

Prose Poems!

FOREWORD

"Little Mr.
From prose poems -
Russell Edson's Poems

Prose poetry has been around since mid-nineteenth century and still no one has succeeded to this day to explain convincingly what it is. The usual definition states that it is poetry written in prose and leaves it at that. For most lovers of poetry, saying something like that is not just absurd, but a blasphemy against everything they call poetry. Free verse, of course, still has its detractors, but not many of them would go so far and insist that absence of rhyme and traditional prosody in Walt Whitman make the hundreds of poems he wrote over his lifetime prose and not poetry.

Anyone who was fortunate to hear Edson read his poems is not likely to have forgotten the experience. He made his audiences roar with laughter or sit astonished at what they were hearing. His heroes are dunderheads who resemble those we encounter in comic strips and silent film comedies with their dramatically simplified narratives which he learned from his father, Gus Edson, the famous cartoonist who created the character Art Gump.

Russell Edson was born in Stamford, Connecticut and lived there all his life, leaving home only to attend the Arts Students League in New York in his youth and in later years to give poetry readings in colleges and universities. He wrote his poems late at night in the attic of the home he shared with his wife Frances, while she slept in their bedroom below armed with a long pole which she used to knock on the ceiling whenever her husband's laughter got too loud and kept her awake.

Edson said that he wanted to write without debt or obligation to any literary form or idea. What made him fond of prose poetry, he claimed, is its awkwardness and its seeming lack of ambition. The monster children of two incompatible strategies, the lyric and the narrative, they are playful and irreverent. Not only did these "poems" not sound like anything one had ever read, but what went on in them was downright peculiar. "Let us consider the farmer who makes his straw hat his sweetheart," one of them begins. In another poem one reads about the rich hiring an orchestra and having the musicians climb into trees and sit

on their branches to play happy birthday to their purebred dogs; there's also the one about a girl who teaches herself to play piano by taking it for a walk into the woods, and the one about a man who falls in love with himself and is unable to think of anything else but himself, being hugely flattered that no one else had ever shown him that much interest.

"A cast-iron airplane that can actually fly, mainly because its pilot doesn't seem to care if it does or not" is how Edson defined the prose poem. The real surprise comes when we realize that despite all the joking we are reading or listening to, these are not the scribblings of a village idiot, but of a comic genius and a serious thinker, as in this lovely little poem:

Antimatter

On the other side of a mirror there's an inverse world, where the insane go sane; where bones climb out of the earth and recede to the first slime of love.

And in the evening the sun is just rising.

Lovers cry because they are a day younger, and soon childhood robs them of their pleasure.

In such a world there is much sadness which, of course, is joy...

— Charles Simic, 2022

Be Drunk

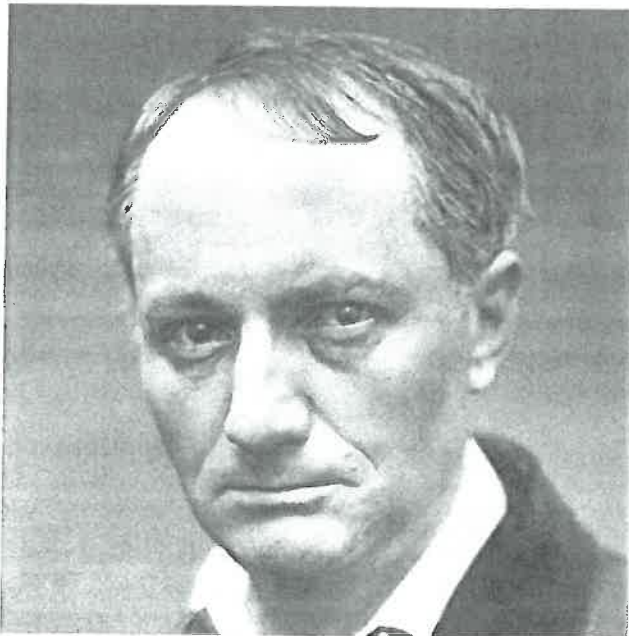
You have to be always drunk. That's all there is to it—it's the only way. So as not to feel the horrible burden of time that breaks your back and bends you to the earth, you have to be continually drunk.

But on what? Wine, poetry or virtue, as you wish. But be drunk.

And if sometimes, on the steps of a palace or the green grass of a ditch, in the mournful solitude of your room, you wake again, drunkenness already diminishing or gone, ask the wind, the wave, the star, the bird, the clock, everything that is flying, everything that is groaning, everything that is rolling, everything that is singing, everything that is speaking. . .ask what time it is and wind, wave, star, bird, clock will answer you: "It is time to be drunk! So as not to be the martyred slaves of time, be drunk, be continually drunk! On wine, on poetry or on virtue as you wish."

