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Commentaries: From *Lawn Of Excluded Middle* Rosmarie Waldrop

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Rosmarie Waldrop

From *Lawn of Excluded Middle*

I worried about the gap between expression and intent, afraid the world might see a fluorescent advertisement where I meant to show a face. Sincerity is no help once we admit to the lies we tell on nocturnal occasions, even in the solitude of our own heart, wishcraft slanting the naked figure from need to seduce to fear of possession. Far better to cultivate the gap itself with its high grass for privacy and reference gone astray. Never mind that it is not philosophy, but raw electrons jumping from orbit to orbit to ready the pit for the orchestra, scrap meanings amplifying the succession of green perspectives, moist fissures, spasms on the lips.

COMMENTARY

The prose poem is well over a hundred years old and has been practiced by such illustrious poets as Baudelaire and Rimbaud, but it still causes puzzlement. In the GDR before the Iron Curtain came down, Elke Erb told me it was not accepted as a literary form at all.

It is both an attraction and the problematic of the prose poem that it is a step farther removed from the oral than verse, that its effects, its rhythms are subtler, less immediate. That if it counts, it counts words or sentences rather than stresses or syllables.

Yet the prose poem is not a short-short-short story. Of the two terms yoked together in its name *poem* is the more important. It needs to have the poem's density and intensity. It must take wing.

Why do I write prose poems? I sometimes wonder, because I like verse very much: the way its rhythm rises from the tension between line and sentence; the way it refuses to fill up all of the available space of the page, each line acknowledging what is *not*. It makes manifest that "to create is to make a pact with nothingness" (Clark Coolidge). Or, as Heather McHugh put it: "[poetry] is the very art of turnings, toward the white frame of the page, toward the unsung, toward the vacancy made visible, that worldlessness in which our words are couched."

So for me one great challenge of the form is to compensate for its absence of turning, of margin. I try to place the vacancy *inside* the text. I cultivate cuts, discontinuity, leaps, shifts of reference. "Gap gardening," I have called it, and my main tool for it is collage.

But the excitement is that the prose poem, even more than a poem in verse, each time sets out into uncharted territory:

“Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night, though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness” (Emily Dickinson).

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