

THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Volume 8 | 1999

**Book Review: Lissa
McLaughlin's *The Grouper*,
Joseph Torra's *Keep Watching the
Sky* and Cecilia Woloch's *Sacrifice***
Brooke Horvath

© Providence College

The author(s) permits users to copy, distribute, display, and perform this work under the following conditions: (1) the original author(s) must be given proper attribution; (2) this work may not be used for commercial purposes; (3) the users may not alter, transform, or build upon this work; (4) users must make the license terms of this work clearly known for any reuse or distribution of this work. Upon request, as holder of this work's copyright, the author(s) may waive any or all of these conditions.

The Prose Poem: An International Journal is produced by
The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress)
for the Providence College Digital Commons.
<http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/prosepoems/>

Lissa McLaughlin. *The Grouper*. Penn Grove, CA: Avec Books, 1997. 59 pp. \$8.50.

Joseph Torra. *Keep Watching the Sky*. Cambridge, MA: Zoland Books, 1996. 109 pp. \$11.95.

Cecilia Woloch. *Sacrifice*. Los Angeles: Cahuenga Press, 1997. 95 pp. \$12.00.

Henry James remarked of *Leaves of Grass* that it wasn't poetry, but neither was it prose. A couple of decades later, *Munsey's Magazine* observed of Stephen Crane's *The Black Riders*, "Mr. Crane has thoughts. We are finding fault with him because they are not put into frank prose. Is this poetry?" Despite subsequent efforts to define the prose poem, critics haven't really advanced terribly far beyond James's succinct if unintentional definition, nor have objections to the form added much to the complaint of Crane's reviewer. The three books under review here, by demonstrating some of the ends to which prose poetry is an effective means, implicitly ask what and why the prose poem is.

In *The Grouper*, Lissa McLaughlin—whose previous work includes two books of poetry and a collection of short prose—brings together verse, prose, and photographs "to explore trauma's inherent unintelligibility; its corrosive effects on language and the dangers of submitting irreducible experiences to words" (Author's Note). Through their "formal qualities," she continues, the poems attempt to "motion to something beyond themselves," something that lies beyond language (hence the inclusion of fifteen photographs that, McLaughlin notes, "seek to supply what speech cannot"). Because this something has to do with the experience of trauma, McLaughlin's decision to combine verse and prose signifies beyond aesthetics.

Of her prose pieces, some attain sufficient length and narrative drive to be taken for short stories or sketches. Of a couple of poems, it is difficult to say whether they are verse whose lines have been broken with design or prose with the right margin left unjustified. These generic uncertainties, underscoring the book's overall vacillation between prose and verse, word and image, echo the uncertainty of much of the book's content as regards trauma. What, for instance, has the following poem to do with emotional shock beyond conjuring what might initially seem the "inherent unintelligibility" of a victim's response to traumatic experience?

Martians landing have to come in the house first to use the toilet.
They're apologetic. As they get ready to leave, they ask you to
write down your address. You watch them go down the street. It's
a nice day, the light slightly dusky. Smoke from some fire rises in
the distance. Should you wash out the glass? You turn it over,
and the wobbly stamp says Made in Milwaukee.

("The Glass")

Perhaps the trauma connection resides in the fact that those arriving at the door seem alien yet in control, their ingratiating overfamiliarity and apolo-

getic tone combining with an ominous request for personal information; or in the sense of vague threat that trails after them (will Milwaukee soon become another fire in the distance?); or in one's sudden inability to make the simplest decisions; or in the way small everyday things assume a wobbly but exaggerated fascination. Although possibly a plausible way of looking at this poem, there is nothing certain about such a reading.

Problematic content combined with formal uncertainty can be illustrated quickly by a look at "Providence Gas Drip," a brief piece that reads in its entirety, "Wrap up that side of beef, / the one that smells slightly funny." Here, trauma's corrosive effect is principally on form itself, the way this barely-here text lays tenuous claim to its identity as poetry by virtue of so slight a thing as that single line break.

Such hovering between forms as "Providence Gas Drip" exhibits is endemic in *The Grouper* and suggests the trauma victim's doubtful status outside or beyond stable identity. Do these poems, gesturing beyond themselves, know what they are or at what they gesture? Do they know what they are saying? That they are traumatized? By the close of *The Grouper*, as one begins to feel how arbitrary here are labels such as "prose" or "verse," how beside any point worth making, one may begin likewise to question the pertinence of psychiatric terminology and classifications. In *Life As We Know It*, his book on Down Syndrome, Michael Berube considers the corrosive effects of the labels "normal" and "abnormal," finding them finally a means of putting into play knee-jerk responses that allow decisions—legal, educational, social—to be made without regard for the individuals whose lives are being stereotypically assessed. Just so the formal energy of McLaughlin's exploration of trauma may ultimately be aimed at a similar questioning of rote norms, of whatever normative stories words are used to tell at the cost of violating the irreducible singularity of any experience.