Credit

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CONCERNING PARABLES

Franz Kafka

Many complain that the words of the wise are always only presented as parables, useless in daily life, and this is all we have. When the wise man says: "Get thee hence," he does not mean that we should go to the other side, a task we could in any case easily accomplish were the crossing worthwhile, he rather means for us to hasten to some fabled yonder that we don't know, a place moreover which he cannot describe any more precisely, and which is perfectly useless to us here and now. What all these parables really mean to say is just that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and that much we already knew. But what we wrestle with every day, that's something else.

To which a wise one said: "Why do you resist? Were you to follow the wisdom of the parables, you yourselves would become parables, and would thereby be relieved of the burden of everyday toil."

Another one said: "I bet that that's a parable too."

Whereupon the first one said: "You win."

To which the second said: "But only figuratively speaking."

Said the first: "No, in reality; figuratively speaking, you lose."



POETRY FOUNDATION

With Sincerest Regrets

BY RUSSELL EDSON

for Charles Simic

Like a monstrous snail, a toilet slides into a living room on a track of wet, demanding to be loved.

It is impossible, and we tender our sincerest regrets. In the book of the heart there is no mention made of plumbing.

And though we have spent our intimacy many times with you, you belong to an unfortunate reference, which we would rather not embrace ...

The toilet slides away ...

Russell Edson, "With Sincerest Regrets," in *The Wounded Breakfast* © 1985 by Russell Edson and reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press. www.wesleyan.edu/wespress

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Chicago, IL 60654

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From *Seven Prose Poems*

by Charles Simic

Comedy of errors at an elegant downtown restaurant.

The chair is really a table making fun of itself. The coat tree has just learned to tip waiters. A shoe is served a plate of black caviar.

"My dear and most esteemed sir," says a potted palm to a mirror, "it is absolutely useless to excite yourself."

From "Don't Let Me Be Lonely"

Claudia Rankine

My grandmother is in a nursing home. It's not bad. It doesn't smell like pee. It doesn't smell like anything. When I go to see her, as I walk through the hall past the common room and the nurses' station, old person after old person puts out his or her hand to me. Steven, one says. Ann, another calls. It's like being in a third-world country, but instead of food or money you are what is wanted, your company. In third-world countries I have felt overwhelmingly American, calcium-rich, privileged, and white. Here, I feel young, lucky, and sad. Sad is one of those words that has given up its life for our country, it's been a martyr for the American dream, it's been neutralized, co-opted by our culture to suggest a tinge of discomfort that lasts the time it takes for this and then for that to happen, the time it takes to change a channel. But sadness is real because once it meant something real. It meant dignified, grave; it meant trustworthy; it meant exceptionally bad, deplorable, shameful; it meant massive, weighty, forming a compact body; it meant falling heavily; and it meant of a color: dark. It meant dark in color, to darken. It meant me. I felt sad.

