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Robert Alexander's *White Pine* *Sucker River* and Mark Vinz's *Late Night Calls*

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Robert Alexander. *White Pine Sucker River*. New Rivers Press, 1993. 81 pp. Paper: \$8.95

Mark Vinz. *Late Night Calls*. New Rivers Press, 1993. 155 pp. Paper: \$8.95

I once began a short poem with the words, "When my father died, he left me his shoes, his blues, and a small measure of fear. It was little enough, but it was all he had." Mark Vinz, in his collection of prose poems entitled *Late Night Calls*, published by New Rivers Press, concretizes that fear in "Fear of Loss."

All his life he was afraid of something. He was always the last one out of a restaurant or theater, checking and rechecking all the seats and tables for whatever might be left behind...

The older he got, the more his fear grew. His houses were filling up, he was repeating everything he said.... When he died...no one came to the funerals...and now, not even his children know the location of his graves.

[The ellipses in the following poems from Alexander's and Vinz's books are mine]

That small measure of fear is what urges us to write: fear of dissolution, fear of not remembering, fear of being overwhelmed. Writing defeats our demons, perhaps, or at least gives them shape, as Vinz has done. The hope is that we as writers can exorcise our fears by writing about them.

And yet there must be something fearless about the form the language takes. Poets need to give their word-pictures a daring that allows them to go out into a mostly unheeding world. For all poets know, they might just be talking to themselves. In another piece, "Family Secret," Vinz writes

...my father tried to stretch a tank of gas because it was a few cents cheaper in St. Cloud. When we ran out, it was two miles from town and right next to the state reformatory...I was sure there'd be a break any minute, sure those desperate convicts would come to get us...and we were going to die.

Retelling the story dissipates the fear. We can smile at the speaker's naivete, smile at the object lesson both he and his father have learned—

"What did I know about saving pennies or surviving? ...he's had to pay a lot more than he bargained on." It is as if the writing of the story has resolved the fear for the writer, and for ourselves.

In this same way, the poems in Robert Alexander's collection, *White Pine Sucker River*, also published by New Rivers Press, are memorable for the intensity of the voice and fearlessness of the language. "My Father Had a Small Lab" describes a successful scientist who brings home small turtles for his son, and who's had "a blood factor named after him."

He told me this one afternoon, we were talking through the park.... But that's a distortion already, he never would have said a thing like that, never have talked about it unless I'd asked him to: Hey, Pop, did you really have a clotting factor named after you?

The disclosure of that incipient distortion is telling, for one fear a writer needs to conquer is the fear of not getting it right, the fear of distorting the truth. But what does it mean, "to get it right"? In the next poem of the collection, Alexander offers us a possible answer:

For years my father practiced the violin: "What d'ya think Rob, am I wasting my time sawing away on this hunk of wood?"
...My mother of course had to listen to him play more than I, but she too found it a pleasure, not so much from enjoyment of the sound as from what the sound suggested of the pleasure he was having.

"How does one get it right"? seems to be the wrong question, then. Getting it down at all while suggesting a sense of the pleasure the writer is having is the writer's minor triumph—a triumph due in no small part to the writer's choice of form. And as for the distortions, well, they are inevitable, aren't they? How else to get to the essence of an experience but to delve into it, to try and get it right, and the getting it right is in itself the distorting element. Consider the famous painting, high above a palace doorway, of a young prince riding a horse with a distended belly and comically foreshortened limbs so that the animal will appear perfectly normal from the viewers' point of view, which is almost two stories below the picture. The prose poem form is just such a distortion of perspective: foreshortened, precise word-pictures that convey a

moment, a mood right before it fades for the rest of us below.

In his introductory statement to *Late Night Calls*, Vinz suggests that most people are not really sure what the prose poem is and that many editors avoid or ignore it as a form. "Perhaps that in itself is the joy of this particular form—one always has the sense of reinventing it as one goes along." I am at once sympathetic with and alarmed by his detachment. No amount of theorizing will make the poems of Vinz or Alexander work any better than they already do, certainly, but I want to know how the prose poem sustains itself, what its shape is, how, indeed, it works. In his *Theory of Criticism*, Murray Krieger reminds us of the assumptions we have traditionally held concerning form that is imposed from outside a work. While Aristotle argued for organic form, says Krieger, Coleridge argued for the human capacity to create new forms, with the stipulation that whatever form is given from the outside must seem to grow "inevitably" from within.

What sustains the prose poem is not its outward form, but its inevitable, inner arc. Fourteen lines do not a sonnet make, surely, but a prose poem sustains its flight by the arrangement of the most telling and concrete details. One can admire the architecture of a beautifully wrought ode, or thrill to the high-wire act of the sestina, but the prose poem is pulled together by the inner tension of its language—it is a flying trapeze act without a net. What intrigues me about the form is its seeming ability to circumvent form itself. If we trust its voice, the prose poem seems to suggest, all will be clear.

