

Observation into Insight: The Poetry of Carol Frost

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Carol Frost has quietly established a reputation as one of the foremost lyric poets of her generation. Although her poems are typically characterized by an exquisite expression of ideas and images, her sense of phrasing extends beyond the instinct for choosing the right word or the right combination of words. In the same way that Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee could invest a rather ordinary lyric with an immediacy or a nuance that transformed it into an affecting sentiment, Frost has a sense of how to locate or break a phrase on the page in order to keep the reader engaged on many levels at once, from the visceral to the reflective.

Although many of Frost's poems vividly render natural settings or subjects, those settings and subjects are typically commonplace rather than spectacular. Still, Frost does not observe nature in the usual ways. Unlike a poet such as Robinson Jeffers, Frost is not especially concerned with describing the workings of nature or in conveying the power of natural forces. Unlike a poet such as Gary Snyder, she is not primarily interested in exploring the intimations of spiritual truths available in nature. And, unlike a poet such as Wallace Stevens, she is not preoccupied by investigating the aesthetic possibilities in images drawn from nature.

Instead, almost without exception in her poems about nature, Frost explores the ways in which the speaker's external world and interior state come into a balance that permits the transformation of an observation into an insight. The natural world may be external to the poet, but it is not something apart from the poet—or at least those aspects of nature that Frost depicts in her poems do not stand apart from her sensibility. On the other hand, although her poems offer a communion with nature, it is not a communion in the usual sense. At the center of these poems is a transcendental interest in entering a moment of physical, emotional, and artistic equipoise in which the natural and the spiritual not so much merge as simply do not contend. This state of poetic completion, of quiet ecstasy, is grounded in a poignant but entirely unsentimental recognition of how delicate and transitory a state it inevitably is.

On February 28, 1948, Carol Frost was born in Massachusetts to William Arthur and Renee (Fellner) Perrins. In 1967, she studied French literature and art at the Sorbonne in Paris, but she would continue her baccalaureate work at the State University of New York's College at Oneonta. She married Richard Frost, a professor at the college, on August 23, 1969. In addition to being a widely published poet, Richard Frost has established a "separate" reputation as a jazz

drummer. The Frosts have had two sons, Daniel Adam and Joel Richard. After completing her B.A. in 1970, Frost founded the Oneonta Children's School in 1971 and served as its chief administrator until 1974. For the next three years, she traveled widely with her family, living at various locations throughout the eastern United States, in central and southern Europe, and in several even more "exotic" places such as the Bahamas, Mexico, and Lebanon. Subsequently Frost enrolled in the graduate program in English at Syracuse University.

Frost's first collection of poems, the chapbook *The Salt Lesson*, was published by Graywolf Press in 1976. In a review published in the *Northwest Review*, Danna Wilner emphasizes Frost's attempts to bring into balance competing tendencies within the poet's perspective and voice—the conceptual and the concrete, the rational and the intuitive, the private self and the world at some remove. At first glance, the title poem may seem to provide an extended figurative comparison of a clam and the human brain. But Frost employs imagery that may apply to both subjects at once, and she thereby undermines the reader's ability to identify which is the primary subject and which provides the figurative elaboration on that subject. Indeed, each mass of gray tissue is appropriate to its functions. The human brain would not just be wasted on a clam; it would mean the demise of the clam. Out of the twenty poems in this chapbook, Frost selected three for inclusion in *Love and Scorn: New and Selected Poems* (2000).

In 1976, Frost received a scholarship to Bread Loaf, and she received the first formal recognition of her work, the Borestone Mountain Poetry Award for the poem, "A Woman with Her Plants Talking." She completed her M.A. in spring 1978. In that same year, her first full-length collection of poems, *Liar's Dice*, was published by the small regional press, Ithaca House. In a substantial review in *New Letters*, Marcia Southwick praises Frost's choice to work within lyrical and narrative structures that allow her to convey a sense of control over her material while not constraining her discovery of sometimes startling metaphors. Southwick also finds an unusual interplay between the precision of Frost's diction and phrasing and the unusual linkages that she finds and develops among images that shift between literal and figurative levels of meaning.

In the title poem of the collection, Frost begins with the image of rocks that have been stacked and painted like a totem pole and that seem to have been used to define the dimensions of or to document the ownership of this otherwise undeveloped space. In the second stanza, Frost addresses in a cleverly oblique way the oxymoronic truism of asserting possession of a wild space, layering in the paradoxical suggestion that there is a type of "ownership" that depends on keeping silent about one's holdings. In this stanza the title image provides a startling center to the poem: the liar's dice are the bones of birds and small animals that Frost describes as being tossed across the "table" of the field. After an indention

that suggests a third stanza without an actual break, the speaker considers whether she ought to lie down with the wind as if it were a lover and thereby risk discovery by someone who might initially seem to be walking with the moon or the sun like another pair of lovers but then “fall on us like police.” In the final stanza, the speaker comes back to the stack of totem rocks, now figuratively described as having the intimidating effect of a grizzly bear standing on hits hind legs. This image is juxtaposed with the speaker’s own sense of poetic possession of the delicate details of the place. This shifting among perspectives, as well as Frost’s restrained phrasing, renews the somewhat hackneyed sentiment of the closing, the suggestion that nature is impervious to human attitudes and emotions, including “love.”

