



Prose Sonnet

In Basket 3 of *Cascadian Zen, Volume I*, there is a sonnet written with epigraphs from Michael McClure and Mary Norbert Körte. The poem is presented in 18 lines because of the space limitations of the book. It originally looked like this:

Sonetos de Cascadia 6.15.2019

“we are overrun the dog and I
by the power of light...

- Mary Norbert Körte - “Lines Bending”

“MONKEY MIND BUILD CATHEDRALS
of imagination and stone
and tone poems
of stained glass
and bubblegum.”

- Michael McClure, “68th Dharma Devotion”

In the Wake of No Buddha

Were my Zen up to speed I'd write a dharma devotion to the hummingbird sangha as here they have a temple of water, sugar and plastic just beyond the temple rabbits have manifested of steel, hay and the occasional purloined blueberry. Neither hummingbird nor rabbit has won a literary lifetime achievement award, but we still like their soft fur and/or whir as they negotiate our summer heads on the deck where one evergreen can be seen in outline on what's left of the island forest just beyond their temples of plastic. Were my Zen up to speed I'd see tracers of my defilements build their own cathedrals of memory of sexual escapades, gland pulses, cheap bliss and then watch the whole cycle rinse, repeat & reappear with new characters merging with sounds of tires on June morning pavement & the fur of the rabbits pulled up in clumps from the prayer rug. No, there is a Buddha here, as there is everywhere & in every sentient being, but he's waiting until after morning coffee to find what's left of his Nirvana.

6:34am



I wrote most of these poems the year before the Covid 19 pandemic (2019) and the rest during year one of Covid. I am not sure if I showed them to Matt Trease during the time I was writing them, or after, but he immediately recognized them as “prose sonnets.”

They owe their velocity mainly to two sources: 1) the Haibun I had been writing that were published as *Haibun de la Serna* and to the sonnets of Jack Clarke. Of Clarke, Michael Boughn has written:

Grounded in an extensive scholarship into the history and life of myth, Clarke’s work, according to Albert Cook who recruited him for the new SUNY Buffalo English Department in 1963, moved as far beyond his friend and mentor, Charles Olson, as Olson had moved beyond Ezra Pound. For the uninitiated, this work is difficult to comprehend on first encounter because it is a site neither of breezy avant-garde parodies and facile ironies, nor of creative writing’s obsessive lyrical self-occupation.

A Blake scholar, Clarke resonated with the notion that one has to create their own systems, or be enslaved by those made by someone else. Boughn adds that:

This is not poetry meant for instant consumption. It does not want you to consume it. It wants to consume you. Be warned. And know that there is nothing here that is not available to the Seeker.

When you listen to Clarke read his poems, (<https://caesura.squarespace.com/posts/michael-boughn-poems-by-jack-clarke>) or you hear them in your head as you are reading them, you’re connected to a potent velocity that I find exhilarating and generative. In his book of such sonnets, he often uses three or more epigraphs for each poem. All the work is basted in Jazz. He was inside of it and that gives him a unique gesture in North American poetry to, at the same time, honor Jazz as well as emulate it. This notion of how poetry can *emulate* or *honor* Jazz came from Wanda Coleman and, at her best, she did both, but she did not know too many poets who could pull it off. The prose poem allows for a quicker pace since lineation is not a concern, as the poem will go 14 lines margin-to-margin & is akin to a solo in Jazz.

It's a feature of the workshops that I facilitate to include playlists that always feature improvised music. There is a quality of this music to put us in the here and now that is a quality unavailable to pop music. Steeping yourself in these playlists can help you experience the thrill of spontaneous composition.

So, to write a prose sonnet, having an epigraph or two from which to launch your exploration of the moment can be helpful, but is not a rule. Finding a way to be led by the melopoeia AND the content is tricky, but you learn to trust the feeling of when you are onto something. When you have hit a vein or a groove. If you find, as your poem builds momentum, that you are headed for more than 14 lines, you can let yourself break that rule by a line or two, or you can go back and tighten up the language. Often there are words like "that", articles, conjunctions, ADVERBS and ADJECTIVES that can be removed. In fact, look at how adjectives, adverbs and gerunds often kill or slow down the energy of the poem. Can you go back and remove them without killing the poem? Can you learn how to avoid them in the act of writing?

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5:37pm
25-DEC-2024
PDX

Works Cited:

Cascadian Zen Volume I (2023, Watershed Press)

Haibun de la Serna (2022, Goldfish Press)

<https://caesura.squarespace.com/posts/michael-boughn-poems-by-jack-clarke>

