

Poetry in the Short Format

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

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Part I.
An Essay on Survival.

Within poetry there are many facets and factions. One of the least accepted forms of poetry is poetry in the short format. The character of this form of poetry lies in its structural nature. Short poetry is short. Though no exact parameters have been set for poetry in the short format, a logical range would be from one to thirteen lines (fourteen could possibly constitute a sonnet). This brevity allows for or causes a concentration of energy. Because of the high energy concentration involved, short poetry should be considered a dangerously intense medium and not all readers and writers are advised to venture into it. It is a medium best left to the more courageous and hearty of individuals.

Brief poetry exposes the reader's most intense emotions swiftly. It allows no time for contemplation--simply time for reaction. In poetry in the short format, the reader is not afforded the luxury of repetition of idea and interpretary guides, as is often the case in long poetry.¹ These elements are used to better achieve the goal of long poetry--interpretation of meaning. Short poetry escapes the necessity of a versified support framework by not having the interpretation of meaning as its goal.

Short poetry's goal is an emotional reaction, not interpretation of meaning. This difference of goals between short and long poetry is why so many readers and writers accustomed to poetry in the long format are unsuccessful with poetry in the short format. Readers of long poetry usually enter short poetry planning to interpret meaning from what they read. They will eventually exit from short poetry unfulfilled. (Meaning exists, but it stands as a lesser achievement in comparison to the emotional reaction produced by good short poetry.) The long poetry readers will decide that short poetry has little meaning and thus little value. Yet, if the quest had begun as a search for an emotional reaction, the task would have been possible and the dissatisfaction could have been avoided.

Writers of long poetry who enter short poetry must also be wary of the possible problems. The courage mentioned earlier is essential to survival. The artist who feels queasy when faced with the fear of being misconstrued had best avoid short poetry as his medium. Short poems are meant to offer a feeling through an emotional reaction. All people vary in their specific emotional tendencies and the emotional reaction produced by a poem is unpredictable. (What may give rise to grief in one individual may bring anger to another.) The emotional reactions brought about by a poem cannot be dictated by the author. An attempt in this direction will result in the production of an ineffective

poem or one of such length as not to fall within the economy required of poetry in the short format. Short poetry was meant to be written then abandoned to one's readers. The poem and the reader will or will not survive as one unit.² (Their destiny will be determined by their combined strength.)

In the end it is the survival record of one's poems that determines their quality. It seems only fair to judge short poetry by its goal. Since the goal of short poetry is an emotional reaction, that reaction or lack thereof will function to separate good short poetry from bad short poetry. More appropriately stated, short poetry is not good or bad, but rather, effective or ineffective.

Part II.

Some Short Poems I Have Written.

P.S. You were delicious

I bought a pizza
while thinking of you.

P.S. You were delicious.

Pink Venus

If you make a mistake
Run to pink venus
Soft, non-abrasive
And above all, cheap.

Brautigan

I'm sitting here

Reading him

Thinking only of you.

Learning Helplessness

Dancing Pigeon, slobbering dogs,
Trained, avoiding, human cogs.
Rats trapped by Skinner's box,
Classically conditioned like a fox.

Boring, shocked, gradient,
Awake, alert, punishment.
Taught, tested, proud Pavlov,
Dancing Pigeon, slobbering dogs.

Terminal Consternation

Blue shirt, purple shirt,
Green, stupid question.
Tan shirt, fat shirt,
Red, condescension.

Loud mouth, slow answer,
Mental constipation.
Sit quiet, slow boil,
Terminal consternation.

Your face is my light,
Your body my breath,
Your presence my life,
Your absence my death.

Relationships

I had chased away the gray
Leaving only starlight or day
But behind each hidden afternoon
It grew.

"Approach stranger," the fool said.
And out came the gray
To haunt the world again.

You see I am alive

The rain comes.
I perceive its delicate delicious scent.

Each drop an angel's kiss.
A practical symbol of revival.

A chance.
Some hope returned.

I used to hunt

Mother rabbit listens.

No one is coming.

Father rabbit has been replaced by solitude.

Consistent sneezing at the door of contentment,
Persistent wheezing when faced with resentment.
Paraplegic cough at religion's runny nose,
Throbbing migraine at the sight of others' prose.
All life's problems and the weight they hold,
Are manifested at once as a damned head cold.

You Cannot

How can you see me

When I'm not really here?

How can you tell when I'm near?

The morning of August 6, 1945

The city rose to a noisy cloud.
(The sun seemingly sucked into oblivion)

The morning people gathering in the city dissappeared.
(Crowds melting into nothingness)

The laughter of children was gone.
(Replaced by numb silence)

I was told my father was a man.
A man, with very large hands.

When opened,
Each stands as a desertion.
The right my brother,
The left me.