But, given all of this, something else informs our response to the prose poem. I have observed, for instance, that many of my favorite pieces have a strong narrative line, as in the best poems of Lawrence Fixel. But I enjoy also the work of Charles Simic, which is sustained by paradox and by an accretion of details that lead us to the shape of an idea—a kind of epistemology of the incongruous. James Joyce used the metaphor of the *epiphany* to explain how his prose poems suddenly revealed "the whatness of a thing...the moment when the soul of the commonest object...seems to us radiant." Metaphysical might be a more prosaic way to describe what happens in many, good prose poems, as in Mark Vinz's "Wind Chill," for example.

The voice on the radio is urgent. When you go outside, it says, exposed flesh will freeze in less than a minute.... Think of flesh, the voice whispers. Think of bare flesh, numbing, tightening.... Listen, says the fading voice: this is what we believe in.

Listen: this is everything we know.

Besides "Wind Chill," Robert Alexander's "Garage" comes to mind when I think about form and voice. In the poem, the speaker describes a garage with a "hip" roof that makes it look a bit like a small barn. On one occasion, the speaker enters it to close two large doors that are flapping in a wind.

You'd best close that door before it gets ripped completely off those hinges, I heard a voice say. Behind the lawnmower disabled now by winter a pallet I'd left for some reason had fallen and was covered with straw. What's straw doing in the middle of the city? This is my story, kid. You think it's easy wintering here with a bit of straw and a pallet separating me from the concrete slab, a roof and some drafty walls....

Right away, I knew I'd made a mistake. What's an old man doing in my garage anyway? It would be easy to say it was just the door flapping in the wind, call it a winter breeze. Fortunately the neighborhood was empty. That's right, no one around, that's exactly how it was.

The sudden taking over by the mysterious voice of someone who isn't there, but who replaces someone who is, may tell us exactly what the prose poem form is supposed to do. No one is around, but a voice is heard. Something is revealed, a radiance is conveyed, but no one is there. That, indeed, takes rare courage: for the writer, who must allow the voice to take over the piece; and for the reader, who must hear the voice alone.

Does getting it right mean having a strong voice, then? And, is the prose poem the form that most naturally allows room for the voice to dominate? Perhaps for those very reasons, both Mark Vinz and Robert Alexander get it right in their collections. While they are very different writers, both are able successfully to penetrate experiences and objects in language that is lively, evocative, and deep, in a form that discloses rather than encloses meaning. And the voices they have created resonate. The opening piece in *White Pine Sucker River* begins with a description of an attic.

The upstairs of my house is a remodeled attic... The walls on the third floor of the house I grew up in were painted the same green, but what's even more remarkable is that my attic these

days smells the same as that other attic, no doubt it's the smell of old plaster. It makes me think of rainy afternoons with the electric trains whizzing back and forth across the dull green room.

And throughout the collection, Alexander looks hard at objects and places, as if seeing them for the first time, recording impressions of them, perhaps distorting them, but only to make them clearer for us. And there are echoes of Pound and William Carlos Williams in the short "I Imagine The Fog."

I imagine the fog has cleared. In the wind.... There's no wind today **[again, that threatening distortion]**, only rain, a slow sprinkle over pavement and bog, dwarf pine and dunes that shift across road and pine: gentle slavery, this season.

This street is silent. Outside my window a silver maple drops yellow leaves onto weeds and bricks. And now my neighbor wanders in his yard, cutting one by one each of his bright flowers.

This is powerful, clean writing, strong in its directness. And the strongest pieces in the collection give places and objects that same kind of there-ness. But there also is that moment of indecision when the speaker corrects the detail in the first line—trying to get right!

On the other hand, Mark Vinz approaches his subjects indirectly. As his title suggests, this collection contains a more dream-like material than Alexander's; *Late Night Calls* suggests both a reaching out to night, and a night that reaches out to us. The first section, "From the Dream Journal," evokes a world of visions and revisions, the kind of dream world one associates with paintings by De Chirico and Magritte. In "Angler," for example, the fisherman

knew that someday he would use up all his line, and the thought bothered him from time to time. But still he fished on alone, deeper and deeper into the dark green shadows, for he also knew that no matter how much line he let out, he would never reach bottom.

The territory is both familiar, and unfamiliar, and the peculiar dread we feel in the poem is the same dread we feel when we recognize a familiar object in an unfamiliar context—the melting watches in paintings

by Dali, the perfectly detailed locomotive emerging from a living room fireplace in a painting by Magritte. Even the world of the late night phone call from a close friend seems terror-ridden; the title poem, which appears very late in the collection, ends with the line, " 'Jesus.' Jim would say, 'this dying is hard work, isn't it.'"

There's that fear again, that nauseating, gripping terror that drives us to create voices that articulate it, and to find forms that contain it.

Alexander's "For Years My Father" ends when the father dies playing Beethoven's Spring Sonata: "When they finish the last movement...my mother asks my father if he doesn't think it's time to stop, and he smiles and says Yes and dies in the chair where he's sitting, violin and bow still in his hands." We never know if the father ever got it right, even though the speaker adds, "Later my uncle tells me that while my father plays, 'It's as though he's never been sick.'" Reading Mark Vinz and Robert Alexander, it's as though they've found a way of dealing with the illness.

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