic monologue "Relación of Cabeza De Vaca," a poem in *The Queen's Desertion* that is not in *Entwined*.]

TL: [That] poem . . . has heightened language, but it also has a richness of narrative you do not use in most of your other poems.

CF: . . . I usually shun narrative or see how little I can get away with. I'm sure this is a preference I hold because of the way my mind works, which is by association and ellipses. I may be condemned to be a lyric poet because I have little tendency to think in narratives or chronologically.

For what it's worth, I also think most narrative work goes on too long: few writers can resist starting their narratives too early and ending past necessity.

TL: I agree. Many poets . . . by attending too closely to a narrative miss the lyric gesture in the poem.

CF: They may miss the possibility within the poem — what other emotional and metaphysical possibilities there are. Walcott's narrative poem *Omeros* is pure genius. So is Brigit Kelly's "Song." However, I found I had more fluency in the lyric mode when I was writing my "Abstractions," even with the first of these,

“The Past.” I wanted to write about the people who owned our old farmhouse in the Otsdawa Valley before we did, but I couldn't realize the poem, which more and more seemed to want to talk about some essence of the Past. The narrative seemed to be flattening out my interest in that still ineffable notion. So I tried to write the poem in another way.

Instead of trying to pile up moments in time, I tend to pile up images. I want to see how they collide and what friction or energy can be created through this collision. I have noticed that some readers lack patience for highly metaphorical poems, maybe because they do not trust themselves to understand by association. The associative element in our thinking is so natural that people do not realize that they're doing it, but if a poem is built out of metaphors they become *aware* of their associations and begin to mistrust them, wanting instead a discursive hint or expository sentence that will say how to feel and think about what's going on in the poem. Or some story to mend any sense of time dislocation.

TL: As a reader, there are many ways of understanding a poem. There are other ways of knowing a poem. Interestingly, I've just interviewed Robert Glück, who is associated with the New Narrative writers in San Francisco. You and he could not be writing about more different subjects, but some of your observations about narrative and the lyric are strikingly similar.

CF: When I was a younger writer and feeling a little insecure about my few aesthetic notions — and couldn't have made a fire out of them if I had dried and put gasoline on them — I was very certain about what I liked and didn't like, and I was afraid of some experimental writing. I started, like many poets of my generation, being taught by poets who had grown up with the New Criticism. That was my bias. But the older I get, the freer I feel to appreciate the sort of writing I may have recoiled from twenty years ago.

TL: In one of Glück's essays on Kathy Acker, another New Narrative writer from the coast, he suggests that the best place for a reader to be is at the point of uncertainty.

CF: I think that's great. I would agree with that. Now, only if readers would.

TL: I notice that your own writing — particularly in the “Voyage to Black Point” poems — has become more experimental.

CF: Now in my thirty-fifth year of writing, with a lot more self-confidence, I'm finding that I'm far more experimental than many of my writing students! When I was starting out I was trying to prove to myself that I knew anything at all about writing poems. I was afraid to experiment. Now I think I need to call into question everything I do all the time. Before, I wanted not to have to call things into question, so I wrote poems that behaved. Now, if the poems are going to behave, they're going to do so differently and on their own terms. I'll enjoy the spectacle.

An Interview with Carol Frost by A. K. Huseby

Adapted from *Smartish Pace*

(http://www.smartishpace.com/interviews/carol_frost/)

A. K. Huseby: “All Summer Long” (in the book *Love and Scorn*) is a transportive piece that describes a “lonely, happy child / . . . who hates silences.” You also speak in “Apiary VIII” of a woman with dementia existing in “her shell of silence” (in *Poetry* magazine’s October 2007 issue). And there seems to be something shameful in the stillness and “dumb imaginings” in the solitude of “Country Marriage” (also in *Love and Scorn*). Is poetry a way to combat those silences, reach others, forestall the loneliness, and document memory?

Carol Frost: All of the above, to one extent or another, although there certainly are poems that affirm solitary thought. I speak of Robinson Crusoe’s joy in solitary pursuits, for instance. My Noah isn’t silent; he yells when he sees what God had wrought. At the heart of it, I suppose I could tell you that I dislike fabrication. I mean I think it’s easy to lie; people want nice lies, don’t you think? Perhaps that’s why so many of the people in my poems wander away from human company. But it’s very hard to stay in the region of imagination beyond the range of familiar truths. The familiar calls you back. It must be noted that the “lonely, happy child” is a good deal better off than the poor woman who no longer inhabits her mind.

AKH: Your piece “Lies” (in *Venus & Don Juan*) speaks of “people made of glass.” As I read that piece, I could hear this abrasive laughter, these false apologies and grating politeness: “Oh, really, you are too kind. So lovely to be included.” Even those who wish others “good luck” are really seeking an out to the conversation. Do you think those small untruths stem from that comfort level, the need to return to the familiar?

CF: The sort of social behavior I meant is what semanticists used to refer to as “purr talk.” We purr. Maybe it’s an out, but it’s also an in, until someone turns especially catty.

AKH: Your poems also often engage and challenge biblical passages, for example Eve’s consideration of eating the fruit and the time before and after that choice in “Matins” (*Love and Scorn*), and the insight that Noah’s ark would have been surrounded by floating corpses in “Joy” (*Venus & Don Juan*). With what intention do you approach such pieces? Do you write them to “push the button” in the way that Shakespeare approached social issues in his own time?

CF: I went to a Baptist summer camp as a child, not for the good of my soul, I think, but because my mother could afford it. I was amazed by the stories from the Bible we were shown on filmstrips. One on stoning an adulteress was almost

too much to bear. Later, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" had a similar effect on me. But from a quite early age I was fascinated by how we explain ourselves. (A favorite human foible of mine is hypocrisy.) I'm pretty sure that if I'd been introduced to Homer at that age, my moral referents would have come from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. My intention, as far as I can tell, is never to use myths as overlay to what I end up arguing, if I may say that my poems argue — implicitly, perhaps — but by plumbing the depths of humanness from which the myths must have come. I won't say I want to convince anyone of anything. Let's call arguing asking, and whatever answers come, they exist momentarily.

