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*The Party Train: A Collection Of
North American Prose Poetry*, edited
by **Robert Alexander, Mark Vinz and
C.W. Truesdale**; *A Curious
Architecture: A Selection Of
Contemporary Prose Poems*, edited by
Rupert Loydell and David Miller;
*Models Of The Universe: An
Anthology Of The Prose Poem*, edited
by **Stuart Friebert and David Young**
John Bradley

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- Robert Alexander, Mark Vinz, and C.W. Truesdale, editors. *The Party Train: A Collection of North American Prose Poetry*. Minneapolis, MN: New Rivers, 1996. 353 pp. \$18.95.
- Rupert Loydell and David Miller, editors. *A Curious Architecture: A Selection of Contemporary Prose Poems*. Devon, England: Stride Publications, 1996. 168 pp. £8.50.
- Stuart Friebert and David Young, editors. *Models of the Universe: An Anthology of the Prose Poem*. Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1995. 320 pp. \$25.00.

Anticipating that inevitable question raised by readers of any prose-poem collection, the editors of *The Party Train* provide the reader with this piece by S.C. Hahn (before the table of contents and the three introductions by the editors, who also wrestle with that inevitable question):

IF MY FATHER WERE TO ASK,

"What's a prose poem?" I would turn my face and look into the distance away from our farm house, into a wild copse of trees which runs from the road's edge and on up the hill to the far fields. Box elder, green ash, and black locust tangle in a net of branches, tied together by thorny greenbrier. I know of a coyote den beneath one old box elder tree, on the edge of a gully cutting through the copse. If I were to stick my hand into the hole, I could feel cool wet air and perhaps the playful teeth of pups.

"Remember when you plowed the fields in the spring," I say to my father, "and the air behind you filled suddenly with sea gulls?" I can see him inhale the aroma of memory: the green and yellow tractor, the motor exhaust and dust, steel blades of the plow sinking into the earth and turning it, the smell all sexual and holy, worms and grubs uncovered into sunlight, then an unexpected slash of white as the gulls materialize behind the plow, a thousand miles and more from any ocean.

I quote this piece in its entirety because it beautifully answers the question from the perspective of the prose poet, rather than that of the after-the-fact literary critic. I also find it fascinating how the image of the plow in Hahn's piece evokes the central issue used to differentiate the prose poem from the poem: "verse" comes from the Latin "to turn." The lines "turn" in verse, just like a plow going back and forth across a field. And yet, in S.C. Hahn's piece, the plow works as a real plow in a real landscape with real sea gulls, all created to answer a hypothetical question not about verse but about the prose poem. The prose poem, Hahn tells us, taking skillful advantage of the prose poem's leisurely anecdotal pace and room for rich detail, yields surprises only unearthed by this form.

Here we are near the end of the century where the prose poem has blossomed and the fact that we have three new anthologies of prose poems attests that this literary form continues to surprise and delight us, even as it continues, like the answer to the question of what is the smallest subatomic particle, to elude us in definition.

The Party Train offers much evidence of why readers (of poetry or fiction) should be reading prose poetry. The anthology, clearly a labor of love (all three editors are writers of the prose poem), has much to offer. This extends to the editors' introductions. Robert Alexander, for example, presents a poem by Allen Ginsberg, "The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour," in both the original free-verse version and the prose-poem version (included in the anthology itself). Alexander lets us feel (or, as he puts it, "hear") the difference in the two pieces and arrive at our own sense of why the prose poem is more appropriate for this piece, and by extension, for other pieces.

The first section of the anthology, entitled "Pathfinders and Desperadoes," establishes a context for the development of the prose poem, providing the reader with some of the earliest prose poets—Hawthorne (credited here with the first American prose poem), Thoreau, Whitman, as well as work by modernists such as Stein, Williams, Toomer, Hemingway. The editors don't provide only the usual suspects, however. They include here writers not as well known—Lafcadio Hearn, Gelett Burgess, Jane Heap, Fenton Johnson, Robert McAlmon. The biographical and publication notes give the interested reader seminal books to track down, such as Kay Boyle's *365 Days*. The prose poem seems to take its birth from journal writing (Hawthorne, Thoreau) and journalism (Whitman, Hemingway), and then mutate into its many forms (in Stein's case, through the influence of Cubism). This portion of the anthology makes the book a must for anyone with a desire to learn more about the evolution of the prose poem.

