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Gary Young's *Days* and Robert
Hill Long's *Effigies*
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Gary Young. *Days*. Eugene, Oregon: Silverfish Review Press, 1997. 70 pp. Cloth edition. Paper: \$12.00.
Robert Hill Long. *Effigies*. West Hartford, Connecticut: Plinth Books, 1997. 95 pp. Cloth: \$24.00. Paper: \$12.00.

One of the significant editorial stances taken in the pages of this journal is a consistent refusal to “define” the prose poem. The two books reviewed here ably illustrate the wisdom of that refusal. The boundless form which the prose poem at its best commands allows a voice to rise, as it does in the work of Gary Young, just above the quietness of contemplative murmur, yet this same form still provides for the range and ambition in the work of Robert Hill Long. Indeed, in *Effigies*, Long seems ready to attempt the impossible act of balancing a hummingbird feather in one hand and a life-size Grecian figure in the other. The prose poem, whatever it is, more than any other form, prose or poetry, seems able to open itself to the experiments and ideas in these books.

The fifty-six prose poems of *Days* resemble paradigms of the *Zen koan* made flesh. The character of these pieces, nonetheless, is unique, purely American, both strange and familiar, and intensely quiet:

The stillborn calf lies near the fence where its mother licked the damp body, then left it. All afternoon she has stood beside a large, white rock in the middle of the pasture. She nuzzles it with her heavy neck and will not be lured away. This must be her purest intelligence, to accept what she expected, something sure, intractable, the whole focus of the afternoon’s pale light.

None of the pieces in *Days* is titled. Silverfish Review Press has wisely allowed separate pages so each poem can assert its presence as well as represent Young’s brief and exquisite examinations of “illusion,” in which “the mind clears and the heart calms”—the nature of both landscape and family, the filiation of animals, the dreamscape and the flux of time.

My friend is dying piece by piece. His right side is paralyzed, already gone. In the time remaining, he is learning to speak again and his good left side rages against his right. He follows each rended thought to cleavage, and dead end, then backtracks and starts again. He hopes to remember, he stammers, how to draw a sentence.

In its best moments, then, this is a book of unknowing and wonderment, a work to be read and re-read in order to grasp the book’s unseen intuition. As regards wonder, for example, Young refrains from becoming preachy, instead exploring and questioning in the space between heartbeats, allowing a voiceless child the same level of knowledge available to any of us:

The baby fusses. I read a book to quiet him, and he calms. His fingers show a lifeline, heartline, all the fates lurking in his flesh. He's asleep when I finish, and one hand closes in a fist around my thumb. Somewhere he learned even dreams must be tethered to the earth.

The two epigraphs from Whitman and Issa (“I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God / not in the least”; “The world of dew / Is the world of dew, / And yet... / And yet...”) are appropriate guideposts for the project of these prose poems. Equally, the presence of Heraclitus hovers always off center stage, flowing and unflowing, moving subject and object with equal disregard toward the eventuality of death.

Where deer tracks enter the stream, the water's erased them. Bay leaves and oak leaves drift along. It's autumn, and everything seems to be falling away. Even the old bitterness has left me. The crayfish have lost their shells. They walk backward through the shallows, their new skin so vulnerable, translucent, and blue.

To read these prose poems, the reader must learn again, or unlearn, the paths of distinguishing and of similarity. This is not a simple book, and so ought not to be considered simply. Some of the difficulties occur because these untitled pieces seem to fall witheringly back to their respective pages. Yet, like leaves falling together into a pile that corrupts the earth they end on, Young's poems have no problem intermingling. If we read too quickly, with a sense of expectation that these prose poems are little more than brief meditations, then we miss the point of *Days*. The task—and the joy—here is to linger in the realm of words where there are no discrete markers, identities. Here there exist only nodes of reflection:

I put asters in a small blue vase. Each morning they open, and they close again each night. Even in this dark room they follow a light which does not reach them. They have bodies. That is all the faith they need.

“The dream has the structure of a sentence,” Jacques Lacan once wrote. In Young's lines, equally, there exists a calm assertion that words might reconstruct the prism of life within the structure of a dream.

Robert Hill Long, more than any poet since Galway Kinnell, considers death as the central concern of his work. This interest, which Long comes back to even as the poet and the poem are moving on, has produced a consistent body of work singular in voice, distinctive, sometimes brilliant. Unlike his first two books of “pure” poetry (*The Power to Die* and *The Work of the Bow*),

however, the prose poems of his *Effigies* have moved away from what Robert Morgan once described in Long's work as the "sad flotsam of a family" and edged closer toward "the legend and landscape of America."

