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national association of
writers in education



Boundary Conditions

Cassandra Atherton, Anne Caldwell, Oz Hardwick,
Paul Hetherington, Paul Munden,
Shane Strange and Jen Webb

A MINI-ANTHOLOGY OF PROSE POETRY, WITH
ACCOMPANYING ARTIST STATEMENTS

Introduction

Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton

The Anglophone prose poem is flourishing in the twenty-first century as writers are embracing hybrid literary forms. The condensed and suggestive pithiness of the prose poem is particularly suited to an age that understands and values fragmentation and is generally suspicious of the sweep of grand narrative gestures. Prose poetry also challenges established generic boundaries—and many other kinds of boundaries, too—opening up a wide variety of possibilities for creative writers interested in making use of prose in poetic ways; and, also, in ways that question, defy or subvert conventional narrative expectations. Indeed, Peter Johnson has written that the prose poem’s “existence depends partly on its ability to plunder the territories of many other like genres” (Johnson 2000: n.p.) and, as we have stated elsewhere, “[p]rose poetry’s challenge to conventional ideas about generic distinctions may be what makes it most modern (and postmodern) . . . It may offer one way through the quagmire of generic classifications and, a little like a literary wormhole, take the reader into new and hitherto unexplored spaces” (Hetherington and Atherton 2020: 23).

In this mini-anthology of prose poetry, seven prose poets have each contributed three prose poems that address diverse ideas associated with boundaries, along with a brief artist’s statement that addresses their prose poetry practice. All of these prose poems demonstrate the flexibility of the prose poem form and the way in which prose poems often employ narrative tropes without aiming to complete or resolve that narrative. Holly Iglesias has written of her impetus to compose prose poems that “[m]y desire is to tell the big story through the little story” (2019: 102) and prose poetry has the capacity to briefly open up wide, suggestive and ambiguous discursive fields. This implies that there may be much more to consider than immediately meets the eye. In the works that follow there are various large stories writ both small and poetically, all of which expand in exponential ways, invoking and challenging ideas of boundaries—where they may be; and what we may cross, contravene or transgress.

Choreography

Cassandra Atherton

Prose poetry's angular sensuality and louche rawness can be compared to jazz choreography's use of improvisation, syncopation and isolation. At its most playful and divisive, a prose poem is a jazz dance squeezed into a compressed rectangle of text. Nikki Santilli has artfully discussed the connection between prose poetry and jazz:

Rooted in classical music, jazz developed along its own lines and split into hot, cool and sweet, bebop and so on. Just like its twin soul of jazz, the prose poem is shedding its skin—it does so easily—to sustain its defining, quixotic nature and continue to host its unique space for literary protest and play. (2018: 297)

Part of this desquamation involves the way a prose poem is visually represented as a paragraph on the page. It prioritizes the quotidian form, shaking off verse's lineation just as jazz dance breaks apart classical ballet technique.

Bob Fosse's choreography is known for its deceptive complexity. His signature steps are about limbs being turned in, rather than the classical imperative for feet to be turned out. Never having learnt labanotation (the standard system of dance annotation) he and others often described his steps in poetic metaphors:

a boxer, hands in gloves, trying to hitch up his trousers or scratch his nose ... the hind legs of a horse trying to navigate through a desert of snakes ... the delicate holding of a soft-boiled egg so that it neither slips from your hands nor squishes into a nauseating drool from too much pressure. (Smith 1999: n.p.)

Ann Reinking, one of the most superbly accomplished dancers of her generation was well known for her execution of Fosse's iconic choreography. Critics have said, "what happened when [she] took the stage can't really be rendered by writers, hard as we try" (Gold 2020: n.p.). In this way, dance may be linked to poetry's active engagement with the expression of the inexpressible—and my suite of prose poems uses the ubiquitous prose poetry rectangle as a stage. It explores some of the multifarious ways that prose poetry performs the ineffable. Furthermore, these prose poems make reference to Reinking's six-year affair with Fosse and use the prose poetry box to challenge her reductive labelling as his muse.

Ultimately, my prose poems seek to transcend disciplinary boundaries and create a new interart aesthetic. They attempt to both resist and play with form in a signature style by putting the "Fosse Amoeba" which is "distinctive for its shoulder-rolling, turned in knees and toes, finger-snapping, bowler-hat-wearing, hip-thrusting, gloved-'jazz-hands' shuffle" (Coleman, 2016: n.p.) on the prose poetry stage.

Toe Box

Stripped back to eyeliner and underwear, jetlag presses the balls of my feet into the carpet. Electric toes. I'm throbbing like a bass line, limbs heavy and numb. The room is velvet dark, neon lighting my veins. Hot pink heartlight. If I close my eyes, I'll wake to find the echo of your knock at my door or a whisper lingering in the door jamb. Between jittery breaths I wrap my ballet skirt around my waist and coax my feet into pointe shoes. It's one pink streak to your room, ribbons trailing. When you put your hands under my thighs, my toe boxes rap against the bedhead. They sound like the metre of your heart or the petit battements of desire.

