

On misunderstanding, masquerade and the prose poem

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I like poems best because they try to say what is unspeakable, but among my fears is the worry that I have wasted years of my life trying to say why, when all I need to know about it, I have already said in this sentence. For a while I only wrote prose poems. The little boxes pleased me, and I wanted to be (mostly) faithful to the sentence. My careful (though wildering) logic of phrase against phrase needed that tight paragraph to generate maximal excitement.¹ Also, I wanted to be a kind of witch: inveigling a reader into the dense woods of the form (how like prose this Thing looks!) before she realises she is reading poetry. Such powers I would sometimes ascribe to myself, because writing is lonely and crazy-making.

Poets choose their forms for inexplicable reasons, and then write craft essays to legitimise their dream logic. This always fails, and must. As Frank O'Hara says, 'you just go on your nerve'. Such justifications are only a vehicle for quietening fear. Something is really happening here, we say to ourselves. The dark swimming of composition is a thing that can be talked about in the daytime. When we explain it, we kill it sometimes. There is an idea that after Jesus died, the first generation of Christians cherished a potent symbol for the church: the body of Christ. Christ *was* the church, and the Mystic Body was the way to crystallise that feeling. All believers were part of this body, a body that was metaphorical, supernatural, mysterious. The body of Christ suggested the unspeakable joy of being in Jesus' presence – of, well, feeling the love. Then when mass proselytising required that the church be systematised, this symbol acquired a confounding logic: the body of Christ was explained as being both fully human and fully divine; Christ was divided and conjoined into both *one* and *three*. These paradoxes became scaffolded by generations and generations of what we call Theology. Thus the mystic poetry of religious experience is smothered by the justifications of the head. My favourite essays (*essai*: a trial) are the ones that keep their doors ajar, in order to avoid such smothering. I like them to perpetuate the impossible expectations we have for poetry: that poems must be both deeply mysterious and able to be ciphered; that poems must sing divine universals with a profane and particular voice; that poems must be both uselessly aesthetic and politically expedient. I like the motion of this perpetuation, and I like its crash back to earth.

It is the province of prose to turn wonderings and discomforts into knowledge-possession. Would baking soda get this tarnish off? What precipitated the wrongness of our mental environment? Who elected this man, and where can I emigrate? It is to prose that we can take our questions. Prose gives us instruction, analysis, cause and effect.

It is to poetry, however, that we can take our cravings for a dreamy brain-spark that makes familiar things strange again.

One of the best tricks of the prose poem is that it can masquerade as a prose form we might approach for information. For example, the business memo:

Understand that we will be working together / and this means / we do not have to like each other. / Understand that we have common goals / and aspirations, we have aspirations / most of all. / Understand, that in the end, / the unspoken is always spoken / and usually by someone not qualified to speak it. Understand, / the rhythm of this agreement is not always symmetric, / sometimes the drummer starts to lean / on one thigh, slowly sags to the side, / and as a result the song can sound like mud and honey. / Understand, that I love you. / Understand, that this doesn't necessarily concern you. / Understand, that this is a bridging agreement, / just a place-holder / until the full programme of individual projects that need to occur to realise the full potential of the programme which addresses all the individual and specific concerns and develops a full and proper understanding of all the aforementioned concerns / is in place. Understand, / that there are no place-holders.

(Bill Nelson, *Memorandum of Understanding*, excerpt)²

Or the letter:

Susan performed one song and I must confess, I was taken aback. I had always thought her talent fairly pedestrian, but you would not believe the improvements she has made this past summer. She has somehow trained her voice to be very full, almost erotically voluminous, like hydrangeas, if that means to you what it does for me. The best I could muster was a borrowed duet, which actually was a great deal of fun although there was a bad moment when Esther did not know where I was. I had told her after the chorus we would go straight to the bridge, but she must not have heard me and by the time we found each other she was sobbing and I was panicking and calling out and darling, I really do not know what I would have done next.

(Louise Wallace, 'Darling')³

Notice in Mr Nelson's poem, the appropriation of corporate jargon and its reluctant bedfellow, the stock-standard love declaration. I haven't quoted the whole poem, but the whole poem is wonderful, especially the end, where he gets to the 'wobbly bits' and squeezes them. Here we have agreements, place-holders, aforementioned concerns, and wobbly bits, all sharing space. The poem makes the familiar formulation 'I love you' complicated and weird. We don't expect to stumble upon it in a memo. Cheerfully grotesque human frailty and the comforts of shared bodies are grafted onto the hard distancing of memo-speak.

Ms Wallace also uses the device of apostrophe, the literary mode of direct address to a person not present. Again, the formulations are familiar, if old-timey: 'I must confess'; 'you would not believe'; 'The best I could muster'; 'a great deal of fun'. We've seen these sorts of letters before, maybe in our grandparents' archives. We know where we are, don't we, readers? Until we get to Susan's voice blooming like 'erotically voluminous ... hydrangeas'. Ms Wallace is pulling a sneaky trick on us, and when we arrive at the 'bridge', the bridge is bigger than it is, more consequential, more vibrational. The bridge is the location of panic, the fear of losing someone dear, and the choked-up joy of reunion. The fact that 'Darling' is dedicated to the poet Rachel Bush, who died the year it was published, makes the irony of the poem's reunion all the more bittersweet.