AKH: What myth or Bible story do you find most interesting or disturbing?

CF: I write more about Genesis than the other books. But basically what the Bible gave me was entry into the sort of thought that I like to call, when encountered in poetry, "moral dreaming." As description or compass, the Bible seems skewed. But this isn't a bad thing for a young person with an open mind who gets thinking.

AKH: Reading "Morphine" (in *Venus & Don Juan*), I felt so addressed by the piece, as though you brought me into the room to stand with you, to bear witness. I've never been present when someone passed away, but this poem is powerfully visionary in a way that left me feeling as though I had. Really, that piece does what great poetry can. Much of your work feels intensely biographical, specifically the pieces on dementia and childhood. Is it?

CF: What I'd wish is that the notion of autobiographical detail was a tertiary concern. If it sounds like it happened to me, that's not bad. *Authentic* is the term, I think, people use in this regard. Still, I try very hard to make a poem, and the made thing is more important to me than the material. A childhood is simply what you had. You don't have the poems until you make them.

AKH: Yet, there are those in critical theory, deconstructionists such as Derrida for example, who assert that there is nothing outside the text ("Il n'y a pas de hors-texte"). Neither the author's context nor the audience's matter because they are constantly changed by time, location, etcetera. The author's context becomes less important than what the reader brings to the work, and the work should stand on its own. Do you agree with that line of reasoning?

CF: Pretty much, although I'd like to say that "what the reader brings to the work" seems at odds with the notion that audience context "doesn't matter." Logic implodes in that contradiction. I do believe that a poem can stand on its own if it is beautifully made, even if readers misread the poem. Cogency is important, but design trumps cogency. We all know poems famously misread, and meaning or biographical truth are only two contingencies. I used to want readers to "get it" — to get what I meant — but now I'm satisfied with a poem I've made lasting after it's read by anyone with any subjectivity.

AKH: In her book *Women, Native, Other*, Trinh T. Minh-ha said:

[W]riting . . . may be said to be concerned, not with inserting a “me” into language, but with creating an opening where the “me” disappears while “I” endlessly come and go, as the nature of language requires.

Should writing de-emphasize the author, making a universal point, if there can be such a thing? Or alternately, by plumbing personal experience does an author end up making that universal point regardless?

CF: I wouldn't like to say *should* when it comes to writers making choices about how to find rhetorical balance, linguistic pleasure, something like truth or beauty. I prefer to leave that up to the temperament of the writer. I prefer to think of the possible in poetry. Is it harder to write out of fraught memory to create a poem that resonates and lasts? Perhaps so and yet, funnily enough, many writers care to try; anyway, to record the memory. Art be damned. And yet, who would want to suggest to such a writer that her or his “me” ought to disappear?

AKH: “Art be damned” — that reminds me of Oscar Wilde's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* — “The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. . . . All art is quite useless.” Though your comment indicated those who write to record memory only, do you agree with Wilde?

CF: I believe art matters, a belief that I don't quit on or second guess — rare for me. The question that keeps arriving and departing, I think, is really about how an individual defines art. Then: are aesthetics granite or water? You have wonderfully opened up what my mother would have called a can of worms. My original point is that individual writers will make their own choices.

AKH: Then, do you consider the rhetorical impact of your work as you write, or is that an afterthought?

CF: I wait as late as possible to take responsibility for what my poem says. I like surprises.

AKH: In “To Kill a Deer” and “Pure,” you used hunting as a narrative element. This is also the case with “Crows” (in *Venus & Don Juan*). Do you hunt?

CF: Yes, I do hunt. I also fish. I use the fish heads for bait for my crab traps. I eat meat, fish, and crabs. I used to keep a large garden until late summer and autumn travel kept me from harvest, so now I only have a kitchen garden. I use the herbs to cook the animals and plants that I prepare for my family and guests. I understand that there are some monkeys who like to rinse their food in salt water, probably partly for flavoring.

Human nature includes these behaviors and others. I have a poem where I talk about when in our evolution procreation became love. I have poems that talk

about language, birth, imagination, art, music, gods and angels, insects, sex, pets, time, mortality, morality, dementia; and I dare say I've not finished looking at all this from many different angles. The three poems about hunting that you mention are from three different angles. As I think I said, it's hard to get to the truth.

AKH: It seems as though you have an encyclopedic approach to subject matter. Do you have a list of topics or issues that you want to cover, that you turn over to examine all the facets?

CF: Oh no. I simply have a restless mind, and is it a high or low threshold for belief? I mean I can't even believe myself for very long.

AKH: After reading your books, the tropes you return to began to stand out: bees, graveyards, gardens, dementia, silence. I wondered what made these places, items, and issues bring you back to them?

CF: I already mentioned the gardens I've kept. Graveyards are interesting historical resources, often beautiful, and in rural New York they are everywhere. The Pope cemetery is near us on the Otsdawa Road — a family cemetery that began to include the community dead in the nineteenth century. All the headstones face west, instead of east as is usual. Bees invited themselves into my poems, first in their humming sound just below sense. I write about mind and imagination, and when I started to write about dementia, the beehive seemed a decent metaphor to follow, especially bees deserting the hive. I ended up assigning myself that metaphor (hive for the mind) for the collection of poems about dementia recently finished — I think it's finished. Let's see: silence? Really, are there as many references to silence as to, say, loneliness or birds and fish and skyscrapers? I'm kidding about skyscrapers. In any case, I rarely think about the tropes.

