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Can't Myth Be Left Behind?

A Review of *The Queen's Desertion* by Carol Frost (TriQuarterly Books, 2006)

"...can't myth be left behind?" Carol Frost asks in her most recent collection, *The Queen's Desertion*. This beautiful and challenging book is filled with the intensely evocative imagery Frost fans have come to expect, but it's her concern with our attempts to make sense of our experience—of our lives and our deaths—that creates the urgency driving these poems. Is it possible to face both our mortality and our unlovely decline head on? If so, must we do that by leaving myth, replete with stories of divine origin and magical experience, behind?

Frost makes use of three quite different poetic backdrops to explore her subject: 1) her mother's decline into dementia; 2) the complicated arena of contact between the natural and the civilized world, which calls into question our assumption of civilization's triumph; and 3) the truly natural world filled with creatures captive to the cycle of birth, ascendance, and decline.

The first section of the book focuses on that great myth of childhood, the strong and unchanging parent. In poems based on her mother's illness, Frost conveys the pain of her loss in a rending phrase, "*I have no mother,*" then goes on to describe "...Her difference— / a broken hive...a black bear in the bluebells / clawing the stinging air." She writes not only to express her grief, but to inhabit her mother's experience as dementia takes hold: "For a little while I knew— there was a door / a split in the wall, and I was two persons..." But "Meanings fissured. Words hollowed. / It was like the thing with bees— / I swatted in front of my face / and hated them. Then there were none."

Bees, their keepers, colonies, and demise feature frequently in the early poems. They stand in for the mind's activity and its eventual loss of coherence, but they also provide a necessary bridge to the unavoidable order of living things. In a long life, whether of colony or individual, there is a time of maturity and competent activity and then a fall. Frost knows that we are bound to mourn our par-

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ticular losses and she, like all of us, is subject to this sorrow, but she does not allow herself to sentimentalize it. "It's all right to cry, I tell myself. But it isn't sadder than it was before." This courage is a hallmark of Frost's work: she's a poet with a history of not only embracing her personal experience, but examining it from a clear-headed, nearly disinterested perspective. Frost chronicles the particular events of her mother's decline even as she places both her mother's loss and her own in a larger context, reminding us of the prevalence of this experience: "it's no sadder—another fall whoever's fall it is..."

The second myth Frost takes on is that of the triumph of civilization over the natural world. Whether it's the failure of modern medicine to defeat illness, the failure of the zoo to wrest the strange from the gaze of a snake, or the experiences of sixteenth-century Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca, Frost challenges our sense of human superiority, of being separate and different in ways that may not survive careful examination. She's also aware of the constant eruption of myth in the human psyche, the stories we inherit and add to that may support our sense of difference and supremacy. But it's significant that even as she questions myth's place in our understanding, Frost is not immune to its appeal. In the poem "Waking" she claims to pity dreamers, "taking a thread / and weaving it on the loom of the Self..." yet she chooses to relate her own dream of a magical deer, whose chest "turned to breastplate, / his one powerful arm covered with pagan signs." And later, in "Songs for Two Seasons," a poem in which she describes the procedures and aftereffects of a difficult surgery, she opens with "the god came with his lute and knife, / asking, Have you made your last song?"

In the long poem that closes this section Frost gives voice to Cabeza de Vaca, a Spaniard who came to the New World in 1528 as an explorer only to become a slave, then a shaman/ruler and eventually a condemned Catholic heretic. During his years of captivity and of rule within the Indian community, followed by years when he was required by the Catholic Church to justify the actions he took in response to his changing circumstances, de Vaca is forced to interpret his experience via mythology in conflicting forms. Frost records the known facts and imagines his possible thoughts, but even here the final synthesis of his understanding

yields to nature: *"The wind says* hunh, */ and the inlets of the mind change. Continuous. Continuous."*

In the third section of the book, Frost looks to the natural waterways of Florida's keys for insight and answers. In this arena the poet participates as a physical being, fishing and boating in waters rich in sea life, even as she continues her questioning—her mind observant and inescapably human. She considers blue crab, sandpiper, dolphin, manatee, pelican, sea hare, and clam as fellow creatures but is unable to see them entirely divorced from myth: the manatees are "liable to be mistaken for Sirens," the sea hare are "Bosch angels changing shape," and even the Redfish evokes "Loaves and fishes." In a poem titled "Orchid," the bees return, this time as natural agents of pollination; but here, too, myth makes an appearance as Frost closes the poem with a reference to "chambers of Byzantium: mind's handiwork." Byzantium was indeed founded through "mind's handiwork," including consultation with the Oracle at Delphi.

Frost's book ends with a short two-poem section, "Old Pan." Here Frost seems to accept as fact that we cannot get totally beyond myth any more than the bear can get beyond its hunger. For whatever reason, our dark, rich attempt to explain something about ourselves is integral to the human psyche. This doesn't mean, of course, that we cannot make intelligent choices about the stories we tell, and Frost clearly concludes that any story that ends with an eternal individual life is too blind, too small—and thus unsatisfactory. To close, she turns to Pan, half man, half goat, god of hunting and rustic music, emblematic of the joy of dance and song. He is also, according to Plutarch, the only god who actually dies. In the magical pantheon of gods, he is most like us and as he plays his pipes in the book's closing poem, the bees return "swelling like fruit / sweeter for the lateness."

The Queen's Desertion is a book that discovers truth by making art. The myths in the poems live again here, not as overlay to argument but as sources of insight reached by touching the natural depths from which the original source material surely sprung. As her inquiry proceeds, Frost finds hard answers, but it's difficult to believe she's really interested in persuading anyone of their truth. She seems sincerely involved in a personal investigation, desiring to become "trued" by the observations and musings of her intel-

ligence and by the ecstasy and grief that mark human experience. She does not ask you to bless her insight or agree with her conclusions. Instead she closes with a quiet and critical indictment. Although winter is coming on, she tells us, "Pan will be rapt, still in snow / but only a few will brave / the cold, and briefly."