I suspect we are most of us quite good at masquerading as immortals. We make our doomed little plans and pretend that death is something that happens to other people. I, for one, pretend every day to be a capable grown-up, but truth be told I go stupid with fear if I pause to seriously consider, say, a loveless old age, or the tearing body of childbirth, or the black collapse of ecosystems. A square of poetry – a tidy, rational-looking paragraph shape that knows where its edges are – is as good a place as any to get healingly absurd.

Robert Frost said a poem should start in delight and end in wisdom. This is a solid formula, but an old one. Some poems that do great and helpful things start in instruction, and end in bewilderment. Like this one:

I think you need to paint a bit of blue between the legs. For there is blue beyond the legs, and blue beyond the body, and there's blue beyond the head, and there is blue beyond the blue eyes, softly gazing out. Only, there is no out. No on beyond the eyes, or eye-lashes, no on beyond the head, the neck, the back, the legs, the spots. You cannot take away the head, the neck, you cannot take away the legs, the spots, you cannot take away an eyelash, not a single one, and not the single back, and not the bit of blue between the legs because there is no bit of blue between the legs.

(Anna Jackson, 'A sonnet about a giraffe')⁴

What?! Exactly. What, indeed. For one thing, this is no sonnet. I am being lied to.⁵ And I begin by thinking, yes, a bit of blue between the legs – good idea! That will make everything lifelike. By the end, I don't know what blue is, or where it's found, or how to conceive of this giraffe of words. And I need to go back and read the poem again from the beginning. That is how Charles Simic, a great sorcerer of the form, defines the prose poem: 'What makes them poems is that they are self-contained, and once you read one you have to go back and start reading it again. That's what a poem does.'

Now I am worried this essay is turning into some sort of treatise on what prose poems can and cannot do. In writing we are sometimes our own worst nightmare.

One smart thing I am doing, though, is to abstain from talking about prose poems that are narratives, or at least have some kind of narrative cohesion, like the sequences in Sarah Jane Barnett's *Work*, or Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*, or Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle's *Autobiography of a Marguerite*, all of which are incredible, and all of which I will leave to those who understand how story works. My subject, the self-contained paragraph, continues to elude me, but I will keep talking about it anyway.

Obviously, many, many prose poems are the relatives of dreams, because dreams are where our psychic rubbish, our aspirations and our anxieties, get all mashed up and eerie and prophetic on us: 'Last night a woman offered to give me an injection against crossness and frustration' – Hannah Mettner, 'Sex Dream'; 'I feel things happening around me that are not real. I must be in a dream' – Nina Powles, 'Miyazaki Bloom'; 'I dream of you in a white tuxedo. It is a wedding. It is not our wedding. But the face that you affix to yourself when you look into me is the face of the man viewing the woman. Hello this is love.' – Emma Barnes, 'White Tuxedo.' It is kind to announce the poem as a Dream Poem in the first line, or in the title, though many don't. This is partly where the prose poem gets its reputation as a surreal form. It is said that in a word-association game, the prompt 'prose poem' would be followed by the association 'surreal' or 'surrealism'.⁶ Perhaps after reading this essay, other things might come to mind, like 'body of Christ' or 'giraffe', both of which would be wrong, and therefore right.

Prose poems are also good for attempted self-definition ('The phasing we are together is a waveform where I am the peak and you are the valley. We are edge to edge like all good risks and measures' – Emma Barnes, 'Give Up') where the appropriated language of science or commerce lends a grown-up air to the investigation, which is only play. You might take issue with my alignment of the prose poem to kid activities. You might well. The truth is, writing of this kind is *not* work proper. It is labour of a kind that, by and large, ruling politicians and parent-

figures still counselling us to apply our creative powers to achieve success in the business sector in order to build a life that Makes Sense cannot understand.⁷

Not that the poets themselves understand any better. This is what I am trying to say, and saying badly, but musically. There is a reason all good poets stammer when they're asked by non-poets 'What kind of poetry do you write?' What kind of poetry *is* there? My name is Rachel O'Neill and I write surreal vignettes. My name is Frankie McMillan and I write tiny stories. To answer this question earnestly is to begin giving an awkward lesson on *what poetry is* to someone who (usually) doesn't really care. Better, perhaps, that poets keep talking to other poets about the things they all realise can never be known. Shouting into the caves. Murmuring better questions into tide-marked Wedgewood. Making faces in the mirror, recognising ourselves as monkeys, old women, fractious babies, felons and ghosts.

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- 1 The term 'maximal excitement' owes something to Lyn Hejinian, who writes: 'In the "open text" ... all the elements of the work are maximally excited ... because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument.' See 'The Rejection of Closure', Poetry Foundation, accessed 30 October 2017 from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69401/the-rejection-of-closure>.
 - 2 Bill Nelson, *Memorandum of Understanding*, VUP, Wellington, 2016.
 - 3 Louise Wallace, 'Darling', *Bad Things*, VUP, Wellington, 2017.
 - 4 Anna Jackson, 'A sonnet about a giraffe', *Sport 41*, 2013.
 - 5 Actually, the paragraph is a sort of introduction to a fourteen-line and therefore sonnet-like *something* called 'Giraffe' whose first line is: 'I think you need to paint a little bit of blue between the legs.'
 - 6 David Lehman says this in his introduction to *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*. He writes, 'Someone quipped that if you said prose poem in a word association game the next word to come to everybody's mind would be *surrealist* or *surreal*.' David Lehman, *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*, Scribner, New York, 2003, p. 20.
 - 7 This idea of work vs. labour is indebted to Lewis Hyde's wonderful book *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, Penguin Random House, New York, 2007.