The prose poems by contemporary writers (in alphabetical order by the author's last name) form the bulk of the book. The editors give credit to those who have been most responsible for the current growth of the prose poem, often by providing the largest number of pieces by these writers. Russell Edson, for example, has six pieces in the anthology. Besides Edson, there's Robert Bly, David Ignatow, Louis Jenkins, W.S. Merwin, Charles Simic, and James Wright, among others. There's a stunning piece of James Wright's, "To Carolee Coombs-Stacy, Who Set My Verses to Music" that's not in his collected poems that alone makes this anthology a must: "When I opened my eyes, a doe was standing only a few feet away from me, She was dappled with fragments broken off from a birch tree. She stood utterly still. So did I...." Writers who have made more recent contributions to the prose poem are also included—Diane Glancy, Maxine Chernoff, Thomas R. Smith—as well as some writers who bring more of a fiction writer's sensibility to the prose poem—Reginald Gibbons, Stuart Dybek (who asks a question the prose poem is surely designed to explore: "What was it about the belly button that connected it to the Old Country?"), and N. Scott Momaday. All deserve a place in an anthol-

ogy which seriously attempts to represent this genre.

Intending, no doubt, to show the vitality of the prose poem, the editors devote the most pages to writers not as well known as those above, but whose work deserves attention. There is a plethora of fine work, starting with S.C. Hahn's "If My Father Were to Ask," quoted earlier, to Jim Hazard's "from The Snow Crazy Copybook" with its delightful, loopy vision of Emily Dickinson yearning for a visit to "the saloon," to Thomas R. Smith's "Portrait of My German Grandparents, 1952," one of a number of moving photograph meditations, to Alison Townsend's "My Ex-Husband Asks Me Who Reads My Rough Drafts," with its painfully honest portrait of divorce ("all the silly things we know about one another float, unspoken, in the lamplight between us"), to Harriet Zinnes's "I Can Help You Speak Your Name," with its spooky, anonymous, authoritative voice ("I can give you to yourself where your heart is..."). As I said earlier, it is evident that the editors undertook this anthology with a great deal of affection for the prose poem.

Some problems, although minor for the most part, do appear. If a history of the prose poem is to be presented, it seems odd to leave out significant "pathfinders and desperadoes" such as Lautreamont, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Kafka, Ponge, etc. I understand the scope of this anthology is limited to North America, but perhaps one of the three introductions could have given credit where credit is due. And with the North American focus, there are some deserving prose poets who were not invited to the party, such as Americans Nin Andrews, Greg Boyd, Lawrence Fixel, Charles Fort, John Knoepfle, Mary Oliver, Douglas Smith, and Barry Yourgrau; and Canadians Allan Cooper, Evelyn Lau, and Douglas Burnet Smith. But this type of complaint can be made of any anthology.

A more serious weakness of this collection is the editorial slant toward the narrative prose poem, with a voice speaking from direct experience (or the assumption of such). A cursory visual examination of the 300+ pages of the prose poems here will confirm that the preference is for the conventional blocks of prose. Missing are the innovators who experiment with form, as well as content, innovators such as Kimiko Hahn, Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, Barry Silesky, and Rosmarie Waldrop, to name a few. These writers, blurring the lines between poetry and prose and essay and drama and almost every genre you can think of, like it or not, are opening up new territory for the prose poem. The reader who wants a more complete picture of the full range of prose poetry will be forced to consult another anthology or anthologies. I regret this omission in an anthology that otherwise makes an excellent introduction to the prose poem, as well as stimulating reading for those already familiar with the genre.

Readers desiring a taste of more experimental prose poetry might turn to Rupert Loydell and David Miller's *A Curious Architecture: A Selection of Contemporary Prose Poems*, though "curious" comes to play in a manner the editors did not intend. In his introduction, Loydell explains a tension between the editors, with Miller more partial to prose poems leaning toward

"prose," and Loydell to pieces leaning more toward "poetry." Out of this creative conflict they decided to include, Loydell notes, "fables, diary entries, stories . . . along with work that utilizes the obvious poetic form of broken lines," to the advantage of the anthology. Pieces range from four lines to six pages, from paragraph form to numbered sections, from verse lines to margin-to-margin lines. Such variety is admirable, and a strength of this anthology, but the manner in which this variety occurs does raise some questions.

The anthology presents both English and American prose poets, but what I find curious is the criteria for the selections. The American prose poets Loydell and Miller choose mainly reflect L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E influence, a.k.a. "postmodern" writing. I'm referring to the spiritual kin of Gertrude Stein, writers that Alexander, Vinz, and Truesdale omitted from *The Party Train*, such as Barbara Guest, Fanny Howe, Keith Waldrop, Rosmarie Waldrop, and John Yau. These inclusions would be fine, if the entire anthology displayed this aesthetic.

