

Of Poets & Poetry



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Carol Frost

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FSPA Chancellor



Photograph by Mark Andrew James Terry



Profiles in Poetry

Reflecting on Pure and more...

Carol FROST FSPA's newest Chancellor

*Interview with FSPA President
Al Rocheleau, Photography by
Mark Andrew James Terry*

Q. In your school years what grandmaster poets or poems first made you, as Sylvia Plath once called it, “mad for poetry.” For her, it was Auden; how about you? And if there were much older (or newer) guideposts for you in the history of our art, who would they be?

A. The first poems I loved were in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*—I can’t imagine we read the whole of it—and also “The Lady of Shalott.” I was in junior high school, and I think I can see in my mind’s eye where I sat as we read those lines, taking turns around the classroom. I see the corner windows and the wooden desk top underneath the books. I felt the magic of language that made it possible for me to imagine the lady “half sick of shadows,” Lancelot singing “Tirra-lirra, tirra lirra,” then the lady’s mirror cracking and she in her shallow boat, drifting into Camelot. I loved the images, words I’d not seen spelled before, and all the rhymes. I learned later that rhyming was tricky, as we all learn, but at the time, oh, rhymes at the end of lines amounted for me to true poetry. Tennyson wasn’t the last poet, though. Hopkins. Dickinson. Wallace Stevens. Whitman. John Donne. Hart Crane. Elizabeth Bishop. I could go on for hours, and already you can see that my tastes are pretty wide—Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Robin Coste Lewis, Ilya Kaminsky, etc.

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“...I am especially drawn to poetry that makes a ceremony of sound and form and image.”

— Carol Frost

Q. Your work is sensitive to sound. Do you think poets often miss this aspect, the sheer sound of words to move a poem?

A. As opinionated as my answer may sound, I may just go ahead and say that sound is everything. Poets least of all can be insensible to sound in poetry, the sounds of words. I think of the foam, glitter, sharp stone, or oil in words and word combinations. They are a part of meaning. As much as anything, poetry is everything that can be found that isn't transient in air, ear, and mind. After what we knew we knew is gone, the poet's lasting voice—noise, cry, or song—will give us back a world.

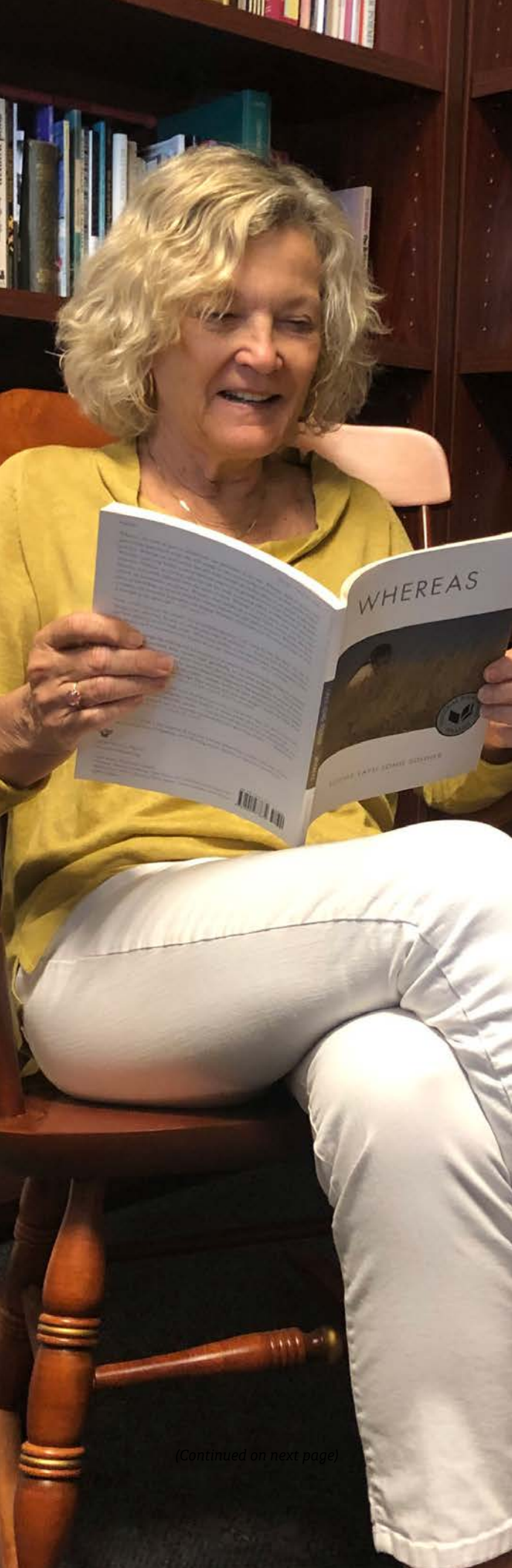
Q. You have written in various fixed forms and created new forms, and yet most of your work could be considered in some aspect of the free verse genre. Do you consider yourself primarily a free verse poet?

