

TONY LEUZZI

A Conversation with 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 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 ecphrastic. Others reference specific paintings and the artists who create 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." Woefully underdressed we went, and I remember being surprised and perhaps disappointed that there were many other artists represented in the show, considering who they were—French and Spanish Realists. I don't know which is right but there ought to be consistency in case for realists and surrealists and not another surrealist anywhere. 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. The painting had been pirated. 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 poured 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 a 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, as much as anything else, made me want to be a part of the world of art. Since I can’t draw or paint or sculpt, or anything like that, 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*, 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 metaphor for abstract terms. I like the leaps one makes in thought and association, and I wanted to create a poetic which would make that part of the experience of the imagination in early form, before story intervenes or discursive thought waters down the effect of 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 it has to do 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 newest book, *The Queen’s Desertion*, and in particular on the section in that book called “Voyage to Black Point.” 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 ver-

tically 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 ways of slowing the reader down to regard the line in fresh 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 it 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 wooly? 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. I 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 what I initially said about 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 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, G M 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 that 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 Bishop. I know a lot about Bishop and Berryman because I have written about them. I have also learned about Moore through her correspondences 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.

TL: Let's talk about another poem in *The Queen's Desertion*, the beautiful dramatic monologue called "Relación of Cabeza De Vaca." This poem is very unlike anything I've ever read of yours before.

CF: I had read De Vaca's *Relación* and had also taken a trip down to that area in the Florida Keys with an outward-bound group long before I had any idea I would be living in Florida. The group was a writing class I devised. I joined my student writers on the boats. One of our activities that really fixed for me a connection with De Vaca's notebooks was walking through the Everglade swamps, trying to find a shell mound, and having to climb over mangroves and mangrove trees, where there were tree crabs all over the branches. This helped to make alive for me what it must have been like for him and the other survivors of the shipwreck. Only four companions and shipmates of De Vaca's lived and made it to Mexico. I was so compelled by his story that I thought I'd try writing a long poem about it. Also, when I started going to Cedar Key, I learned there was a possibility that he might have gone by—and probably right through—the place. That was another connection for me.

I imagined some of his story, but portions of that poem were simply handed to me by experiences I had that, at the time, I did not realize had anything to do with a literary activity but ended up being important to writing this poem.

I will tell you that I went back and rewrote and repunctuated the first section of the “Relación” *after* I had written the poems in “Voyage to Black Point.” I use a lot of ellipses and a few colons. There, I was imitating interior states through the varying length of line. I wanted to start out the poem in an authoritative-imitative way of establishing someone’s thought.

TL: This dramatic monologue is real contribution to early settlement literature. It reminds me of Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage.”

CF: Oh, yes, that’s a favorite poem of mine and far too brilliant for you to see any parallel.

TL: I don’t see your poem as derivative. But they both seem to be participating in a similar project, which is an attempt to reclaim the distant past and reshaping it through the contemporary imagination.

CF: That’s interestingly put. The Hayden poem, as you know, is very different from the rest of his work, as well. It’s a much more heightened language.

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

CF: Yes, I enjoy this poem because of its narrative, which is unusually rich, but for other reasons having more to do with the lyric. 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, for example, 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 poem "The Past." I wanted to write about the people who owned our old farmhouse in the Otsdawa Valley before we did, but 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 them 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, as 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.