AKH: You mentioned during our opening conversation that this is the first summer you've had off in seventeen years because you are no longer directing the Catskill Poetry Workshop. Billy Collins has asserted that poetry workshops are not conducive to writing, and he titled one of his books *Sailing Alone Around the Room* to emphasize the notion that poetry is ultimately a solitary pursuit. Do you agree?

CF: I do agree with Mr. Collins. You know, I teach poetry, but my intention in teaching is to make it possible for the student to have as many teachers as there are authors. What can be learned is far and away broader and deeper than what a few workshops can tell one. In this sense one is never quite alone. Something else occurs to me — you know how different it is when you go to a museum with another person, and when you go alone? The poet may have hundreds of friends, but the poet needs to go alone.

AKH: Like your “lonely, happy child”?

CF: I guess so.

AKH: If you could teach an emerging poet only one thing and have them learn it well, what would that one lesson be?

CF: Learn to read as a writer and try everything — syntaxes, metaphoric takes, styles of lineation. Be ambitious for the work and not yourself.

AKH: Does learning to read as a writer just come with time, or is it a skill that must be taught?

CF: I don't know. Some poets learn it on their own, I'm sure. I guess I did, though at the time I didn't even know I was. Maybe you have to be obsessed. I think it must be like learning to listen to music — the performance, technical take, interpretation of sound, source of energy. A person can help you to hear. A person can say, "Listen to the MUSIC" . . .

I make lots and lots of changes in any poem I write, and the results, I've learned, better produce differences or something is terribly wrong with the poem's contingencies. . . .

AKH: I'd like to hear about your process. How long does it take you to write a poem? When do you do the majority of your writing?

CF: Sometimes a poem will be in process for years and sometimes they seem to write themselves. Recently I broke precedent and didn't write at home in my rather pleasant studio listening to opera or jazz. I was stuck in the Comfort Suites in Raleigh for ten days with my husband and our cat. Our transmission had broken and we were waiting on the insurance adjuster, parts, repairs, etcetera. It was awful, my patience awful, too. I wanted to be home and writing. After a couple of days of whining, I decided I'd work while we were stranded every morning, which is when I typically write. (When one writes, and the daily routine, puts me in mind of athletes' fetishes. Or [German poet Friedrich] Schiller's rotten apple.) I'll embarrass myself if I tell you how much I wrote during those fifty or so hours, but something rather unexpected happened. I wrote drafts of the poems I needed to finish my book. I revised after we got home — with a second broken transmission. You know, I'd been writing the poems for the book for several years, so in a sense I'd been writing those last ones for a long while, too.

AKH: Schiller's rotten apple! Since you hunt, I'm seriously hoping you're not keeping anything rotten under your desk for inspiration! You do have a regular routine, though. Do you ever take a day off from writing intentionally?

CF: I write in intensive periods when I can clear time completely. I don't write all year around. When I find that time, and I like at least three weeks, I write from early morning till noon. I make myself stop near noon or one or two. See how it

goes? Often, I have to make myself stop.

After not writing for several weeks, even months, it's all pent up. In a writing period I follow up by walking or some other physical pursuit. In Cedar Key, I head into the gulf by kayak or small boat. I like to clear my mind of my own words. I imagine the distraction will help my revisions.

AKH: How are poems born for you?

CF: There's a poem I've been wanting to write, and I'm still waiting to see what possibilities my mind comes up with. A lot needs to be discarded. In essence, I've been working on it for about a year. The actual writing, pen on page, starts with a phrase or a sound.

AKH: At what age did you start writing poetry?

CF: I wrote nothing of any consequence until I was twenty-six or twenty-seven.

AKH: Was there an epiphany or breakthrough of some form, a moment you can recall feeling as though something had changed, when you began to create consequential work?

CF: This has happened several times, actually. When I was a young writer, I'd surprised myself with what I spoke of derisively . . . as translations from the Slavic or another (for me) impossible language. Then I figured it out. I found the stride, the strange gait, of making metaphor, a little akin to Donne, and I thought, *I can do this*. When I began writing the eleven-line poems, my closest advisors thought it was the wrong sort of thing to write — not narrative enough. I think that at that point I realized that what I wanted to do was not so much find my voice or tell the truth, whatever those notions completely are, but to keep experimenting. What is art?

AKH: There we are back to Wilde again. You commented to me in an earlier conversation: "There was a reason, I say to myself, why John Donne's poetry first made me want to write poems — not to BE a poet since the being a poet seems involved with a certain amount of frivolous acting. I want *to write poems*; I can't not write, not after Donne and others." Could you explain that a bit more?

CF: I thought I'd be a photographer. Early artistic success came from my black and white photos, but during my husband's sabbatical year, I stopped taking pictures. While he took care of the two little boys, I sat down every morning for several months and taught myself the basics. *North American Review* took one of those early efforts. Writing poetry is so damned interesting, though I can imagine how to be bored writing poems — by rote, imitating myself, or writing what will satisfy a readership. It comes down to what I said earlier about contingency — every small alteration, any new sound, or verb, for instance, brings with it another array of possibilities and choices.

AKH: How did you figure out what worked and what didn't?

CF: You choose wrongly or rightly. You keep reading.

AKH: What other poets have influenced you?

CF: I have a large library. In the beginning, I was wonderfully perplexed by Donne and also by Wallace Stevens. I didn't always know what the poems said, but I loved the moments before I could understand — that's where something we may as call beauty seemed to reside. I felt an affinity, young and foolish as I was, to their habit of mind — sound and figure to meditate on. Yeats taught me that I needed to abstract. Larry Levis teaches how to sustain a poem's energy. Hart Crane and Gerard Manley Hopkins, for the singularity of their vision. George Herbert and John Berryman, for form and structure. Dickinson for all the aforementioned. You know, I could go on and on, and that's one of the pleasures of an art — what's come before. But another important question may have to do with non-literary influences. If you ask me that question, I'll tell you a few of them. Here's one, whether you ask me or not: Crusader Rabbit.

