

# Connections



Louis McKee

**TRAFFIC: NEW AND SELECTED PROSE POEMS**

**Jack Anderson**

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*Traffic* begins with a simple enough premise: “We are all connected, one unto another.” A man finds himself in a dark hallway fitting new bulbs into a socket, but to no avail. Suddenly he is aware of a wall switch he’d never noticed before. You might think that his problems are over; he flicks it on—and off—on and off—but nothing. You might think. But, “Three blocks away, in their apartment, a wife calls to her husband. ‘Henry, come quick! The lights seem to be going on and off for no reason.’”

A woman on the Staten Island ferry can make the stars twinkle by wiggling her fingers, sweet magic enough to fill one’s heart. But back in the city it is quickly deflated: your neighbor tells you, “too bad you don’t live in the backwoods South. Because there you could gather all the superstitious people in the county and set yourself up as the leader of a new sect. . . . You’d make a mint off those hicks. But here in New York no one will believe you. You’ll never get famous and you’ll never get rich.”

Two pages, two poems, and you know all about *Traffic*—it is a book of magic and mystery, of wonder, surreal twists, and simple common desires. It is glimpses of a stanger in a strange land, a curious, wide-eyed wanderer, loosed like a red-tailed fox in the midst of ornery, cynical big-city hounds.

Never before has coffee seemed so significant. Never before have small noises, mysterious sounds, meant so much. With a scene in Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, where an inexplicable noise reduces the characters and even the actors to the embarrassingly simple people they are, we are reminded of the sounds around us, the sounds we have tried to explain, to name, to recall, but which never recur, are never the same: “all such sounds are forever fading. They never come nearer. They never come close to you. They are always receding, . . . . Going away.”

As much as we want to deny it, academia has cast long shadows on our thinking; we look for comfort in the signs of logic and conformity we’ve analyzed, discussed, and diffused. As we’ve gone on, we have found our pleasures, often enough, in what we’ve discovered on our own, the emotional, the rough-hewn and hard-won; and these didn’t always stand the tests of analysis.

For one thing, there is the Prose Poem. In the classrooms of the 1960s there was no mention of it, even as an occasional specimen might show up in the magazines. Some late night turning of the rocks in the deserted corners of the library exposed that colorful critter Baudelaire, and his *Petits Poèmes en prose*. It was novel; it was French; it was hip, but marginal. No one seemed to know the rules; if, in fact, there were rules at all.

Who said: Never look a gift horse in the mouth? What we have here are simple, short lyrics built of many of the same materials we find in other poems; driving rhythms, finely woven imagery, exacting diction, and depth. What’s missing are the broken lines. While the tensions and surprises of lineation are lost, there is another, different, power conjured, and intensified by the parameters of the paragraph. The rigid margins create their own surprises, no way diminished by their randomness, their serendipity. That, in fact, can be part of the delight.

Jack Anderson does not work exclusively in the prose poem genre, nor is he new to it. Some of the pieces in *Traffic* appeared in earlier collections, as far back as 1968, volumes highly regarded and memorable, such as *The Invention of New Jersey* and *Toward the Liberation of the Left Hand*. Most of the poems here are new, though, having seen only the limited exposure afforded by litmags, from *Caprice* to *Exquisite Corpse*, from *Hanging Loose* to *Poetry East*.

“The Somnambulists’ Hotel” is where all the sleepwalkers stay. In the middle of the night, they climb from their beds and live. The wild night life might surprise those of us who sleep through it:

Some leap to the window ledges and teeter above the street. Others climb the fire escape to the roof where they race back and forth, holding their heads high

and throwing their arms wide in the glimmering starlight.

Some—after opening their closets and finding strange apparel there—put on these garments and venture into the corridors. Clinging to the walls, some struggle in the wind that has now become a great gale. Yet in another corridor only a gentle breeze blows. Women in white nightgowns float through these halls, skimming along in toe shoes, lighted candles in their hands, their long hair streaming loose behind them.

Other guests take the elevator down to the lobby....

One wonders what Jung might have made of this. “Yet when City Hall clock strikes the first hour of dawning and the garbagemen come banging along, the guests quiet down and, after fumbling their way back to their rooms, lock the doors and sink into bed.”

It is the ballet of the sleepwalkers, and the “Stomp”-like cacophony of the morning streets being set to right, the juxtaposition of sounds and movement, that make this “small poem in prose” something other than a short short story, something more than poetic prose.



*Cover used with permission*

Jack Anderson is a dance critic for the *New York Times* and involved with numerous dance journals and books. It should come as no surprise, then, the choreography he creates on the page, and what poet John Logan referred to as the “ballet of the ear.”

Stephen Hero found his epiphany in the old clock tower on St. Stephen’s Green; it is no less fitting, then, that one should have “a golden moment” in the men’s department of Macy’s: “...the very moment I set foot among the shirts and ties—Pachelbel’s Canon comes over the public-address system and the store is flooded with D Major—a key I associate with summer sunshine—and I beam serenely....”

Orpheus shows up among the bartenders, angels, and the Sincere Poet. Even Elvis is here, the subject of a short prayer.

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***If there ever was a baedeker of the soul, this is it.***

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In case you are not yet convinced of the opening premise, that we are all connected, one unto another, there are the “Abandoned Cities”: Asunción, Paraguay; Bismark, North Dakota; Kaunus, Lithuania; and Ecbatana, Iran. If there ever was a baedeker of the soul, this is it. And it is not such a distance to “The Model Community”—not far, even, from “Life on the Moon.” (“Like anyplace else, it has its problems....”)

Anderson’s wit and wisdom come from all over, like the vehicles and pedestrians that crowd the streets, the traffic. But we needn’t travel far to find it. There is a corner downtown in every city about which it is said, “Stand there long enough, and the world will pass before you.” Wherever we stand, some of us simply see the traffic. We are lucky for the few, like Jack Anderson, who see the dance.

Such is *Traffic*. “Outside the window. At all hours. It comes and goes. Surges. Recedes. Like thoughts. Like breath. Anyone’s breath. *Anonymous*. Yet particular. You can hear it....” We’d do well to listen.

*Louis McKee has essays and reviews in upcoming issues of Xavier Review, ONTHEBUS, Pembroke Magazine, Home Planet News, and Whelks Walk Review.*