

# **THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL**

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## **Short Reviews**

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## SHORT REVIEWS

Jim Linebarger. *Anecdotal Evidence*. Point Riders Press, 1993. 61 pp.  
\$8.00. Drawings by Claude Anderson.

The title of this collection could not be more appropriate. In *Anecdotal Evidence*, using conversational language, Jim Linebarger offers us short chronological accounts of events and experiences, most of them associated with growing up in Texas.

In several of the poems, the title is used to give us the setting ("College Lunchroom, the Teachers' Table") or to introduce us to the characters at hand ("The Salesman and the College Boy"). In many poems, Linebarger uses the first sentence, usually embedded with information, to serve this function, and to give us the feel of an anecdote:

A Texan, a freshman at an unnamed Ivy League college on 116th Street in Manhattan where Dwight D. Eisenhower is the figurehead president, is undergoing a probing interview to determine his fitness to belong to a prestigious undergraduate service society.

("The Jewish Question")

This poem begins a series of five that refer to the college-student years. By this time, we have already seen groups of poems about children, boys, and a teenager. As his hero comes of age, Linebarger serves as commentator of the boy's various rites of passage, which are told with an insightfulness that makes me suspect that at least a few of these rites are autobiographical; the author, like his subject, grew up in Texas, played football, and became a college professor. Some poems can be read as straightforward narratives that make growing up laughable, such as his first junior high dance ("Semi-formal, 1948"), or when he has to keep from swallowing a tooth that falls out during his first French kiss ("Up Front"). Others, although the language is still simple, carry more of a message beneath the outward descriptions. For example, "Paper-boy" is not simply a narrative of his first job, but also an account of his first encounter with prejudice, an issue which Linebarger continues to address.

By the time we reach the "young man" and "man" poems, the hero (Linebarger?) begins to recognize ignorance and prejudice everywhere. In "Gone to Texas" he sees racism in his uncle, who says, "I'd rather work with a nigger any day than with one of them lazy spies from over there in Meskin-town." He sees religious ignorance in one of his female students. When he "asks for an example of religious intolerance" in "Experienced Teacher Longs for Halcyon Days," "she volunteers: she and her high school friends were forced to eat cafeteria fish on Fridays, and all because of the Catholics. The teacher sighs..." Unfortunately, in this poem there also seems to be a form of prejudice that resonates from the speaker himself—a touch of sexism. He

refers to the female student as "blond and blank," and the unflattering drawing of the woman that accompanies the poem depicts her as such. In "College Lunchroom" he alludes to the religious intolerance of a female colleague, and, in "Lunchroom Revisited," he describes the awkward silence that her attitude creates, showing us his more poetic side: "The quiet is broken only by the unintentional sounds of utensils against plates, ice tea in glasses, a throat not quite cleared, overhead fans whirring." The details that Linebarger skillfully chooses to include in recalling such episodes are what give us his perspective, whether or not we know if he is a bystander or an actual participant. He never states his opinion flat out, but leads us to it indirectly by means of "anecdotal evidence," thus making a storytelling device poetic.

### **Jean Hopkinson**

M. Kasper. *All Cotton Briefs*. Benzene Brooklyn Publishers. 1992,

Sometimes it is best to look at a serious issue with a sense of humor. In *All Cotton Briefs* M. Kasper satirizes a number of people and narrative strategies in the tradition of Jonathan Swift. The delightful tone of the book begins with the cover illustration—a pair of "expanded edition" BVDs that connect the title to the drawing, which is exactly the effect of each one of his prose poems.

The table of contents prepares the reader for Kasper's crafty writing style: the author collects a number of very interesting stories and facts and presents them to an audience who is forced to evaluate them. "Miasmi" is one of the many highlights of the collection. Kasper writes, "Greetings from sunny South Florida! Stupid nightlife and drug rub-outs." He goes on to detail some of the evils that are present in Florida today. Above the text is a stereotypical "Greetings from..." postcard with "Miasmi" in place of "Miami."

The author also concentrates on individual dilemmas, and he seems to emphasize the egotism of people. "Nurse Harris Mops Up: A True Story" portrays a hospital scene where a nurse humiliates an old man who can no longer control his bowel movements. The man basically gives up on life because Nurse Harris is overly concerned with events in her own life.