AKH: I'll cop to googling Crusader Rabbit (for the curious: this was the first cartoon series for television, featuring an animated knight-in-shining-armor rabbit in episodic, satirical adventures). And I'll bite: What non-literary influences are important to you?

CF: The land and ocean, their beauty and danger, the creatures, and the mortal process. The 1930s and '40s jazz my husband reveres. Verdi. Botany. Praying mantises. The Roman churches I visited, something Salvador Dali said to me at the opening of his great painting *La Peche aux Thons* in Paris during a hitchhiking trip through Europe when I was nineteen. Sports.

AKH: Do you have a favorite poem, yours or someone else's?

CF: Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" — a tour de force with all the linguistic and formal elements that he finds a way to reconcile. I'll need to name others: Edward Snow's translation of Rilke's "Washing the Corpse"; "The Perfection of Solitude" by Larry Levis; Frost's "Directive." "Eros Tyrannos" by Edwin Arlington Robinson; Stevens's "Sunday Morning"; "You, Andrew Marvell" by MacLeish; Bishop's "At the Fish Houses." I could easily go on — surely Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." These are very different poems but share a beauty of phrasing, a stunning event or stunningly rendered event, a new (to me) sense of structure, and a deeply meant and felt significance.

AKH: Do you feel that you've emulated one of these poets?

CF: I read as a writer.

AKH: There are so many excellent poetry magazines and literary reviews that it's difficult to estimate what might be interesting to their specific audiences or appealing to their editorial staffs. Did you or do you ever feel as though you're not sure what to give to editors?

CF: I wouldn't want to offend editors by saying that I don't take special pains to match a poem or poems to an editor or a readership. I send out what I hope are good poems and imagine that if a poem is good enough it will get past initial aesthetic screening. Editors have temperaments and biases like everyone.

I did set up a strategy early on to place a poem or poems in magazines that represented each letter of the alphabet. I supposed and still think that it's better to treat acceptance and rejection lightly than to agonize. Agony takes a lot of energy, and the energy might better be used in writing the poems.

AKH: So now I'm curious if you made it through the alphabet?

CF: The end of the alphabet is hard.

AKH: What do you read regularly?

CF: Just now I'm reading a lot of prose. I read all the books of poems and the magazines that come across my desk. My husband does the subscribing — *Poetry*, certainly, which he's subscribed to for more than forty years. I'll add that I particularly enjoy books of poems and magazines that are outside of what some people might describe as my aesthetic interests. I also like to answer requests for poems from new magazines, if I have any. Sometimes I simply run out, likely meaning I've had a dry patch, or I'm doing too much teaching.

AKH: What is your next project?

CF: . . . I want to write an essay about Bishop's "At the Fish Houses." I have all the drafts, and with the help of a powerful magnifying glass have transcribed them. I've also located where the fish houses were, near Lockport, Nova Scotia, or likely were. As for poems, I'll have to wait to see.

A Poet's Inner Eye: On Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish"

An essay by Carol Frost

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In the summer of 2000, I spent several days in the Vassar Library Special Collections reading Elizabeth Bishop's Key West notebooks. I started with an idea to verify that the poem "The Fish" was based on the jewfish pictured on a postcard she sent to Robert Lowell, and I was looking for all her references to fish she had caught. What started as a small curiosity about accuracy turned into questions about a poet's memory and imagination. How does the imagination alter an experience as modest as fishing in the Keys to create a memorable work? I never found a reference to the jewfish, but the notebooks revealed many surprises, including her sketch, in a rather careless hand, of the monument on which her poem "The Monument" is based.

Her notes below the drawing

*This is the beginning of a painting
A piece of statuary, or a poem,
Or the beginning of a monument.
Suddenly it will become something.
Suddenly it will become something.*

are altered in the poem: "It is the beginning of a painting / a piece of sculpture, or a poem, or monument, / and all of wood. Watch it closely." The change, any change in lines for a poem, should come as no surprise, for revision, we know, is at the heart of making art.

In graduate school, I'd regarded the monument in the poem as finished, as the poem was finished, and as a result my attempt at a drawing was architectural and neat. It was also upside down. The phrase "like several boxes in descending sizes" is responsible for that. The petals of the fleur-de-lis atop my "temple of crates" are more petal-shaped than those in the Bishop drawing; hers are more vague. And I had drawn what looks to me now like pieces of springy wood or metal arching downward with little gizmos at the end, which Bishop describes in the finished poem as "slanted like fishing-poles or flag-poles," and which are barely suggested in her sketch. One has a clear sense that the monument in her notebook is being assembled, is coming into focus: "beginning," becoming. The fleur-de-lis, for instance, looks like it is just about to be placed by an invisible hand onto the top crate. What intervenes between the monument of the drawing and of the poem is time. "Now," (my emphasis) the speaker asks in the first line,

“can you see the monument?”

What else is at work concerns the inner eye of the poet and the reader, insofar as the drawing seems a depiction of the inner eye's power to generate, focus, manipulate, and enhance images in the mind, and the poem shows the future of that power.

My interest in Bishop's mind's eye had drawn me to her Key West notebooks in the first place. I was looking for images and fragments of lines purportedly jotted into her diary or notebook near the time “The Fish” was written in the winter of 1939. I had an idea that the fishing trip in “The Fish” was a conflation of several fishing trips and that the noble and “homely” fish of the poem might not have been the jewfish pictured and named as the fish on a postcard to Lowell in 1948.

