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## **Commentaries: Mortal Colors** John Bradley

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## John Bradley

### MORTAL COLORS

*For Jana*

Gray, white, brown scoured November sky. You were wearing a gray coat with round white circles, each one held by a tiny gold safety pin, trembling in the wind. The dog with the electronic collar silently racing to the end of the lawn, where the sensors lay buried out of sight. Halting to hurl his carnivorous cry. *"Anger, like sex, is quite sexual"* the dog said, translating for us motion into language. Into private prophecy. Gray, white, brown, the bristles in my elementary mustache. *"Everything in the world exists to end in a book,"* my mustache said, translating color into urgency. Into shades of public privacy. You blew to me from the bare trees. Gray, white, brown strips woven by wasps into a wind-ravaged papyrus nest. *"Everything you say will be used by someone or something to fashion the walls of a home"* the wasp colors said, translating specificity into curve. Curve into nonbinding text. The book that declares without declaring itself the first and last book. You will be wearing a nightgown with a round hole, a little bigger than a host, just below your navel. Do I place there my eye or my tongue? Either way, you and I will be read. Everything comes to this. Gray, white, brown, that's why I let them roam your humming hair.

### COMMENTARY

This prose poem started out as a verse poem so awful I have destroyed every version of it. It began, I think, like this:

Gray, white, brown scoured  
November sky.

You can see the problem. I thought that only the colors were important. Those colors I saw that November day in Bloomington, Indiana: the gray, white, and brown of the wasp nest the same as those in my wife's hair. As a writer, I was operating on the belief that "condense, condense, condense," as Lorine Niedecker phrases the gospel of Ezra Pound, was the way to proceed. But, as I soon discovered, the haiku-

like form (several stanzas of three lines) could not accommodate the experience. I returned to the poem many times, adding and then subtracting further detail, and coming away each time frustrated with the piece. Yet I was unable to dump it altogether.

A year or two later I decided to try a prose-poem version of the same experience. Suddenly the context entered the poem—the dog with the electronic collar that lived on the same road as the wasps. A dream of my wife with a hole in her nightgown brought out the sensuality of the colors in the wasp nest. And as the prose poem grew, I made a startling observation: My mustache had the same colors as the wasp nest and my wife's hair! Now I was implicated in the "mortal colors." When this happened, I knew that the poem had finally arrived at its real destination.

Would this have happened if I had stayed with the tight, condensed form? I don't think so. It was only when I began working with the long line and open form of the prose poem that I felt permission to bring in seemingly non-essential material which enabled me to follow the arc of the poem. The prose poem's inclusiveness was ideal for this particular experience, though I never would have guessed that when I first began. One of the miracles of the prose poem is that it can accommodate *anything*, making it the most "modern" of literary forms, I believe. Certainly some "condensing" takes place as I edit my prose poems, but the (self-?) imposed restrictions of the verse poem, the need to strip away everything but the "essence," never allowed me to make the larger and more interesting connections that were inherent in the colors all along.

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