Indeed, the prose poet of *Effigies* is strikingly different from the poet who shaped such stark lyricism in his first two books. The intimacy of family and the familiar is replaced with what Long himself describes in an introductory note as "an elegiac sequence, set in a deep south riverport." Yet if these elegies are little more than minor, personal histories, they equally comprise a mosaic that turns on the themes of mortality and linkage, separation, and confounded awareness. As Long suggests diffidently in his introduction—and as Faulkner demonstrated in his weighty narratives—in the minor event the sense of place and the immense weight of history most honestly emerge. Long beautifully describes his effort in *Effigies* as one that seeks "not to comprehend but rather apprehend that city."

"Apprehend: from the Latin, *apprehendere*—to seize upon; look forward to with fear or dread; perceive through conscious awareness; lay hold of with the hands." No better term exists to describe how, in Long's hands, these jewels of apprehension strike:

Even when she was very little her hunger was worth something: hunger taught her to dance, and her father noticed. When his thirst was deep enough he could charm any bartender into clearing the narrow bar for just one dance—see, a girl, and feet so tiny. The patrons would shout for a second dance when they saw how the drumbeat of her bare feet could start such a trembling among the bottles on shelves. By the third or fourth dance, the trembling reached the glasses in their hands: they threw coins and bills at her feet to make her stop. Then father would let her climb down and be a little girl again, mumbling thanks in poor English for the chair and spoon and bowls of stew brought her by drunken bricklayers and stevedores.

Afterwards, under the stars of whatever field they slept in, she'd dream the same dream: dancing in a dress with ruffles, polka dots. Some nights, still asleep, she'd rise and wander. Once she woke in the middle of a dirt road: an armadillo sniffed her, a train blew in the distance. Another time she woke on the porch of an old white couple. Her English was so poor they guessed she was deaf-mute. They bathed and fed her, aimed to adopt her. She was trying on a dress with blue dots in front of their radio full of Bing Crosby when her father knocked at the screen door. He made her choose between the dress and him. To protect his livelihood after that, he tied a rope from her ankle to his ankle at night. If she rose to leave, she fell.

It is many dances later, now, many dresses, many men later. The nurses who are otherwise kind tie her old-lady wrists down so she cannot rip out the IV again. Some nights her feet drum against the footboard, but weakly. When she can forget the restraints, she goes over memories step by step: the time she was caught dancing in a bar at age ten and jailed for three days. Emerging, she saw father at the corner holding his hat, which meant he was ashamed of himself. Out of his jacket he drew the most beautiful loaf of bread, which she ate before allowing him to kiss her. She remembers the night her stitched-up knee opened on stage in Chicago: with every spin she flung blood onto the front-row gowns and tuxedos. By then even her blood was famous.

But sometimes when she was ten, twelve, dancing in those bars, she would not stop. Not even after her father's guitar stopped. She made the coins at her feet tremble and spin, kicked the sweaty dollar bills back at the drinkers and shouters. Having the moment, that was having everything. When she closes her eyes now she knows who it is, tied to her on the narrow bed.

(“The Restraints”)

This poem is emblematic of *Effigies*: conceptually compressed, yet with some impressive turns within the narrative that might otherwise require chapters for similar effect in a novel; simply written and accessible, yet far more than bland observation. The risk that Long willingly takes here is that of appropriating human figures for conceptual purposes. What right, after all, does the poet as observer have to “know” the character “whose blood was famous” or to invent a Mississippi “Melpomene” who loses “sixteen out of twenty-six in wind rattled shacks on one Delta sharecrop after another” or (“On Duty”) how “The man . . . [ellipsis mine] doesn’t have to rise from the sofa to see that across the river the boy is stumbling toward a bad end”? This, of course, is the risk that any inventor of fictions must grapple with; for the prose poem, however, the danger of manipulating device and figure at the expense of credibility seems far more significant in several paragraphs than in the leisure of several hundred pages afforded the “conventional” novelist, or, for that matter, even the “conventional” short story writer.

The happy event is that Long is successful in straining the limits of indefinite boundaries between poetry and prose. Whereas Gary Young’s exquisitely lyric compressions thrive in the realm of the poetic, Long has achieved in *Effigies* work that is both prose and poetry. In the three sections of *Effigies* (“A Century of Southern Light,” “The Streets of the Muses,” “Toward a Bad End”), Long achieves cohesion from fractured entities coexisting over the last century in the legend and landscape of “a deep south riverport.”

The poems themselves often read like imploded novels. In this sense then, the book contains forty-nine “implosions,” and by the journey’s end, the reader as traveler is fairly exhausted and emotionally drained. *Effigies* may well represent something entirely new for poetry, prose poetry, and sudden fictions; at the least, this work adds significantly to the rich heritage Robert Hill Long has already provided in his work, and bears fairly reliable indicators that a great deal of his magic is likely still waiting in the word.

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