The largest of the groupers, the jewfish is abundant in Florida waters, and can be found near shore in deep holes, on ledges, and around pilings. Now called the goliath grouper, its old name is a reminder that it was kosher under Levitical law. Jewfish are olive brown or green-gray and present irregular, vertical bars, called “strips” in the Bishop poem. However, their most notable features for identification are the small black spots that cover the head and fins. Doesn't it seem unlikely that a poet with celebrated observational powers would fail to record them? Jewfish grow to tremendous weight. The Florida record is over 680 pounds. Of course, one person's “tremendous” fish can be another's much smaller fish, and there are plenty of examples of deliberate liberties with scale in Bishop (as in *sun* and *crumb* in “A Miracle for Breakfast”), but the fish in the poem is also old — “venerable” and “speckled with barnacles.” The skin is compared to “ancient wallpaper,” the pattern “stained and lost through age,” and the boat the fisherman is in, in the poem, has oarlocks for rowing, besides a motor. An old fish (the lifespan of the jewfish is thirty to fifty years) with its weight range of up to nearly seven hundred pounds would be much too large to be held “half out of water” by a lone fisherman in a small craft, perhaps the “catboat” she writes to Frani Blough in February 1938 that she is “thinking of renting” for “\$25 a month.”

By its physical characteristics, the black drum may be a better possibility for the fish in the poem. The one I caught from my kayak last year weighed thirty-nine pounds, and the native fisherman who identified him for me told me he was about forty years old. The drum was silver-brown with drab brown bars on the flanks, and he grunted — “He hung a grunting weight” — when I finally landed him, trailing the heavy fish behind my little kayak about a mile to shore. Drums are so called because of this deep, reverberating sound they make when in danger. The shapes of their swim bladders are, as one fishing manual says, “remarkable, and differ from species to species. Like sharks' teeth, the distinctiveness is so characteristic that in most cases species could be identified by the bladder shape alone.” Perhaps Bishop's black drum had a “pink swim-bladder / like a big peony.” Bishop's description of the fish's lethargy — “He didn't fight. / He hadn't fought at all” — matches the behavior of the black drum, which uses its weight, sticking stubbornly on the sea bed. The eyes of *Pogonias cromis* are also a better match for the Bishop lines — “his eyes / . . . were far larger than mine” — than jewfish eyes,

which are described in fishing manuals as being unusually small. One last interesting feature is the jewfish's dangling chin barbels, not unlike "a five-haired beard of wisdom."

Another possibility is the amberjack, which grunts, can be found near shore in South Florida, is golden brown, with a darker vertical strip, and commonly weighs forty pounds. There are several references to the sixty-pound amberjack Bishop caught on her first trip to Key West in late 1936. Her letter to Frani Blough from the Keewaydin fishing camp on January 4, 1937, describes the fishing trip:

You go out with two men in a motor boat, about seven miles off-shore. At the stern are two swivel chairs with sockets in front to steady the pole in. The water is the most beautiful pistachio color, ice-blue in the shade. It is so pretty when you have actually caught one of these monster fish and have him all the way up to the side — to see him all silver and iridescent colors in that blue water. We had awfully good luck — we must have caught about twenty fish and all over twenty pounds. I caught (as I guess I couldn't resist telling you on the postcard) the biggest one — an Amberjack about 60 lbs. Of course Ernest [Hemingway] gets them, or something, up to 1,000 but we were pleased to learn he began fishing off a pier.

Was the fish she caught the amberjack or a jewfish? (I personally think that the amberjack is too pretty to have been the fish described in her poem.) A black drum? She has said that the catch was in 1938 in Key West and says "that was exactly how it happened." She goes on to say that she changed the number of hooks the fish had hanging from its mouth from three hooks to the five in the poem. "Sometimes," she said, "a poem makes its own demands. But I always try to stick as much as possible to what really happened when I describe something in a poem."

The point isn't to cast doubt on Bishop's memory or her accuracy but to begin to suggest that other fishing trips, other fish, and other imagery that only relates to a remembered event by the associative power of the imagination, contributed to the writing of the poem, insofar as any poem begins, like the monument in the first Key West notebook, diffuse and in shambles, and takes time to assemble. The inner eye's potential for visualizing (and remembering) seems almost measurable in the creative act — physical entities that are blurry seeming to serve less well as elements in thought than the clearer images that can be produced, reproduced, combined, and recombined voluntarily. I'm not speaking of the simple, if fundamental, ability to visualize the door lock in the dark, but of how in a changing mental landscape, self and sensibility, emotion, language (spoken, written, dreamed, and thought), image, abstraction, and pattern combine, balance or balance imperfectly, and come to have meaning. Antithetical to the poet, if possible at all, is what some psychologists and philosophers dream of — thinking in pure meanings, as if in thin but shining air.

The raw, natural process of the mind's eye is a little like dreaming and it's

physical — a panoply of images appearing in the darkness of the mind. Bishop's poem "The Weed" offers a compelling description of her, and our, inner visuality. In the early part of the poem, the narrator, "dead, and meditating" in the dark, notices a "slight, young weed" which melts the heart's frozen thought, so that two "rushing half-clear streams" pour from the heart's sides. Bishop continues: "A few drops fell upon my face / and in my eyes, so I could see / (or in that black space thought I saw) / that each drop contained a light, / a small illuminated scene; / the weed-deflected stream was made / itself of racing images. . . ."

