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Viscid Poetics: :The Prose Poem Engendered

The first one flew out like a fetus past due—bruised and blotchy; howling mouth. One fist around the cord, refusing to vacate me; limbs twitching and out of synch. Barely composed myself, I could not versify.

All week my son had been driving the streets, wandering, calling on the hour. A young man, full grown, scoping out the right place, the perfect moment. Taking me on his last ride. An extended goodbye, the ache manifest only in his voice, and even that failing and shredded by the static of a fucking car phone. Embankments and crumbling piers assessed in passing.

I saw the wall that would deliver him, the solid end to pain. The way it would stop him dead and leave me with nothing but a dial tone in my hand. The poem shaped like his end, a barrier wall, solid and final.

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The bullet. I have chosen to set it center, square in the middle of things.

Poetry embraces grief, welcomes it; a long tradition of elegy, woe-ful meditation; then transcendence.

I yearn to set my sadness down. My father, freshly dead. So I list his things, familiar things to comfort me with customized surfaces and scents. His oldest, I want to honor him, to understand what is lost and what remains, to feel the fit of absence.

Like much of his work, what I do is count, take stock. And in my head, I rummage through the contents of his desk, listing his pen and waxed envelopes, Italian coins, a jar of paste. Trading stamps, his high school ring, Zippo flints and nail clipper. This is trespass. Then the cool of the Luger's butt, stashed against some horrible eventuality, some unforeseen pain. His insurance against the end of love.

Lists collapse, realign. Again, the solid piece of text. The unlovely thing, no curvature or generous margin, no clever turn of line. Unversed.

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Or the one about the wedding, the surly cast and unseasonable weather. The spongy cake cut in high drama with a sword; a tiny cut sliced into my tongue, blood on cream icing.

The professor conducts his workshop, not instructing or guiding; rather, cajoling, making light: boylike, playful. He tags my work prose poems; winks. You know—*chunky*. No line break, margins justified: that's all you need to know. How long were you married?

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[The lid slams.]

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Observe the women.
Watch the ones
who choose a bastard form.

Step lively, now. Take your seats.
Come see the Ladies Boxing inside a Box.

Why, 'tis obscene,
rude: a bergamasque!
Didn't we come
for pastorage?
tableaux vivants?
For women with bowls
in their tender hands,
jugs, say, or urns.
Instead, they wield bricks,
such stuff as walls are made of,
blocks of print viscid
and dense as rage.

The piper blows a looting tune
as they hurl the heft of prose.

The reader takes
the blow, doubles.

This is free verse.

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La! the pretty boxes bestowed on us, so we will stay here. Ah, stay, they say; consider the exquisite fit, the form so express and admirable, gay in ornament and decorum. Yet we grow large and swell to the bounds of our pretty boxes. And oh the contempt should we bulge beyond. We stay inside; distill; we keep the lid on, lock our lips. We listen for the click of the clasp and squirm at the pursing of our allowance. Our mouths number two, both hideous.

Echo was the girl who had no door on her mouth.

The panel addresses “The Prose Poem: Why the Prose Poem? Why Now?”

The singular grates, signaling plural’s loss. I shush myself and wait, stash my bark inside a box. A much-touted, venerable uncle of the form is insinuating himself to the head table, a small crowd drawn mothlike in his wake, when, microphone in fist, he declares this the age of prose and pats poetry on the back for getting on board. He jeers at the prose poem’s insensibility to sound and lust for the visual, its cynical humor and jaded heart. Fingering Dada as the father, he laughs and laughs and eventually, inevitably, as if his wont, invokes the Mother, blushing.

A brief skirmish as panelists jockey for position. A chart quickly sketched of In and Out, of Wit and Dullard. Camps form: sniping surrealists, weepy boys with fire in their bellies, lingo-laden avant gardians. At last, order is restored when the moderator, returning the floor to the guru, thanks him for making the prose poem legitimate.

Ah—

At once coy and papal, his voice wafting from a mane of cherubic hair, he recites his own work, sonorous and reverent as he delicately dances his nymph muse in public. Then candid, humble, confessing to a spell of flaccid verse, to lines sterile and lofty as sermons. But, glory be, prose poetry brought him down a notch, freeing him from the prison of victors. A release he attributes to the feminine nature of the form, which is like the ear—a vessel, receptive.

Matter reviled. Containment; captivity narratives; trespass and riot. The box a case for duplicitous flesh, an unlovely, Substantial thing.

Women in the main, the moderator inserts, tend to the lyrical, thus shying away from the darker, more demonic side of humor so essential to the genre.

ha.