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Commentaries: After The Weather

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AFTER THE WEATHER

Yesterday a man was sucked out of an airplane over the blue-tipped mountains of Bolivia. He didn't cry "emergency." He didn't buzz the stewardess. He just dropped his fork, opened his mouth, and let the wind gather him inch by inch.

The other passengers agreed. This was real life, better than the movie or chicken salad. They leaned out of their seats, envying the man, arms and legs spread like a sheet, discovering raw air and the breath of migrating angels.

Below an old peasant woman beat her tortilla. She never dreamed that above her a man was losing his heart. Perhaps she was a barren woman, and when he landed, she'd say, "Yes, this is my son, a little old and a little late, but still my son."

And the man, he thought of wind and flocks of severed wings, then closed his eyes and arched himself again. He didn't understand. His head began to ache. He understood Buicks, red hair, the smell of day-old beer. But not these clouds, this new, white sunlight, or the fate of a man from Sandusky, Ohio.

COMMENTARY

I wrote "After the Weather" a fairly long time ago. I had fallen asleep on the couch during the 11:00 news but woke up just after the weather report—hence the title of the poem!—to a story about a man being sucked out of an airplane. Still in that semi-conscious sleep state, I sat up, trying to listen for more details that weren't forthcoming. Instead a beleaguered fender for a body shop commercial danced across the TV screen, and exhausted, I dozed back to sleep.

The next day I was hooked. Who was the man? Where was the airplane headed? Did he float like a leaf or drop like a can of tomato juice? I searched the newspapers looking for the story, found nothing, then began to wonder if, perhaps, I hadn't really heard the story but instead dreamt it, imposing dream on reality. Either way, so what! Such inviting ingredients for a prose poem—no beginning, no end, just the image of the man and all the possibilities.

"After the Weather" has modest ambitions—it doesn't take on a

whole event but instead tries to capture the essence of it—in this case, the last moment or two in this poor man's life. For me, the tight contained box of the prose poem invites such focus. But what I find challenging about this form is how much I can fit into that box, how wide can I expand the lens, how I can rearrange and reconstruct the details. The prose poem encourages me to play, to surprise myself, to be impulsive and have fun. So even if the poem is intent on the man's final moments, it opens up to include not just him but the major characters around him.

Looking back, I think this poem works off some quiet tensions. First, its structure. On the one hand, it moves quickly from the man to the other passengers—a *most enthusiastic audience*—to the old peasant woman—*where did she come from?*—then back to the man. On the other hand, it was important to suspend the moment, to explore both the horror and the humor of this man's predicament. (How sad it would be if he just tumbles down to earth—The End!) So while the shifts from stanza to stanza provide momentum to the narrative, I also think they help to slow it down, to hold the man and the reader so that both can linger just a second or two longer. Language, too, contributes to this tension. Yes, a man being sucked out of an airplane is not a lucky man—the inevitable is, of course, a dead man. Yet to soften the inevitable and, again, to suspend the moment, I wanted a mix of lines— short, direct reportage and longer, more luxurious ones—a juxtaposition that helps create the music which I think is so essential to the prose poem. Take the second stanza. The opening is reasonably straightforward. But then comes, "They leaned out of their seats, envying the man, arms and legs spread like a sheet, discovering raw air and the breath of migrating angels." There's something pretty being said, almost as good as the lyrics from a John Denver song. Finally, that bit of dialogue—something I love to include in my prose poems because it so often has such natural cadence. In this poem, the four syllable units as well as the repetition of "son" and "little" provide this music. At the same time, the old woman's words are both humorous and tender, giving life to the man at a point in the narrative when he should be meeting his end.

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