Bishop's notebooks are full of images, documenting the poet's interest in the physical world. They consist, in good measure, of observations on natural phenomena — on color, shape, form — often with a view to their use as art, as, for instance, when in her parenthetical note after a description of the sea off Cuttyhunk Island in Massachusetts as "The creme-de-menthe sea," she says "(for prose purposes only)." While Bishop was marking down her observations in the 1930s and '40s, and also quoting Samuel Coleridge, Edgar Allan Poe, Søren Kierkegaard on the dangers of abstraction, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, Albert Einstein, and Blaise Pascal, she was working toward an aesthetic. An early passage in 1934 concerns the poet's "material":

i.e. immediate, intense physical reactions, a sense of metaphor and decoration in everything — to express something not of them — something I suppose spiritual. But it proceeds from the material, the material eaten out with acid, pulled down from underneath, made to perform and always kept in order, in its place. Sometimes it cannot be made to indicate its spiritual goal clearly (some of Hopkins, say, where the point seems to be missing) but even then the spiritual must be felt. Miss Moore does this — but occasionally. The other way — of using the supposedly "spiritual" — the beautiful, the nostalgic, the ideal and poetic, to produce the material is the way of the Romantic, I think, and a great perversity.

"The material eaten out with acid," Bishop says, meaning that some astringent is brought to bear on the raw material for poetry — perhaps in reference to the use of acid in the etching of copper plates, as in Blake. Art, the implication seems to be, is the astringent ("made to perform and always kept in order, in its place"), but before art the material itself is "immediate" and there is "a sense of metaphor and decoration in everything." The implication is that sensory information scintillates and that the mind of the poet responds with intensity.

Bishop's readiness toward the world of sensory objects can be seen in other notebook entries. Describing being in Cuttyhunk in the fog as like being "inside a great fish skeleton," for instance, Bishop goes on in the same paragraph to describe a mess of striped bass: "the stripes and the edges of the scales are so strongly marked that the fish looks rippled, rough. I was surprised when I felt it and it was smooth & slimy on top. They are not nearly as beautiful as sword fish. As they lay there, you could see a glimpse of the rose-colored sheaf of gills, crisp and bloody." Bishop is clearly in the moment. The image of the gills is intense —

intense enough, one can argue, to last, for only compare the description with two lines in “The Fish”: “— the frightening gills, / fresh and crisp with blood.” There’s no doubt that Bishop, who fished a lot, again saw the effort of fish to breathe as they died and saw blood in the gills from a hole or tear of the hook; but it would be hard not to notice — as Brett C. Millier has noted in her biography of Bishop — the surprising adjective *crisp* that appears both in the diary and the three-stress line of the poem. Another echo in “The Fish” to this early passage is “rose-colored,” appearing in the poem as “shapes like full-blown roses” and “fine rosettes of lime.”

I found many references in Bishop’s notebooks and letters to fish she saw and caught and dreamed of, and also to flowers. In the record of her 1932 trip to Newfoundland, for instance, Bishop notes the marshberries and butter-and-egg flowers, crabs and eels, “a statue of Jesus in a glass case, hung with paper roses,” “rose sheep and pink goats.”

While her Key West notebook makes no reference to the jewfish, it does offer some intriguing glimpses into the work of Bishop’s imagination in regard to fish — in dreams, when the inner eye is at work involuntarily, and in little snatches of phrasing about fish in incompletely drafted and unpublished poems. “The impetalled fish seriously swims,” Bishop jots, then further along writes “little (fish like zinnias) marigolds” next to the crossed-out phrase “The petalled fish.” The same flower / fish motif recurs. “I dreamed a dream of roses,” she writes, and then “of roses or of fishes.” The phrases here seem less a result of observation than of association.

One associates for any number of reasons and often without reason, involuntarily, primarily to identify — something looks like, or smells like, or is like something one *has* seen, smelled or known, the simile coming into play when observation doesn’t recognize or know. The poet’s associations, however, are often conscious, “a sense of metaphor and decoration always,” Bishop said. The associations, involuntary and voluntary, are also personal, and it seems fair to say that a person who has no knowledge of fish or of flowers wouldn’t associate the two. Bishop was interested in fish *and* in flora, so that when in “The Fish” she says the swim bladder is pink “like a peony,” and the barnacles are “fine rosettes of lime,” one isn’t particularly surprised, though the similes *are* surprising.

I wasn’t terribly surprised when the references to *rose* in Bishop, the flower and the color, began to pile up in the same letters and diaries I had been scouring for the jewfish. I think that is how the mind’s eye initially works — the exterior eye gives to the inner eye immediate images, which accumulate, though notice is personal, flavored by interest, emotion, association, temperament, and any number of other colorations.

Bishop’s, or any poet’s, collecting of images is this natural. In Key West, Bishop was attuned to flora and fauna, as seen in her letters to friends. Sometimes she writes about a plant someone has given her or a new species of rose bush — she liked roses, wax roses, the pale pink Rock Rose of her poem, and the one grafted by a Key West gardener (with its mixture of pink, yellow, and white flowers), and the Devil Rose and Rose of Hell given to her by her Florida

neighbors. Then, in notebook descriptions, something like a natural predisposition to the color red seems to occur, often associated with roses, as in the rose-red sun and the fishermen's sunburned backs "like rose-petals," in the "10,000 Islands." Perhaps most interesting is her description in her Key West notebook from 1936–37 of the fish she dreamed as "large, about 3 feet long, large-scaled, metallic gold only a beautiful rose color."

For all her observational powers, Bishop's "The Fish" is a work of imagination. Whatever fish it was, the fish in the poem is recollected. Out of the dark of the mind, awake and dreaming, a stream of images occurs, a mixture of "black sand" and water, to put it in terms from "The Weed." Whatever a poem is meant to be, the mind has a greater store of images. As the inner eye visualizes one, hundreds of others flit by. The poet selects a part she is certain of (for being interesting or precisely right for the poem and, for that reason, exciting) and that part invokes other memories, other images. Sometimes in the midst of the new memory, the poet can recall a lost fragment of the original shadow or water memory.

