

Poetry Writing  
The Prose Poem

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Questions

How is this a poem and not flash fiction?

How is this a poem and not an essay?

What are the particular effects of the poet's choice of form?

How is the subject matter or point of view of the poem particularly suitable to this form?

**The Colonel**

BY CAROLYN FORCHÉ

WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go [to hell]. He swept the ears to the floor with

his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

*May 1978*

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## MUSEUM

by Robert Hass

On the morning of the Käthe Kollwitz exhibit, a young man and woman come into the museum restaurant. She is carrying a baby; he carries the air-freight edition of the Sunday *New York Times*. She sits in a high-backed wicker chair, cradling the infant in her arms. He fills a tray with fresh fruit, rolls, and coffee in white cups and brings it to the table. His hair is tousled, her eyes are puffy. They look like they were thrown down into sleep and then yanked out of it like divers coming up for air. He holds the baby. She drinks coffee, scans the front page, butters a roll and eats it in their little corner in the sun. After a while, she holds the baby. He reads the Book Review and eats some fruit. Then he holds the baby while she finds the section of the paper she wants and eats fruit and smokes. They've hardly exchanged a look. Meanwhile, I have fallen in love with this equitable arrangement, and with the baby who cooperates by sleeping. All around them are faces Käthe Kollwitz carved in wood of people with no talent or capacity for suffering who are suffering the numbest kinds of pain: hunger, helpless terror. But this young couple is reading the Sunday paper in the sun, the baby is sleeping, the green has begun to emerge from the rind of the cantaloupe, and everything seems possible.

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## **Paschal Lamb**

by Robert Hass

Well, David had said—it was snowing outside and his voice contained many registers of anger, disgust, and wounded justice, I think it's crazy. I'm not going to be a sacrificial lamb.

In Greece sometimes, a friend told me, when she walked on the high road above the sea back to her house from the village in the dark, and the sky seemed immense, the moon terribly bright, she wondered if her life would be a fit gift.

And there is that poor heifer in the poem by Keats, all decked out in ribbons and flowers, no terror in the eyes, no uncontrollable slobber of mucus at the muzzle, since she didn't understand the festivities.

And years later, after David had quit academic life, he actually bought a ranch in Kentucky near a town called Pleasantville, and began to raise sheep.

When we visited that summer and the nights were shrill with crickets and the heat did not let up, we traded stories after dinner and he told us again the story about his first teaching job and the vice president.

When he bought the place, he had continued his subscription to *The Guardian* and *Workers Vanguard*, but they piled up in a corner un-read. He had a mortgage to pay. He didn't know a thing about raising animals for slaughter, and so he read *The American Sheepman* with an intensity of concentration he had never even approximated when he was reading political theory for his Ph.D. orals.

The vice president of the United States, after his term in office, accepted a position as a lecturer in political science at a small college in his home district, where David had just taken his first job. The dean brought Humbert Humphrey around to introduce him to the faculty. When they came to David's office, the vice president, expensively dressed, immensely hearty, extended his hand and David did not feel he could take it because he believed the man was a war criminal; and not knowing any way to avoid the awkwardness, he said so, which was the beginning of his losing the job at that college.

But that was the dean's doing. The vice president started to cry. He had the hurt look, David said, of a kicked dog with a long, unblemished record of loyalty and affection, this man who had publicly defended, had *praised* the terror bombing of villages full of peasants. He seemed to David unimaginably empty of inner life if he could be hurt rather than affronted by a callow young man making a stiffly moral gesture in front of two men his father's age. David said that he had never looked at another human being with such icy, wondering detachment, and that he hadn't liked the sensation.

And so in the high-ceilinged kitchen, in the cricked-riddled air drenched with the odor of clover, we remembered Vic Doyno in the snow in Buffalo, in the days when the war went on

continuously like a nightmare in our waking and sleeping hours.

Vic had come to work flushed with excitement at an idea he had had in the middle of the night. He had figured out how to end the war. It was a simple plan. Everyone in the country—in the world, certainly a lot of Swedish and English students would go along—who was opposed to the war would simply cut off the little finger on the left hand and send it to the president. Imagine! They would arrive slowly at first, the act of one or two maniacs, but the news would hit the newspapers and the next day there would be a few more. And the day after that more. And on the fourth day there would be thousands. And on the fifth day, clinics would be set up—organized by medical students in Madison, San Francisco, Stockholm, Paris—to deal with the surgical procedure safely and on a massive scale. And on the sixth day, the war would stop. It would stop. The helicopters at Bien Hoa would sit on the airfields in silence like squads of disciplined mosquitoes. Peasants, worried and curious because peasants are always worried and curious, would stare up curiously into the unfamiliar quiet of a blue, cirrus-drifted sky. And years later we would know each other by those missing fingers. An aging Japanese businessman minus a little finger on his left hand would notice the similarly mutilated hand of his cab driver in Chicago, and they would exchange a fleeting unspoken nod of fellowship.

And it could happen. All we had to do to make it happen—Vic had said, while the water for tea hissed on the hot plate in David's chilly office and the snow came down thick as cotton batting, was cut off our little fingers right now, take them down to the department secretary, and have her put them in the mail.

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The Fall  
by Russell Edson

There was a man who found two leaves and came indoors holding them out saying to his parents that he was a tree.

To which they said then go into the yard and do not grow in the living room as your roots may ruin the carpet.

He said I was fooling I am not a tree and he dropped his leaves.

But his parents said look it is fall.

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## **Metals Metals**

BY RUSSELL EDSON

Out of the golden West, out of the leaden East, into the iron South, and to the silver North . . .

Oh metals metals everywhere, forks and knives, belt buckles and hooks . . . When you are beaten you sing. You do not give anyone a chance . . .

You come out of the earth and fly with men. You lodge in men. You hurt them terribly. You tear them. You do not care for anyone.

Oh metals metals, why are you always hanging about? Is it not enough that you hold men's wrists? Is it not enough that we let you in our mouths?

Why is it you will not do anything for yourself? Why is it you always wait for men to show you what to be?

And men love you. Perhaps it is because you soften so often.

You did, it is true, pour into anything men asked you to. It has always proved you to be somewhat softer than you really are.

Oh metals metals, why are you always filling my house?

You are like family, you do not care for anyone.

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[Kills bugs dead.]

by Harryette Mullen

Kills bugs dead. Redundancy is syntactical overkill. A pin-prick of peace at the end of the tunnel of a nightmare night in a roach motel. Their noise infects the dream. In black kitchens they foul the food, walk on our bodies as we sleep over oceans of pirate flags. Skull and crossbones, they crunch like candy. When we die they will eat us, unless we kill them first. Invest in better mousetraps. Take no prisoners on board ship, to rock the boat, to violate our beds with pestilence. We dream the dream of extirpation. Wipe out a species, with God at our side. Annihilate the insects. Sterilize the filthy vermin.