In the fall of 1979, Frost taught as a visiting professor at Syracuse University. In 1981, she began her long association with Hartwick College in Oneonta, teaching there as an adjunct lecturer for the next several years. In this period, Frost received a number of grants that supported her development as a poet. In 1978, 1980, and 1982, she held residencies at Yaddo, and in 1979, she received the Margaret Bridgeman Fellowship to Bread Loaf. Then in 1981-1982, she was the recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1982, her second chapbook, *Cold Frame*, was published by a small publisher in Montana, Owl Creek Press. Not surprisingly, the twenty-page chapbook did not receive much notice. Somewhat surprisingly, Frost herself did not select any of the poems for inclusion in *Love and Scorn*.

In the following year, however, Ithaca House published her second full-length collection, *The Fearful Child* (1983). That Frost herself considers this her first mature collection is reflected in her decision to include eight of the poems in *Love and Scorn*. The title poem is a first-person initiation narrative. The child’s stuffed animals become representative of her attempts to transform her bed and bedroom into a psychic fortress against her overwhelming sense of the dangers, both known and unknown, posed by the outside world. The child experiences an epiphany when she ventures out into the night and discovers that she is as at ease with it as any creature might be. Indeed, she discovers a freedom and self-contentment that was impossible in the fortress of her fear.

Another notable poem in this collection is “Ode to the Horseshoe Crab.” Initially the poem seems imitative of Marianne Moore’s painstakingly witty, poetic portraits of animal life. Frost’s poem is only five stanzas long, and the first, third, and fifth stanzas do describe the crabs. But Frost inverts, rather than imitates, Moore’s approach of layering metaphors onto her subjects like a thickening shell on a crab. Conveying the primitive simplicity of the crabs seems to require stripping the metaphors from the crabs in each successive stanza in which the poet attempts to describe them. Furthermore, in the second and fourth stanzas,

Frost introduces boys who casually drop stones on the crabs, which are so numerous and mindless that the loss of a few to such acts of casual cruelty seems insignificant. It is not until the final two lines of the poem that the crab's long and energetic survival as a species is documented in order to reverse abruptly the whole movement of the poem. Suddenly it is the boys who kill the crabs who seem insignificant. And the attitudes toward nature that they represent are suddenly thrown into stark relief as primitive.

In 1985, Frost became a full-time member of the faculty at Hartwick College, assuming an assistant professorship. In 1986, her third full-length collection, *Day of the Body*, was published by Ion Books in Memphis, the book imprint of the literary journal *Raccoon*. Reviewed in journals such as *Another Chicago Magazine* and *Georgia Review*, the volume contains some poems from Frost's two chapbooks. The 56 poems are divided into four sections. All of the poems are relatively short lyrics: thirty-nine fit on a single page, and none is longer than three pages. Twelve of the poems have been included in *Love and Scorn*. In a fairly large percentage of the poems, the focus is on domestic subjects and the natural world is, at most, indirectly represented. Nonetheless, in some of these poems, Frost takes on some archetypal aspects of the human relationship to nature. For instance, in "To Kill a Deer," she seems initially to be describing a contemporary female hunter's identification with the doe she kills. But, in the last third of the poem, this emotionally intense, almost documentary account of a hunt moves from verisimilitude to a sort of magical realism. The hunter not only guts the deer but also cracks the leg bones at the joint to get at the marrow and then somehow empties the deer's hide of everything except the bones. This shift in treatment sets up the very hauntingly vivid closing—"I heard/the night wind blowing through her fur,/heard riot in the emptied head"—which for all of its intensity cannot quite be connected to a literal situation and emphasizes tension between the visceral and the mystical in the delicate relationship between the poet and her subject.

In 1989, Frost was appointed writer-in-residence at Hartwick College, a position that she has held to the present. She founded and has continued to direct the Catskill Poetry Workshop, which is hosted by Hartwick College each summer and has attracted an impressive roster of American poets as faculty and, in several instances, initially as students.

In 1990, Frost's fourth full-length collection, *Chimera*, was published by Peregrine Smith Books in Salt Lake City. The thirty-seven poems in the volume are divided into three roughly equal sections. All of the poems are relatively compact lyrics that fit on a single page. Eleven are included in *Love and Scorn*. Although the book was reviewed positively in *Library Journal*, it did not receive a great deal of other notice. The title poem was, however, nominated for both a Pushcart Prize

and a Poet's Prize. The poem focuses on a walker's discovery of a unidentifiably "gelatinous" sea creature on a beach. As his wonder at it deepens, the whole setting comes into a new focus. The pelicans diving into the waves become "Bosch's rebellious angels," "angels who accept the hideous and the monstrous." The creature suggests all of the otherworldly creatures that inhabit the depths and that over eons crept gradually out onto the sand and eventually became us. The poem concludes with the man's working up the resolve to take the creature into his hands just long enough to fling it back out beyond the breaking surf. In 1992, another of the poems in this volume, "Apple Rind," was also nominated for a Pushcart Prize. The poem merges the speaker's sensory response to coming out of surgical anesthesia with images of an orchard in winter that flash with equal and even greater immediacy across her consciousness. Her sense of the surgeon's blade that has cut through her flesh merges with an image of her working a coring knife through the meat of an apple.