To make the retrieval effort more personal or, to some, valuable, one may tell oneself that the recaptured piece of memory is equivalent to fact. Maybe only the poet saw it, but the poet *was* there; and, furthermore, its not having been seen by others makes it all the more unforgettable to the seer. For the reader, the fish can be any fish, various notions of fishing and fish existing regardless of the poet. But for a poet like Bishop, its having been and having happened can only move into significance if it is seen just so. This is personal. Not five pieces of line embedded in the fish's lip, but four and a wire leader. Not a sea robin (for which Lowell mistook the fish, when she sent him the fish postcard), or a snook, but a jewfish.

I don't know what happens to memories that are never retrieved. Are they frozen, as in "The Weed"? Are they too dark or colorless for the inner eye? As for the memories that are retrieved, I think they can never be fully rinsed of association. Bishop's starting place for "The Fish" was a particular fishing expedition, but I don't doubt that earlier memories and memory fragments, snatches of experience, like the scales of the parrot fish a stranger on a dock in Key West gave her, touched her original memory. Bishop wrote "The Fish" with much more in mind, in the mind's eye, than a single event.

Moreover, art, too, intervenes, as does language, which creates the word pictures the reader relies on to see the fish. "The Fish" moves from "the simple, or *running* image" through simile, then metaphor, to symbol at the end of the poem — the fish otherworldly and redemptive. Perhaps Bishop felt that jewfish or amberjack could compete with or distract from the more generalized symbol. The fish is everyfish. For the sake of the poem she withholds that information, perhaps overruling her mind's eye, and the appeal, for her, of accuracy. "Pound out an idea of sight," Bishop writes just above her sketch of her notebook monument, and I think her poems do that. The crude monument she first saw vaguely in her mind's eye becomes the poem that tries to sort out what art is and what it does. The poem asks the reader to observe, to look closely at the surface

shape and embellishments (the scrollwork and fleur-de-lis) of the monument, though “carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all.” The decorations, however, “give it away as having life.” And so with the fish of her poem. As the speaker studies it, we do, and try to look inside where the meanings are. Can we envision something? If not, we can see the swim bladder and the entrails. Was there a rainbow of gasoline or oil on the water the morning she caught this tremendous fish? Was she in a catboat, a rowboat, an offshore motorized boat? It mattered most to her, not to her readers, whose inner eye is satisfied.

We can see the fish beginning to look like a fish, faintly at first, then its whole exterior, though not really; for art, she notes, in Kierkegaard is “illusion.” A fish like the ones Bishop saw in the water and in her inner eye appears on the page for the reader, though some parts are missing, the fins, for instance. We *almost* see it: *turning into* a fish. Fish, trying, recollecting, forming, folding into barely imaginable or remembered connections, in water, in black sand. Crisp gills, rose, rose-red, and the even darker, accurate rose of blood. The fish, in all but flesh is alive, caught, and freed.

Oracle: On Carol Frost

from an essay by Garth Greenwell

from BOSTON REVIEW (May 1, 2007)

(<https://www.bostonreview.net/garth-greenwell-carol-frost-the-queens-dissertation>)

*Note: The following observations are excerpted from an essay by Garth Greenwell's that offered a retrospective appraisal of Carol Frost's poetry, with special emphasis on her book *The Queen's Desertion*. Commentary about poems not included in *Entwined* can be found in the original piece, available through the link given above.*

Carol Frost opens her tenth collection with a claim as marvelous as it is perverse: "I Lucifer, cast down from heaven's city which is the stars, / soar darkly nights across the water to islands / and their runway lights —." Fallen, though still allowed the name of light-bearer, Frost's angel surveys the Floridian landscape with the pained wonder of Milton's Satan approaching Creation. But this Lucifer gazes at a world of his own making, transformed but not stripped of beauty by the Fall: "all I've scorned, all this lasts whether I leave or come. / The garden fails but the earth's garden lives on / unbearable—" "Our sense of origin ourselves bedeviled," Frost writes, *in propria persona*, later in this collection, offering as examples of such bedevilment "Apollo Saturn: in the rose black garden Eve." Invoking Lucifer as gatekeeper to these new poems — establishing him as the first of the collection's several patrons — she gives pride of place to an intuition she has long pursued: that mankind bears a closer allegiance to the fallen than to the victorious angels. "At the root of humanness," she wrote in *Chimera* (1990), "a cup of blood / nature spills."

Frost remains a poet too little discussed and far too little celebrated, but for many readers who know her mature work she is indispensable. The publication of *The Queen's Desertion* marks thirty years since the appearance of her first book, and one reads the new work with the excitement of watching a competent poet become an excellent one. Her poems have always been accomplished. For the first half of her career she wrote poems that were lovely, occasionally extremely so; they were also largely conventional, satisfying the expectations of the unambitious lyric, their loveliness too often unleavened by any starkness. It was with *Chimera* that Frost first began publishing poems that bore themselves with a new urgency, their lines at once more expansive — often stretching toward, and sometimes past, the right-hand margin — and also more compact, with an elliptical, impacted syntax thrilling in its music. . . .

After Lucifer's proem, *The Queen's Desertion* opens with a series of poems that explore "the mind at its end," figuring the victim of dementia "as a metaphysician beekeeping / after the leaves have fallen at autumn's end." The

poems are affecting, occupying the voices of both the woman suffering and the daughter who grieves for her: “Mother hears / ambient grief and, more and more, / her earlier German tongue — rhyming Schiller lines. / *Where were you?* I’ll ask. *Wer bist du?* she’ll say.” But they amount at best to a sketch for an elegy, and the titles of the three central poems — “Apiary II,” “Apiary VII,” and “Apiary IX” — suggest that there is a larger project in which they may make more satisfying sense. . . .