A. I am primarily a free verse poet, dedicated to what Yeats once told Berryman over tea was worth revising toward—“a more passionate syntax”—and unwilling to renounce the verse that has come before.

Q. For you, what is the main difference between prose and poetry?

A. At one time I would have said that the difference is line. That was the fairly standard answer before Charles Simic's book *The World Doesn't End*. It didn't matter that he won the Pulitzer for the book; many writers thought poetry could not be written in prose, and, if truth be told, many hadn't read much, if any, prose poetry. I had read Baudelaire's *Little Poems in Prose* and in some cases had read his prose poems and poems by the same title side by side. I can't say that I had preferred his prose poems overall to such poems of his as “The Swan” and “Voyage to Cythere,” but I had preferred the unlineated prose poem “Invitation to the Voyage” to his lineated version. I once probably thought image the difference. Or music. And while I am especially drawn to poetry that makes a ceremony of sound and form and image, I can think of poems that don't that still are wonderful.

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So the short answer is, I don't know what the difference between poetry and prose is. And I've changed my teaching in classes and workshops to reflect that talking less about distinctions between genres than about hybrid forms. I like to talk about possibility. What is possible in poetry, I ask. And also, how is what we are reading now designed, and how well does it function in its design.

Maybe in a pinch I'd go back to sound, that in poetry there is an amplified sense of sound, except when there isn't. Now I'm thinking about little poems, Basho's haiku, even sounded in his native tongue—Creely, etc.

Q. What kinds of poems don't you write?

A. I gave up writing didactic poetry when I was 19. I didn't write poems about cities until I wrote the ones for my newest collection on a dare by a poet-friend. Nothing, really, seems off limits. Oh, I can't write funny. I tried once but readers took it seriously. Only my husband found it funny. He fell off his chair laughing.

Q. Many poets seem to swim in concept words, often generic and easily carried along by cliché. You seem rather to adorn concepts with discrete objects that can show them. Is that a major part of your intent?

A. Avoiding literary abstractions had been the major part of my intent until it dawned on me that W. B. Yeats composed with them. Thereafter I thought it was important to learn how to abstract, how to earn the word or words that expressed an idea or an emotion outright, if vaguely. One way to do it is embody the abstraction with rhythm, meter, rhyme, and another is to pair the abstraction with an image that gives body or partial body to, say, death or, better, beautiful death beside a yellow forest of falling aspen leaves. Meter and rhyme are pretty much off the table in free verse, but rhythm isn't. That's what Blake and Whitman were doing in their verse – liberating meter with rhythmic combinations that hadn't names but a reader could sense. Giving body to their abstractions and concepts.

Q. For one book, you developed your own 11-line form. Can you describe it, and the specific aims you developed for it?

A. Funny you should mention those 11-line poems of mine. I called them my Abstractions. I was trying to learn about how to abstract and that seemed also to mean thinking more deeply about image and, then, of different ways to lineate a poem. I also wanted to see how little narrative I could get away with. There's always some narrative, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with it, but my project was to write "high lyric," or that's what the experiment evolved into.



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I started writing the poems before I knew the form; I only knew a poem I was trying to write about a sense of the past I sometimes felt when I was walking around the grounds of our old farmhouse wasn't working. I guessed that the line length I was working with was too tight for the experience I was trying to make for myself and any reader I might have and decided to try page-length lines. That was the very beginning of invention. I wondered how many lines I could write that were actually margin-to-margin long instead of being short lines strung together. I began fooling with syntax and while I was experimenting with that, I thought I'd experiment with image and metaphor. Much of this was subliminal thought. It was only after I'd finished the poem, then written another with similar attributes, that I became as fully conscious as any poet, likely, ought to be beforehand. I noticed that the two poems were written in 11 lines. Both had abstract titles and seem to function as extended metaphors for the title, as if I were beginning a sort of lexicon for abstractions. I had managed to keep from using well-worn images—my favorite in the two poems was and is this line: "Her beauty no longer catches glances like small animals in a gentle snare." That's one single line. Beauty isn't a rose or a sunset. And I can't say I can tell you what it is in so many words. That is when a new metaphor is necessary.

