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Commentaries: A Woman Leans Gary Young

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Gary Young

A WOMAN LEANS

A woman leans against a tall white pine, looks up into the tree, then lowers her head and stares at the horizon. Her son has climbed into the branches high above her. She's called him down twice, but afraid now her voice might distract him, she stands there silently and waits for him to fall. She knows if he does, there is nothing she can do. A cold wind moves through the tree. She can feel her body stiffen, but does not look up when the child cries out, I can see almost forever.

COMMENTARY

"Finding the Poem: Some Notes on Form"

I have been asked on more than one occasion to defend the prose poem, and to explain in particular how a poem can be a poem without "the line." Curiously, it is often poets working in free verse who make the most strenuous objection to prose poems, the same poets who argue for the legitimacy of free verse against those who champion poems written in formal meter and rhyme. Both arguments are absurd, and disingenuous as well. One might just as well be asked to defend the sonnet.

The prose poem has a history in the poetry of Europe and America that extends back more than a century and a half. It was appropriated by many of those same poets who first experimented with other free verse forms, and of course in China the *fu*, or poem-in-prose, has a history that stretches back millennia.

After Apollinaire's *Calligrams* and the visual explosions of Dada, after Modernism, Concrete poetry, Visual poetry, Language poetry and all the rest, to question the legitimacy of any poetic form is pedantic and unproductive. I am neither a critic, nor an apologist. I am simply a poet who has followed his appetites and his instincts to a congenial form.

My embrace of the prose poem is the result of a confluence in my work as a poet and my work as a fine printer. When I published *The Geography of Home*, an artist's book in which the text runs in a single horizontal line across each page, I found myself seduced by a form that

literally embodied the semantic landscape I was attempting to inhabit. My use of the prose poem is not based on any philosophic projection; it is rather a matter of enthusiasm and practicality.

The paradox of any poetic form is that it simultaneously liberates and constricts. Any formal strategy will structure a specific logic, and every form accentuates or encourages a particular mode of thinking; I am tempted to say, a particular mode of wonder. Form is merely an architecture necessary to support the ceremony of the poem.

Readers come to every poem with certain expectations, and traditional poetic forms create an anticipation of the "poetic" that prose does not. It is this very lack of expectation that makes the prose poem supremely subversive and supple; the reader may be seduced in wholly unanticipated ways. By eschewing the ornamental apparatus of received poetic forms, the prose poem must rely wholly on the music and the honesty of its own utterance. When they're successful, prose poems achieve a subtlety and a power to convince seldom matched by lineated poems.

The reader's diminished expectation of a poetic experience also makes the prose poem an especially demanding form. There are no signposts that telegraph: this is a poem. Because it *is* prose, and shares more visual equivalence with the language we use to negotiate newspapers, contracts or personal correspondence, it must work especially hard to embrace the rapture of language we identify as poetry.

My attraction to the prose poem is emotional rather than critical. The prose poem is a maternal form. It is comforting and embracing, but it can also be smothering, constricting; once inside there is no way out, no place to rest until the poem is finished. It is a clot of language, and must convince through revelation.

But in truth, what I treasure most about this form is the moral pressure it exerts. The prose poem encourages a particular kind of modesty. It might even at times achieve a certain humility, a humility which may, through grace, be reflected back upon the poet's own heart.

"A woman leans," from *Quarterly West*, No. 24, 1996-97.

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