[T]he book’s second experiment [is] an extraordinary sequence of poems that forms its third and longest section, “Voyage to Black Point.” In lines of often astonishing energy, shorn of almost all punctuation save colons, the poems attempt a new dramatization of experience. In rhythms that recall Berryman’s glorious awkwardnesses and Crane’s rhapsodies (“Come in the silent acting in a dream now wayfarer”), these poems constitute something like a blazon of the Florida Keys. Titled after creatures, locales, or phenomena of the sea, they are full of physical, empirical detail. But they also make use of a non-normative syntax, running perceptions together as though seeking sensation without mediation, often resorting to lists, as though the fecundity of the environment had compelled Frost toward verbal profligacy. Here is the beginning of “Pelican”:

Rendings grunts after so much quiet: look:
 tide is advancing—billows, mullet leaping toward shore:
 also pigfish pinfish herring sheepshead silverside grass and top
 minnows prawns:: brown pelicans—Audubon drawn
 chestnut crosshatch iris blue rim reddened yellow tuft:
 pistol-shot from wharves: . . .

Beautiful and alluring, the keys as Frost describes them are also places of sudden and sometimes dangerous mystery, littered with boats run aground and everywhere suggestive of peril: “I love and fear winding in these waters: deep corridors: / currents: shoals: iridescence boiling / suddenly: the back of something larger than my boat.” They are also, finally, unknowable, mercurial beyond the possibility of self-assured navigation: “charts often wrong: storm / shift: cuts narrowed:: still fathoming the tides.”

As committed as they are to observation, these poems also have grander ambitions, and they layer the landscape of Greek myth on top of the Florida Keys. In the creatures Frost describes—blue crabs, manatees, egrets — she finds Saturn, sirens, Geryon; a gulf becomes Hades; in “Black Point,” the first poem in the series, a cove is named “Corycian,” after the cave on Mount Parnassus sacred to the Muses. Frost’s poems have long been fascinated with myth, but what in earlier books was primarily a source of narrative is here put to more mysterious and allusive (though no less central) use:

I want to say oracle: sea grass: crab cluck:

swollen sheepshead in a fitful sea nodding assent:
 I who listened for decades to familiar voicings
 now heard Delphic imaginings low and sweet:
 hallucinogenic as when the dolphin crests
 in early morning vapor and light mixing on water
 the leap and splash thunderous: a flight of birds:
 one piping: syrinx in the wind: a rising sea —

Lucifer gives way to Apollo as patron of this sequence — an Apollo who is not merely the dolphin cresting, but also the offended god who strips Marsyas of his skin and also, above all, the source of prophecy, of knowledge gleaned from “low and sweet” murmurings, “hallucinogenic” in their distance from “familiar voicings.” Yet these poems, for all their strangeness, are anything but gnostic, and they make their concerns urgently available. If Frost’s landscapes offer frequent access to myth, they remain rooted in the world of blood. “Nature is hungry,” Frost writes, and that perception defeats, here as throughout her recent collections, the charge of romanticism that has occasionally been levied against her work. Frost’s poems remain as un giving, as resistant to the claims of sentiment as ever, and they are still fascinated by their own cruel resourcefulness: “mind in its parts admired the fight and iridescence,” Frost writes in “Redfish,” recasting and challenging Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Fish,” “and remembered where to put the point of the knife.”

It would be difficult to overpraise the best of these poems, but the techniques on display in “Voyage to Black Point” court their own dangers: when the urgency of the poems slackens, their motion can seem arbitrary, fueled by no surer logic than association, stripped of too many graces. In “Sea Hare,” Frost presents a revision of the title poem of *Chimera* that is much weaker than the original, denying itself the marvelously sinuous syntax that contributes so much to the success of this and other earlier poems. Too much of this poet’s repertoire would be lost were this new mode her only mode. But Frost is far too savvy for such a disfiguring renunciation, and she closes this volume with a very different kind of poem, invoking now a third patron for the collection. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, there is a musical duel between the Olympian Apollo, with his tortoise-shell lyre, and the forest-dwelling Pan, his reeds held together by wax. As Ovid tells it there is no doubt of the winner; only Midas, whose foolishness has already been established, insists that Pan’s is the finer music. But Frost ends her collection not with Delphic cadences but with the rich rustic music of “Old Pan,” whose presence can be glimpsed at moments, too, earlier in the collection, in the “syrinx” of “Black Point” and the “panic” the poet feels later in that poem. Closing her book with simple, stately quatrains, with images reminiscent of Keats’s Autumn Ode (“swelling like fruit / sweeter for the lateness”), Frost forestalls any fears that her recent adventurousness might have resulted, for all its excitement, in self-limiting experiment. That Frost joins experimentation with a newly

affirmed commitment to the lyric is a mark of her seriousness and accomplishment: "Delphic imaginings," however alluring, need not force this excellent poet to deny the claims of "music so simple, so nearly gone away."

Additional Links

Academy of American Poets web-page for Carol Frost:
(<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/carol-frost>)

The Poetry Foundation web-page for Carol Frost:
(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/carol-frost>)

The Poetry Foundation also offers a mobile app for iOS and Android devices, with a searchable library of hundreds of classic and contemporary poems in text and audio, including the following poems by Carol Frost: “To Fishermen,” “To Kill a Deer,” “The Gross Clinic,” “Apiary 40” (“The humble sense . . .,” which is “Apiary Poem 23” in *Entwined*), “What the Dove Sings,” “The Fearful Child,” “Ardors,” “All Summer Long,” “Apiary viii” (“For the ones . . .,” which is “Apiary Poem 1” in *Entwined*), “Argonaut’s View,” “Man of War,” “Matins,” and “Waking.”
(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/mobile/>)

The Poetry Foundation audio archive: “Pelican” by Carol Frost, read by Barbara Rosenblatt. Play online or download:
(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/audioitem/3844>)

Tupelo Press web-page for Carol Frost’s *Entwined*:
(<http://www.tupelopress.org/authors/cfrost>)