With the two poems as my guide I came up with the "rules" for the form, feeling free to break a rule or alter the form as the next poem demanded.

*Please join us as we welcome the poet
Carol Frost as Chancellor of the
Florida State Poets Association.*

— Al Richeleau, FSPA President

Carol Frost was born in 1948 in Lowell, Massachusetts. She studied at the Sorbonne and earned degrees from the State University of Oneonta and Syracuse University. She currently teaches poetry and directs Winter with the Writers at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. Frost is the author of numerous collections, including her newest book entitled *Alias City*. Its signature poem appeared in the November 2015 issue of *Poetry*. Frost has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, won several Pushcart Prizes, and has been nominated for many more. This year, FSPA nominated her as one of its candidates for Florida Poet Laureate. As described at Poetry Foundation.org: "Frost's poems draw on sources from the book of Genesis to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to the poetry of John Donne; she writes of the human body, and her poems are rich with the acutely imagined objects of the natural world—whether found off the coast of Florida or in a beehive. *Honeycomb*, which won the Gold Medal in Poetry from the Florida Book Awards, treats the subject of dementia through a sustained metaphor of the beehive. According to Amy Glynn Greacen in *New York Quarterly Reviews*, "the interweaving of lost and confabulated, confused knowledge is a running theme...in Frost's deft hands it resonates and echoes through various natural processes and phenomena." Frost has been praised for her "protean layers of observation," in the words of a reviewer for the *Women's Review of Books*, and for her inventive syntax; an interviewer at *Smartish Pace* described Frost's "encyclopedic approach to subject matter."

Poems

by Carol Frost

CITY NEAR PARADISE

1

Long before you turned on the light, I heard hurricane fill the
oak.

As morning flowers from hell, little hellish flames,
we are still here. Let's ask how dayfly makes its hours

and oak what it feels to be in the ground. Let's talk
to the devil himself, licking the tepid blooms
of the hibiscus like the venomous snake.

2.

Turpentine sweated us through summer
slaking our skin trees bled and burned
white faces in the forest a sea of pine stumps
the fire the spring that's to say
the ground water to drink when found
the hands the feet within the heart
an ailing bird over the sand how low
it flew a song blown through air

we want to remember song
we want to sing and dream sweet things.

3.

Sing as grandfather heron soars—
franhkh, franhkh—the first heart morning makes,
Sing fantasia, el largarto,
and the waters dance, all hours of the spring.

4.

Plovers huddle on the last piece of land.
I say, come onto the waters,
and when sunset embers,
we'll turn back
hours—evil and great—
and in Florida's most quiet,
sssssss, follow breathmaker
come short of paradise.

Poems by Carol Frost

ORNITHOLOGY

Who else has seen the moment parleying snipe on disappearing
shoals,
wind frothing at their feet, lift in one loud whirring of wings,
so the last
are first—a testament time illuminates?
How many years ago even as now
did another first see morning implement with gold the margins of
inlet
and marshland, carelessly as the wind blew? Winds, we can tell,
are jealous
winds and take away the shore, night steals away the gold cup
of day, stars to follow—like a serene flock of birds—and lives
are taken
in any order, till the last survivors are first, singing
themselves alone.
Haven't you heard shore birds sing this, in a few notes, and
known?

ALIAS CITY

They were travelers, plotting river courses,
writing the Genesis of unknown people,
fugitives with a revolver in one hand, reins in another,
merchants among the olive trees, euphorbias, mimosas,
emmisaries, deserters. Some knew the native tongues;
they called themselves by new names
in the eastern twilight, different parts of their soul
never having learned to live together.
Skies burned. Dust covered the palms
and minarets as they arrived by the incandescent shore
of our city, each with his own little dreams and disasters.
Some remained, never to be heard of again.
Some left with caravans, wearing native dress—ephemerids.
Where are they? What are they used to?
The only preserved interview—of an artist and explorer.
Did he ever speak of his friends in X?
Never. The only thing he liked in X was his sister.
But did you know that he painted?
Oh yes!—some fine things: stemware,
a series of watercolors of Shoebills and Abdim's
stork.

(from *Alias City*, Madhat Press, 2019.)