In 1992 and 1993, Frost held a visiting professorship in the MFA program at Warren Wilson College. Her fifth full-length collection, *Pure*, was published by TriQuarterly Books in 1994. All of her subsequent books have also been published by TriQuarterly and have received much wider critical attention than her earlier books. For example, in addition to being reviewed in *Library Journal* and *Publishers' Weekly*, *Pure* was reviewed in *Gettysburg Review* and by the poet Molly Bendall in *Denver Quarterly*. Frost's own sense that *Pure* may be her most important individual collection to date is reflected in her decision to include twenty-one of its poems in *Love and Scorn*. It should be noted, however, that *Pure* also includes some poems from previous collections, such as "Apple Rind" and "To Kill a Deer." The poems are divided into three sections, with the first and third sections together consisting of fifteen poems and the middle section consisting of twenty-five poems. The title poem is the closing poem in the first section. In quick strokes, the poem treats a hunter's overwhelming grief at his discovery that he has mistaken his own son for a deer and has shot him dead. With the abruptness of the hunter's firing a bullet into his own head, the poem ends: "his mind like a saint's/ tried to bear/ that which God took from His own mind when he could/not, for another moment . . . ' "

Published in 1996, Frost's sixth full-length collection, *Venus and Don Juan*, contains thirty-eight poems divided into eight sections that vary considerably in length. Twenty-eight of the poems are eleven-line variations on the sonnet form. Frost included nineteen of the poems in this volume in *Love and Scorn*, but as the title suggests, many of the poems are concerned with subjects other than the natural world. "Scorn," for which Frost received her first Pushcart Prize, opens with a meal of "starlings eggs" but explores the emotional tensions that have sustained a long marriage with little other reference to anything in nature. In "Crows," however, Frost returns to her recurring interest in the deer hunt. In this

instance, a woman goes out onto her lawn in the pre-dawn hours, intending to shoot the crows that are keeping her awake. Though she cannot ultimately bring herself to shoot the crows, when a deer appears at the edge of the yard, she shoots it and then must follow it into the dark brush in order to finish it off. Thus the poem takes a somewhat odd situation and gives it several more twists until it has an almost gothic tone.

In 1997, Frost was appointed distinguished writer-in-residence at Wichita State University, and in 1998, she taught as a visiting writer at Washington University in St. Louis. From 1998 to 2000, she taught as a visiting poet at the University of Wollongong in Australia.

When *Love and Scorn: New and Selected Poems* was published in 1998, it was widely and for the most part favorably reviewed. Even in a less positive review, such as the unsigned review in *Publishers Weekly*, the reviewer complains that Frost does not always fully achieve what are clearly high ambitions and admits that even in what seem to be conceptually flawed poems, Frost's skill with phrasing and imagery often results in moments of undeniable power. In addition to twenty new poems, the volume contains seventy-nine previously collected poems, broken into two groups: the first group of thirty-five poems is titled "Abstractions" and arranged thematically; the second group of forty-four poems is titled "Selections" and arranged alphabetically. Among the new poems, "Komodo" and "St. Louis Zoo," are somewhat atypical of Frost's poems treating animal life. The diction is rather Latinate and the tone seems somewhat self-consciously clever. But in poems such as "Rural Weather," her control over her materials is more evident. In that poem, she conveys the rural awareness of the weather as something both current and impending, and in a startling juxtaposition, she connects the sudden onset of a storm with a breaking news report about boys who have murdered their parents. Whatever equivalence these kinds of violent outbreaks may have, the reference to the murders fixes the tone of guarded ease, as if the person observing the weather were only too aware of the many ways in which the ostensible peace of rural life can be shattered.

In 2002, Frost received her second Pushcart Prize for "The Part of the Bee's Body Embedded in the Flesh." The poem appears in her most recent collection, *I Will Say Beauty*, published in late 2003. The volume contains thirty-eight poems divided into eleven sections of two to four poems. Almost all of the poems treat natural settings or subjects. The title of the volume is taken from the last line of "The Part of the Bee's Body Embedded in the Flesh." The poem begins with a folk-mythic story about a boy who keeps bees under his shirt and endures their stinging so that he can consume their honey. In the middle of the poem, the taste of that honey is linked to the sunlight in the paintings of Rubens and Van Gogh, rapture being rapturous whether its source sensation is olfactory or visual or

tactile. The close of the poem—"Whatever it means, why not say it hurts--/the mind's raw, gold coiling whirled against/air currents, want, and beauty? I will say beauty"--stands as both a broader statement of what poetry costs the poet and as a more specific assertion of the impetus that has made Frost one of our finest lyric poets.

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