The selections of prose poems by British writers, however, seem to exhibit an entirely different standard. The book opens with four prose poems by Peter Redgrave, a writer whose work can be found in Michael Benedikt's out-of-print classic *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology* (1976). Given Redgrave's long interest in the prose poem, I can certainly understand why the editors open with his writing. But the four pieces they begin with don't do justice to this writer's wilder side, which he clearly exhibits in his recent collection of prose poems, *The Cyclopean Mistress*. Given the preference for the wilder American prose poems, why not apply the same aesthetic to the English writers? Just what is the organizing principle of the book?

Another problem has to do with the book's organization. The editors don't present the prose poems in alphabetical order by author, which I find liberating, yet they group all the pieces by one writer together, so the effect is not quite a formal structure, yet not quite an organic one. If you're going to group poems by author, then why not use an overall alphabetical order, or else organize the poems themselves into some sort of whole? If there is some organizing plan here, I failed to find it.

I don't wish to leave the impression that the book is without virtue. There's work here that deserves attention: Fanny Howe's obliquely narrated "The Low Road," "There Are No 'Others,'" and "The Bourgeoisie Despises Poverty and Denies It Cultural Validity"; Thomas A. Clark's aphoristic, Wallace Stevens-like "Of Shade and Shadow"; Rosmarie Waldrop's multi-layered, multidimensional sentences ("Whenever you're surprised that I should speak your language I am suddenly wearing too many necklaces and breasts, even though feeling does not produce what is felt, and the object of observation is something else again") excerpted from her *Lawn of Excluded Middle*; and John Levy's Zen-humored "Kyoto," the shortest piece in the book, and a good example of the split in the editors' tastes. Here, in this piece by a British writer, we see the more traditional prose poem, one that would fit comfortably in *The Party Train*:

I'm at a temple. A young monk in black robes walks by, looks at me, stops. He points to my long hair. Brown. Then to my goatee. Red. He touches my armpit and looks puzzled. I point to my hair. He points to my crotch. I point to my hair. He invites me in for green tea.

David Miller states in his "Afterword" that "we have to look, for the most part, to nonlineated (or 'nonversified') poetry—i.e. prose poetry— ... for a real concern with disclosing the unfamiliar or unknown." I'm not sure I totally agree with that, but I admire this preference for work that's partial to the mysterious. Lord knows we need more editors with an openness to work that doesn't blindly follow conventions. Yet Miller's statement seems to apply only to the selections by the American prose poets and not to those by the British writers in *A Curious Architecture*. The editors could have made this anthology a lot more valuable to the reader had they been more consistent in their objectives.

The editors of *Models of the Universe*, Stuart Friebert and David Young, have no problem showing a consistency of aesthetics in their anthology. It can first be seen in the illustration of the cover—Joseph Cornell's "Soap Bubble Set." As Young explains in his "Voodoo Poetics?" introduction, the prose poem offers "the attraction of a little world made out of everyday materials," just as Cornell's shadowboxes function, transforming the mundane to the magical. In his list of five "slightly bendable" rules governing selections for this anthology, Young coyly admits a bias (which the selections in the anthology confirm): "A tilt, if any, toward the representation of the essential craziness and exuberant inventiveness that we take to be the especially representative flavor of the genre, from Bertrand [1807-1841, credited by the editors as the first prose poet] on."

"Snakebread," by Hans Arp, translated by Walter Howell III, serves as a stunning example of this "tilt":

Snakebread is the rapture of snakes. It is a torturous hollow wreath of bread with a practical entrance and exit. The snake, aroused and shimmering, is accustomed to winding its way into it and consumes, then, its daily bread not as we do ours—in the sweat of our brow—but rather in a pleasant half sleep, sucking and slurping on the surrounding walls of bread. The soles of my feet turn sky-blue with envy as I consider such a revolting favoring of snakes. Likewise, I would love to eat a bread-wreath in such a manner, but for us poor harp-playing souls there is none to be had. For us it's just the old rolls of yesterday on which we can take bites with our weak little teeth.

Arp so startles us with the originality of this disturbing vision that the narrator's response—the soles of his feet turning "sky-blue"—seems quite plausible. Those who do agree with Friebert and Young on the "essential craziness and exuberant inventiveness" of the prose poem will find a treasure trove in this anthology.