The pictures in the collection add to the work as a whole, but it is obvious that Kasper's writing could stand on its own. He details different aspects of history, such as the Vietnam War, while at the same time touching the abstract ideas of greed and love. The final prose poem of the book is a summation of Kasper's style of thinking and writing. "Surrounded with injustice and guilty of complicity, we sometimes get confused about what we do. Take Jane. She considered it immoral to feed pets when people were starving ... so she killed her cat."

### **Kevin Drew**

R.M. Host. *Reality Sandwiches*. Oregon: Trout Creek Press, 1995. 27 pages.  
\$4.00.

Robert Bly once described prose poetry as a "leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again." R.M. Host's *Reality Sandwiches* fits Bly's definition of prose poetry by pushing the reader to make such "leaps." Host's language is rich with everyday observations which he then extracts from their usual contexts and molds them into his obscure logic. Throughout the chapbook Host has his reader move from sandwich to sandwich. In each piece the internal logic, or "bread," holds the surreal or unconscious "filling" of the sandwiches together.

An example of this "leap" can be found in his opening piece "Broken States." In this prose poem Host describes the "Florida of [his] dreams," which includes such bizarre things as "flea circuses," and a "boombox blaring '30s big band hits." The "flea circus" filling is held together by his very logical pattern of describing Florida. He describes his state in a logical manner, and makes this realm almost believable until his second to last line. In this line he juxtaposes the image of his mother against the Florida that he had created in the previous lines, requiring the reader to leap from his "kingdom-yet-to-be" to "the State which my mother achieved after she abandoned me but before the angels broke her."

In "Arbor Day" Host creates the reality of a tree in his back yard, then immediately has the reader leap into the surreal, writing that his tree is really moaning in a "low, dismal tone, a tone that clears every living thing from its branches as well as from the back yard." Because of his internal logic, this leap to believe in a personified tree is easier to make.

The rest of his work in the chapbook follows the same pattern of setting up one logic system, then leaping into another one. One of his stronger pieces is "Dim Sum," in which he describes suburban life with a new twist. The last line of this piece is what separates it from an ordinary observation of suburban life: "We have become suburban outsiders stumbling around the edges of our own lives while organizing ourselves to cope with permanent dimness. Our suburban children, although playing, are not trying very hard and yearn secretly for adulthood."

**Kathy M. Saad**

Greenslade, David. *Fishbone*. Illustrated by Iwan Bala. Argraffiad cyntaf: Hydref, 1993.

The surreal drawing on the outside of David Greenslade's *Fishbone* is intimidating at first, but don't let it scare you—dive in. It's safer than it appears. The cover's portrayal of man and fish trading heads alludes to a kinship shared by seemingly opposite natures. This interconnectedness is

only a prelude to what can be found inside. And it seems that this collection is suggesting that although we perceive things as disconnected, there is, in fact, *always* a connection. But sometimes it's just a whisper instead of a scream.

Throughout *Fishbone*, there are several illustrations accompanying the prose poems. The drawings reflect the prose; they are not a *reproduction* of a reality so much as a *suggestion* of it. For example, in the title piece, "Fishbone," the first thing we notice is the picture to the left of the poem, one that is almost identical to the cover illustration, but not quite. It seems that what Greenslade is suggesting is that nothing stays the same, not even the illustrations in a book, and it is in change that we must find meaning. When Greenslade starts out, "here is the fishbone we made from a needle and this is the plan for your escape," the reader is confronted with a sort of ironic causality: normally, needles are made from fish bones, not the other way around. His point is that nothing here is superficially meaningful.

There are many other images that conflict with "normal" reasoning. The notion of escape is found when the reader is told, "this will bother you but remember, your way is always down." At first, this is an uncomfortable image because, as escapes go, down rarely leads out. But if we refer to the half-man half-fish entity on the opposing page, we are reminded that the world the writer has created in "Fishbone" is not a place where perceptions are clear and comfortable. What Greenslade seems to be suggesting is that we must plunge further into the "domestic waters" of the prose poem until we reach the "great rock of time's reluctant womb" and get to the bottom of the images.

