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Commentaries: Edouard's Nose

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EDOUARD'S NOSE

Edouard doesn't have a head. A torso and limbs, but no head. Facial features in the middle of his back. He smokes a pipe, which he keeps in his mouth most of the time because it's awkward for him to reach his arms around to the middle of his back. "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," painted Magritte, an allusion to the idea that the symbol does not necessarily correspond to the actual physical reality it's intended to represent. Same goes for the word nose and for the same Edouard, etc.

So much for background information. One day Edouard decided to take a walk. He put his nose on a leash and set out for the park. By the artificial lake he shared a bench with a woman with only one leg. "May I pet your nose?" she asked.

"Certainly," he replied, "but be careful, he's not always nice. Would you like a Kleenex?" he added, taking one out of the box he carried with him.

"No thanks, I'm on a diet," she said, so he ate it himself as she stroked his nose. "Nice nose," she said when it dripped on her hand.

She caught him staring at her missing leg, though there was nothing to stare at. "It's an old football injury," she explained, pointing at the nothing. "By the way, if you don't mind, if it's not too personal, what happened to your head?"

"Problem with my nose. Complications in surgery. Had to amputate." Edouard sighed and lit his pipe. "Dreadful business."

They talked like this for several minutes. By chance they met again in the same place the next day. In time they became lovers. She started wearing more revealing clothes and got her nose pierced. He took up tarot card reading as an exotic hobby. They rode nude together on a bicycle through the streets of Paris in the early morning. They both claimed to have a total disregard for symbols. Neither of the two would admit to being in love. "Love my nose," said Edouard. Socially they were a big hit. It was fashionable to be seen at the same restaurant as Edouard and Edouardetta. Everyone ordered boiled nose. That was before the war, when nose was still plentiful.

COMMENTARY

Like Edouard above, who expresses "a total disregard for symbols," the prose poem itself often noses its thumbs at linguistic convention. Since prose is based on the logic of an agreed-upon set of symbols, readers of prose trust that a particular work, "chair" for example, will not be used to convey the notion of "fast food" or "umbrella." Poetry undermines this expectation; for the very nose of poetry is metaphor, comparison via the substitution and subsequent fusing of unlike elements. Thus, in prose my love is a beautiful, accomplished, intelligent woman, whereas in poetry she may be a flower, a blowfish, a lawnmower, a nose.

The humor, paradox, irony and playfulness inherent in many of my favorite prose poems results from a head-on collision between the routine linguistic expectations of prose and the intensely lyrical disruptions of poetry. I take particular delight in how the very shape of the prose poem lulls and attracts the unsuspecting reader, who often wades into it expecting the calm waters of the familiar, only to find himself caught in a linguistic riptide.

An unleashed metaphor will wander, tail wagging, from place to place. In short, it will follow its nose. Many of my prose poems start with a metaphor and quickly expand it into its own universe. Each of these miniature worlds has its own unique physical laws and properties, its own logic.

Because they are generally short, highly concentrated narratives, prose poems make wonderful vehicles for a nosy imagination.

It occurs to me that the hero and heroine of my prose poem are both amputees. Edouard has "lost his head," while Edouardetta is missing a limb. Is this some kind of oblique commentary?

I smell a nose.

"Edouard's Nose," from *Carnival Aptitude*, Asylum Arts, 1993.