Here lies the central difference between *Models of the Universe* and *The Party Train*. While examples of prose poems exhibiting this "essential craziness" can certainly be found in the latter anthology, the former revels in them, due very likely to the editors' historical perspective. I use the term "historical perspective" for a variety of reasons: 1) the prose poems in *Models* are arranged by the year of each author's birth; 2) the editors possess an *international* awareness of the prose poem, making this a vastly different book than *The Party Train*; 3) the major influences on the prose poem, at least in the eyes of Friebert and Young, of Dada and French Surrealism (*Models* opens with Aloysius Bertrand's "The Five Fingers of the Hand" and closes with Tom Andrews' "Cinema Verite: Jacques Derrida and God's *Tsimtsum*," thus suggesting this Dadaist/Surrealist aesthetic is still the dominant mode in prose poetry); and 4) the debt *Models* owes to Michael Benedikt's *The Prose Poem*, which Young, to his credit, acknowledges in his introduction.

Those readers who have wished for years that Benedikt's invaluable anthology would be reprinted will be pleased with *Models of the Universe*. As can be seen from the comments above, Friebert and Young share with Benedikt nearly identical beliefs of the parentage of the prose poem. There are some omissions from Benedikt's anthology, though, that are troubling—Lautreamont (*Songs of Maldoror*); Alfred Jarry, the "Ubuist"; Octavio Paz (*Eagle or Sun*), and Velimir Khlebnikov, the Russian futurist, to name the most glaring. While no anthology has the room to include all the writers that deserve to be included (even one that's over 300 pages), these omissions loom large given the care the editors take to show lineage.

The chronological ordering and the gathering of a world cast of writers—Baudelaire, Kafka, Trakl, Vallejo, Borges, Ponge, Seferis, Ritsos, Cortazar, et al.—creates another problem. These folks are one tough act to follow. The last one hundred pages of *Models*, where the editors present contemporaries, display a drop in energy and inventiveness. Well, but of course, you might be saying. While it might be impossible for anyone to follow this warm-up act, the choices of the editors do seem a little curious. Is Steve Martin really one of our most vital prose poets? The inclusion of writers who don't write primarily in the prose poem form—Rita Dove, Philip Levine, Sandra McPherson, David St. John, Bruce Weigl, for example—might also account for the lack of energy in the last third of the book. If prose poems are to be included solely on the basis of excellence, where is Robert Haas's "A Story About the Body"? Where are Barry Yourgrau, Nin Andrews, Louis Jenkins (all writers who work almost solely in this genre and share the same aesthetic as Friebert and Young)? And, as in *The Party Train*, the exclusion in *Models* of nearly all L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E writers (except for Michael Palmer) makes the con-

temporary prose poem appear a much more tame genre than is the case. And where is an author index in alphabetical order for quick access to a particular writer?

Despite these shortcomings, *Models of the Universe* deserves praise. Reading this volume is to take a voyage through a Borgesian gallery of exquisite beasts. There's Julio Cortazar's classic "Instructions on How to Cry," H.D.'s "Antistrophe" (I had never seen any of her prose poems before this), six of Italo Calvino's whimsical "Invisible Cities," Margaret Atwood's "Fainting" (from her prose poem collection *Murder in the Dark*), W.S. Merwin's "Postcards from the Maginot Line," Thylas Moss's "An Anointing," and Peter Schjeldahl's "Dynamite." And no anthology of prose poems would be complete without Russell Edson; *Models* gives us five (though they could have used the blank half a page in his section to give us yet one more of the master's work). Here is the opening of "The Wounded Breakfast," a kind of tragicomic Mother Goose vision:

A huge shoe mounts up from the horizon, squealing and grinding forward on small wheels, even as a man sitting to break fast on his veranda is suddenly engulfed in a great shadow, almost the size of the night__

He looks up and sees a huge shoe ponderously mounting out of the earth.

Up in the unlaced ankle-part an old woman stands at a helm behind the great tongue curled forward; the thick laces dragging like ships' ropes on the ground as the huge thing squeals and grinds forward; children everywhere ...

The Party Train, *A Curious Architecture*, and *Models of the Universe* show that while the prose poem continues to flourish at the end of the twentieth century, distinct camps have formed. I must confess I was surprised at how little overlap in prose poets exists in these three collections. The good news, however, is that despite some continued resistance by publishers (especially and unfortunately for book-length prose-poem collections), the publication of these anthologies shows that the prose poem is finally getting the recognition it deserves as a major literary form. Readers who desire a rounded view of the prose poem will want to examine all three of these anthologies. But given limitations of time or money, I'd advise readers to choose either *The Party Train* or *Models of the Universe* (according to whether they prefer the North American or international scope). The historical perspectives alone make each book a valuable addition to literature and creative writing classrooms, public and private libraries, and a must for anyone interested in the prose poem. *The Party Train* and *Models of the Universe* will surely become the new high water marks future prose-poem anthologies will be measured against.

John Bradley