FLASH FICTION

EVERYONE CRIED

BY LYDIA DAVIS

July 4, 2019

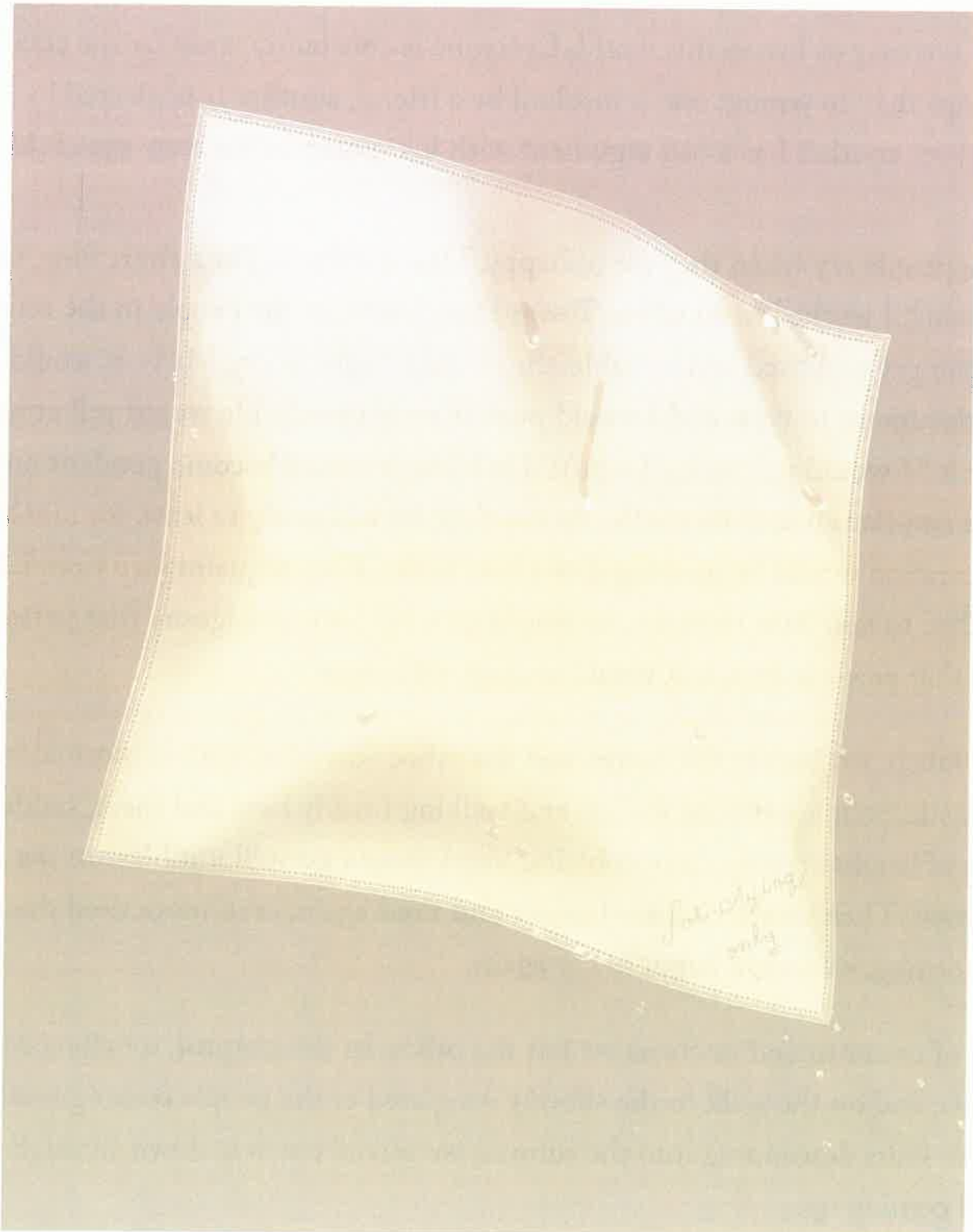


Illustration by Na Kim

Save this story

This is the first story in this summer's online Flash Fiction series. You can read the entire series, and our Flash Fiction stories from 2017 and 2018, [here](#).

It is not easy to live in this world. Everyone is constantly upset by the small things that go wrong: one is insulted by a friend; another is neglected by her family; yet another has a bad argument with his spouse or his teen-age child.

Often, people cry when they are unhappy. This is natural. For a short time, when I was young, I worked in an office. Toward lunchtime, as the people in the office grew hungry and tired and irritable, they would begin to cry. My boss would give me a document to type, and I would push it away crossly. He would yell at me, "Type it!" I would yell back, "I won't!" He himself would become petulant on the phone and slam it into its cradle. By the time he was ready to leave for lunch, tears of frustration would be running down his cheeks. If an acquaintance stopped by the office to take him to lunch, he would turn his back and ignore that person. Then that person's eyes, too, would well up with tears.

After lunch, we usually felt better, and the office was filled with its normal hum and bustle, people carrying folders and walking briskly here and there, sudden bursts of laughter rising from cubicles. Work would go well until late in the afternoon. Then, as we all grew hungry and tired again, even more tired than in the morning, we would begin to cry again.

Most of us continued to cry as we left the office. In the elevator, we elbowed one another, and on the walk to the subway we glared at the people coming toward us. On the stairs descending into the subway, we forced our way down through the crowd coming up.

It was summer. In those days, there was no air-conditioning in the subway cars, and, as we all stood packed together, swaying between stops, the tears wet our cheeks, the sweat ran down our backs and legs, and the women's feet swelled in their tight shoes.

Some people would gradually stop crying as they rode toward home, especially if they had found a seat. They would blink their damp eyelashes and contentedly suck on their fingers as they read their newspapers and books, their eyes still shining.

They might not cry again that day. I don't know, because I wasn't with them; I can only imagine. I myself did not usually cry at home, except at the table, if my supper was very disappointing, or if my bedtime was drawing near, because I did not really want to go to bed, because I did not want to get up the next day and go to work. But maybe others did cry at home, maybe on and off all evening, depending what they found there.

Lydia Davis's latest collection of short fiction is "Can't and Won't" (2014). Her collection "Essays I" will be published in November, and a volume of her translations, from the Dutch, of the very short stories of A. L. Snijders will come out in 2020.

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