Changing meaning and escaping "normal" thinking is a challenge to any writer or reader. Only with the "new remembering" invoked by the souvenir fishbone can we "stitch the valley back into the sky" and see the poet's goal—unity. This unity is only possible through escaping the restrictions of what we know for the freedom of what we imagine.

**Kristen Gagne**

Michelle Murphy, *the tongue in its shelf*. Standing Stone Press, 1995.

In this collection of prose poems, Michelle Murphy manipulates language and religious imagery, and this manipulation reveals oppositions in her work. One way she draws the reader into her visual world is through contrasting descriptions in the form of phrases not marked by punctuation. Murphy's style is challenging since the short phrases in her prose poems are meant to be consumed all at once, as in "Degrees." In this poem she manipulates language to fit "the alphabet on a postcard" and her words are "sanded down to one cracked syllable." The deliberate absence of punctuation and lack of capitalization, as in "Fortune," exemplify her ability to honor words as free entities. The phrase, "spill into emersion," conjures up images on its own, but changes in the context of the poem. The repetitive use of brief phrases

also forces the reader to simultaneously absorb a word's individual meaning as well as to see how it works in context with the rest of the poem.

The cover of *the tongue in its shelf* has a photograph of an "S&M Communion Bread" shop, which of course creates religious overtones. However, the chapbook doesn't make an obvious religious comment, as the title suggests. Instead, Murphy uses the idea of "tongues" to imply the existence of several different ideas occurring at the same time. For example, she suggests that one may receive communion on the tongue in silence, but she also uses it as a way to speak her words and talk in different tongues. Religious imagery is not thrown at the reader. Rather, the imagery is delicately crafted within each poem, as in "Without Height." In this prose poem we again see her precise phrases that float on their own, such as "sampling prayer" and "me alive as any Sunday town going through the motions of mourning." Murphy uses these simple but powerful images to carry her suitcases of metaphor.

In "Visible" we also see the contrast between the senses of sight and sound. As Murphy explores the battle of the senses, she crosses into the world of the supernatural, "This ghost hums in her hair." However, she still manages to keep one foot grounded. The narrator hears the ghost open the door but "she can smell for bruises better in the dark." So it seems that Murphy opposes the visionary qualities and the tangible reality in her poems so she can explore the "blind & no matter" that she writes of. There, Murphy reminds us that there are many ways that we experience words.

### Mara Maddalone

Thomas Wiloch. *Paper Mask*. Exeter, England: Stride, 1988. 56 pages.

"I'm looking for the face I had before the world was made."  
—William Butler Yeats

This is one of two quotations that open up this chapbook of prose poetry, entitled *Paper Mask*. Thomas Wiloch effectively describes the idea of and search for the loss of identity. Masks and mirrors are well-chosen analogies for these ambiguous identities due to their enigmatic and mysterious nature; there is always a story behind them.

Despite intentional ambiguity in the prose poems in this chapbook, Wiloch creates believable personae. These prose poems are similar to fairy tales and childhood stories we have always wondered about or thought of participating in as youths. There are times when some of his pieces verge on the edge of being "prosy," only to be brought back from this edge with one clearly articulated image or unexpected phrase, such as in "Conversations," a piece dealing with a man and his dog.

"The Hallway of Broken Mirrors" is a poem that combines philosophy and religion in a surrealistic, dreamlike manner. Wiloch, as in a number of

pieces, creates mental jumps from one level to another, such as in "The Sleeping Mirror," where a mirror will not work for a man.

Surrealistic is a good word to use in describing Wiloch's writing, as well as the book's illustrations. There is a dreamlike quality to a number of his pieces, grounded in the fact that the reader accept the internal logic of each poem immediately from its onset. This technique is quite effective in creating a chapbook that makes one look at the world through different eyes to see the things one has been missing all along. In the end, Wiloch's world full of masks becomes a surreal place, and even what is behind these masks is dubious. Nothing and no one can be taken for granted. As Wyndham Lewis states in the beginning of the chapbook: "Such a strange thing as our coming together requires a strange place for initial stages of our intimate ceremonious acquaintance."

**Carolyn Stokes**