I sit by a corner
in a circular room
Unable to see the face
of the man who speaks.

My voice is larger than his
It beckons from silence.

Haunted by King James

As a young child
child
caught
in a rainstorm

I found myself
screaming
God

Why hast thou forsaken me?
--and win in Vietnam.

Part III.

Some Short Poems I Wish I Had Written.

And the days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field mouse
Not shaking the grass.

--Ezra Pound

The whole world's lost in a maze
Of anguished obscurity.

No one knows what's to come
The answer's not to be found.

--Ivan Kharaborou

The cross of antlers, idol-like, the stag
Raises aloft through crowns of thorn bushes
The doe he does not win but saws her out
From the most tender muscles of the rival.
The trumpet-horn sounds in the vale
And wounds the side to salt.
The pretty hinds inhale
The cruel smell of father and son.

--Mikhail Yeryomin

When our hands are alone,
They open like faces.
There is no shore
To their opening.

--Saint Geraud

Goodbye

If you are still alive when you read this,
Close your eyes. I am
Under their lids, growing black.

--Saint Geraud

The White Horse

The youth walks up to the white horse, to put its halter on
and the horse looks at him in silence.

They are so silent they are in another world.

--D.H. Lawrence

At the Desk

I spent the entire day in official details;
And it almost pulled me down like the others:
I felt that tiny insane voluptuousness,
Getting this done, finally finishing that.

--Theodor Storm

America

If an eagle be imprisoned
on the back of a coin,
and the coin be tossed
into the sky,
the coin will spin,
the coin will flutter,
but the eagle will never fly.

--Henry Dumas

Watts

Must I shoot the
white man dead.
to free the nigger
in his head?

--Conrad Kent Rivers

Friends

Some of my best friends are white boys.
When I meet 'em,
I treat 'em
Just the same as if
They was people.

--Ray Durem

We Real Cool

The Pool Players
Seven at the Golden Shovel

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk Late. We
Strike Straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

--Gwendolyn Brooks

The Blackstone Rangers

There they are
Thirty at the corner
Black, raw, ready.
Sores in the city
That do not want to heal.

--Gwendolyn Brooks

Corner Meeting

Ladder, flag, and amplifier
now are what the soap box
used to be.

The speaker catches fire,
looking at listeners' faces.

His words jump down
to stand
in their
places.

--Langston Hughes

In this City

In this city, perhaps a street.
In this street, perhaps a house.
In this house, perhaps a room.
And in this room a woman sitting,
Sitting in the darkness, sitting and crying
For someone who has just gone through the door
And who has just switched off the light
Forgetting she was there.

--Alan Brownjohn

Visitors

Sunday brings them with fruit and smiles
Beneath trees unfolding picnic tablecloths.
And all so earnestly unaware
Of barred windows where livid faces stare
And shrill curses hurled from crooked mouths.

--Peter Kocan

A Dying Man

Some compulsion to ask:
"Is there anything you want?"

afraid of his answer
for there's nothing I can give,

ashamed of my question
knowing he knows,

forgiven by a lie,
his merciful, "No."

--Gael Turnbull

The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water

I heard the old, old men say,
"Everything alters,
And one by one we drop away."
They had hands like claws, and their knees
Were twisted like the old thorn-trees
By the waters.
I heard the old, old men say,
"All that's beautiful drifts away
Like the waters."

--William Butler Yeats

The Wall Test

When they say "To the wall!"
and the squad does a right turn,

where do you stand? With the squad
or the man against the wall?

In every case
you find yourself standing against the wall.

--Louis Simpson

In a Train

There has been a light snow.

Dark car tracks move in out of the darkness.

I stare at the train window marked with soft dust.

I have awakened at Missoula, Montana, utterly happy.

--Robert Bly

Morning at the Window

They are rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens,
And along the trampled edges of the street
I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
Sprouting despondently at area gates.

The grown waves of fog toss up to me
Twisted faces from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile that hovers in the air
And vanishes along the level of the roofs.

--T.S. Eliot

Poem

Get your tongue
out
of my mouth;
I'm kissing you
goodbye.

--Ted Kooser

On the Collar of a Dog

I am his Highness' dog at Kew;
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

--Alexander Pope

The Soldiers

(The soldiers speaking)

We stay
as the leaves
on trees
in fall

(from the Italian of Giuseppe Ungaretti,
tr. by Glauco Cambon)

The Sky is Low

The sky is low, the clouds are mean,
A traveling flake of snow
Across a barn or through a rut
Debates if it will go.

A narrow wind complains all day
How someone treated him.
Nature, like us, is sometimes caught
Without her diadem.

--Emily Dickinson

NOTES

1. Robert Bly, ed. The Sea and the Honeycomb. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p.x.

2. Ibid.

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