If verse poetry constitutes the poetic norm today, Joseph Torra's *Keep Watching the Sky* works hard to abnormalize that norm. Consisting of three lengthy sequences each stylistically distinct yet all three bearing a decided resemblance to Language poetry, *Keep Watching the Sky*, the first collection from the editor of the journal *lift*, is comprised almost exclusively of prose. Verse makes the first of its five or six appearances on page sixty-eight, five poems into the book's final sequence, *Spine Titles*, which serves up a melange of prose narrative, lists, phrasal fragments, dialogs, film scenarios, letters, journalism, citations, odes and prayers, and takes the content-generating titles of its constituent poems from volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* ("Conifer Ear Diseases," "Pay to Pol"). One effect of this employment of what the critic Leonard Orrhas termed "random verbal generators" (in the manner, say, of Walter Abish or Raymond Queneau) is (as with McLaughlin) to underscore arbitrariness of both content and form. And as for Torra's sparing use of verse, the result is to render its presence intrusive and gratuitous, merely decorative and anomalous, a dusty souvenir from one of the worlds we have lost and

about which we no longer much care: "during a short walk home the church elders' boredom is recited in metered lines" ("*Livingstone Metalwork*," *Spine Titles*).

Torra's poetry is ambitious and difficult. It courts misreading as it relentlessly pursues either what cannot be said or what can no longer be heard if said more directly and unambiguously; it demands do-it-yourself assembly. Rarely quotable in a "best loved poems" sort of way, *Keep Watching the Sky* may brainstorm passion, but it is an intellectual passion unsure of the viability of any vocabulary of happiness; it is dystopian culture criticism, glimmerings of sense, a scanning of the contemporary scene as it collapses into other times and places. At times, it recalls Paul Bowles's stark mood of disquieting familiarity wrapped inside a forbidding otherness.

The book's most austere sequence is *The Domino Sessions*, twenty-nine untitled blocks of prose that deliver curt, often coded dispatches from that dangerous front we like to call "the way we live now":

you think you've seen the last of it but hand to hand
island to island fighting continues instigators
exterminated fundamental procedures enough to
demolish whole countries being invented chances are
representing the night will be buried with thoughts
diseases rampant excavate daily ease the restless
mind storm warning remains in corners of
uncleaned garages evidence sleeps and
multi-pronged attacks fail to penetrate static walls

Here, like punctuation or a less telegraphic delivery, lineation would excessively prefabricate meaning by weighing and parceling it out in linear units and would too much mitigate a formal severity that helps call into being Torra's unsparing vision.

If *The Domino Sessions* recalls the work of Brice Marden or Mark Rothko, *Paintings* is an Albert Pinkham Ryder gradually metamorphosing into Richard Diebenkorn (with *Spine Titles* a series of Rauschenbergs illustrating a Paul Metcalf novel). Most of the twenty-two sections are titled; all are punctuated and broken into prose stanzas. However, as the sequence progresses, telling what might be the story of (some) civilization from its elemental beginnings through an increasingly disjointed present into some (im)possible tomorrow, syntax and coherence erode. Like a painter attempting to represent an unstable, incomprehensible, incorporeal reality, Torra is stuck with language in his attempts to keep pace with what is finally pre/post/nonverbal:

A topology of learning to adjust—snail and parts offish provide only hints at direction. Swollen summer months reduced to frantic

play. During the course of trekking, words alone aren't often enough. (Lovers of fixed points pointing.)

A grove of hardwood trees echoes of not-too-distant concepts. In the hollow of can we reach that far. Landmarks vanish. The way out must wait until the end of a next dream. Keep watching the sky.

(from "Even the compass needle trembles," *Paintings*)

Keep Watching the Sky paints a world where there is little room left for "poetry," where any "unifying explanation dies a martyr in the streets" ("The Road to the City," *Paintings*) and at best "A half-eaten impression permeates the foreground—background's a cumulus of disconnections" ("Eye-Seed," *Paintings*). The book's concluding sentences perhaps explain Torra's refusal (or inability) to pledge allegiance to poetic forms that aestheticize (and anesthetize us to) bankrupt cultural norms: "I scratch the rules of control to find much of my life a landscape for filling in blanks[....] There is no such thing as two lines not meeting. I set my own timetable and means of regulation. Bits of this pieces of that brutal whole" ("Med to Mum," *Spine Titles*).

Cecilia Woloch also offers us "bits and pieces" of an often "brutal whole," in her case a family history she refers to at one point as "this meager breakfast" ("History"). *Sacrifice* is the most conventional of the three books reviewed here, a suite of twenty prose and thirty-four verse poems that chart the poet's childhood, her marriage and its wreckage, the emotions that accompany a life. If hers is a family whose "secrets are poverty, hunger, / suicide, sleeplessness" ("El Compadre, Again"), a family that "smelled of prison and cabbage and cigarette smoke" ("Conception"), and if hers is a failed marriage that leaves only her estranged husband's "name like salt on [the] tongue and the ghost of [his] body as witness" ("Your Back"), her life has been rich in feeling, in touch with the body's "complex desires" ("The Integrity of Angels"), privy to often harsh truths discovered with gentle surprise: "We believe we will live forever until / we can't believe it again" ("Stars in the Mouth of the Wolf"); "There is nothing to keep us from throwing ourselves on the mercy of death but desire" ("History"). Like the family photo being taken in the collection's final selection, these poems are an attempt "to capture ourselves, full of loss" ("The Patriarch").

What I admire most about this debut collection is Woloch's willingness to speak without hiding behind mandarin obscurities or brutalizing irony and yet to say what she says as art and never as the crude transcription of unshaped memories:

I snagged against my love and then I married him for the ragged tin of his arms. For his bulletproof heart. For his shocking hair. Every night of our marriage we dreamt and woke with the taste

of the sea in our mouths. The sea which is grey in this part of the world, when it isn't green. A handsome man with a spine I could kiss like I once kissed the beads of the rosary or the links in a chain link fence. Because I believed what I read with my lips: that between what we love, we are loved. And the sparks of silver we see from the corners of our eyes when there's nobody there are not hallucinations, at all, but trails of light from one world to the next. That's what I mean when I say: / *have given him up*. That he got away. ("Tin")

If for a moment (to make a point) we associate prose with straightforward telling and poetry with metaphoric indirection, Woloch's prose is often as not poetic (as "Tin" reveals), her verse sometimes prosaic, as in these opening lines (with their afterthought lineation) from "The Back Room, Yamashiro":

How handsome we are in this empty room—
you with your cigarettes in the pocket of
your leather jacket again, and I
in the perfume of unfaithfulness that follows me everywhere.
I have loved too many men, therefore I could not
love any of them.

The effect this time of combining prose, verse, and poetry is to be reminded that even the prosaic moments of a life can be made to sing, can be poetry, but also that the prosaic is never fully escaped (I think it no accident that as the book moves from childhood to adulthood, the frequency with which Woloch turns to prose increases even as these same poems make repeated reference to singing). Or say it is as though verse with its ragged edge (words such as "ragged" and "jagged" recur throughout) reminds us of how ragtag life remains despite our best efforts to shape and smooth it, despite our effort to tone it down by prosifying it, to justify our life lines.

Different as they are one from another, McLaughlin, Terra, and Woloch do much to erase the lines separating prose from verse. Especially if their poems are read aloud, they remind us of how much the categories "prose" and "poetry" depend upon a text's mere visual appearance. (After all, if the prose poem is typically something that looks like prose but asks to be read as poetry, why can't it as readily be something that looks like verse but reads like prose— in which case, so much for all the blood spilt attacking and defending free verse?) Why, these three books ask, think so categorically anyway? Isn't the prose poem part of our (postmodern) desire to elude stultifying constructs and conventions for something more life-enhancing? Isn't that why Czeslaw Milosz speaks of his desire for "a more spacious form / that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose;" and Ishmael Reed in *Flight to Canada* mentions a writer who was "so much against slavery that he had begun to include prose and poetry in the same book ..."? *The Grouper*, *Keep Watching the Sky*, and

Sacrifice seek that more spacious form and refuse to be enslaved. "If you discriminate too much," the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki felt, "you limit yourself." So there it is: freedom and its consequences or limiting discriminations and their consequences. This is certainly one of the choices the prose poem puts at least poetically before us. But isn't this a choice that signifies beyond aesthetics?

Brooke Horvath