Labanotation

After Ann Reinking

You refashion my body like a Fosse dancer. Turned in toes, bent arms, curved shoulders. During rehearsals I finger snap my way into your heart. Click. Pause. Click Pause. Your notes are full of stick figures and illegible scrawls. Squiggles. Wiggles. I'm not sure if I have them the right way up as I try to copy what could be a sideways shuffle or soft-boiled-egg hand. Yolk. Yoke. In your bed, I'm your jagged little muse. The triple threat of alcohol, Seconal and Dexedrine on your sheets. In a bowler hat, fishnet suspenders and a skin-tight tuxedo jacket I audition for the role of myself in the documentary of your life. It's a glitter-and-doom aesthetic. Waiting to hear if I've got the role, I tuck in my elbows and extend my lower arms, imagine water running over my body and the electric zap of your hips in motion.

Timing

There's a nervous crackle and the deep burn of four beats. I inhabit the 5, 6 7, 8—those moments before it begins. Even before I know you, I am preparing. When we meet, I tell you I'm your lemniscate and you breathe me in, a figure eight of bright air in your lungs.

Later, with my pointe shoes ribboned to my ankles, you reach under my skirt and pull down my ballet tights in one motion, quicker than the count from 8 back to 1. On the bed, I lift my stocking-shackled feet and in the 2, 3, 4 you strip and occupy the space between my thighs. I try to count you in, but when you place your warm palms under my hips, there's only an 8, 8, 8 in a continuous electric loop.

Cusp

Anne Caldwell

These three prose poems have taken the theme of boundaries and tried to explore it from both physical and metaphorical perspectives. Prose poetry is an exciting and appropriate form for this creative process, because of its ability to hold different images and ideas within its compressed shape. It is like thinking in three dimensions when writing in this way. "Late Snow" takes the image of the threshold that can exist in a troubled relationship as its genesis. I was influenced by the memory of reading one of my favourite, deceptively simple poems, "The Door" by Miroslav Holub which urges the reader to become open to the possibility of change. "The Ancient Mariner" is also hovering in the background, through the figure of the brother. I have always interwoven allusions into my prose poems to add to the sense of three dimensions. "Cusp" explores the transition from boyhood to manhood. Spurn Point in the North of England seemed to be the perfect setting for this prose poem. It is an ecotone, a spit of shingle that lives in that magical space between land and sea and I have returned to this landscape many times because of its mutability. As climate change develops apace, a setting like this highlights the fragility of the environments we inhabit, as well as our tenuous connections with each other. "Stranraer" is also located geographically between shoreline and water and was written with the consequences of Brexit and migration fresh in my mind. The metaphor of burning bridges felt both a personal meditation on decisions I have made in my life and reflection on living in the fractured state of the United Kingdom today where boundaries are more politicized than ever.

My latest collection of prose poems, *Alice and the North* (Valley Press, 2020), took the notion of journeys as an organising principle for the whole collection, as the central persona travels through the North. I can still sense this psycho-geographic inspiration for writing at work here in my recent prose poems, which often begin with an open door and a pair of good, strong boots.

Cusp

Male swallows arrived here a fortnight before the females, singing their hearts out to attract a mate. Today they are swooping and sky-dancing. In the far distance, the Zeebrugge ferry lingers at the mouth of the estuary and offshore wind farms simmer in the heat. I watch a toddler run into the North Sea, a young pup let loose from a leash, and picture all the summers of your childhood. A flock of common terns rises up from mudflats. Here, gun emplacements are crumbling. Concrete pillboxes are home to rockpools feathered with seaweed. The road ahead twists and tilts, washed away by the last storm surge.

All is mutable. We're at the mercy of any change in sea level. We watch seals basking in the bay and without warning a roe deer bounds across the dunes onto the beach. The sea is orange, grey, mauve in the late afternoon sun and you're striding out of view now: nineteen and fit as a butcher's dog. A whole life ribbons out in front of you, far beyond this spit of sand and shingle. I think of the way Spurn Point curves like an arm, protecting the soft underbelly of Hull. I must let you pilot your own craft on open water. You'll dodge sandbars, riptides and find a navigable channel, a safe passage for the winter ahead.

Late Snow

My dead brother stood between us when we kissed. He took to lying with us at night: a shallow impression on the sheets, but there all the same. I felt him. He was the ghostly albatross around our necks, a devil on our shoulders. Even when having sex, we sensed we were being watched. You grew irritable and moody. For a while, Love was a ship marooned in ice, no longer fit for purpose. You spent days in pyjamas refusing to leave the house. I could hear you at night, opening the fridge, working your way through blocks of cheese and packets of Jacobs cream crackers, staring out of the window at the passage of Venus. *Three's a crowd*, you muttered to yourself. Thresholds became difficult to negotiate so I was the one who went for supplies and bought you cigarettes whilst my brother flexed his impossible wings.

That spring, snow came late and three lambs died of hypothermia in the lower field. The farmer slung them over his shoulder and carried their stiff bodies to his waiting trailer.

The ewes bleated for days, nosing their way beneath holly bushes, trying to find their offspring's scent. The snow melted. *Hope is the thing with feathers*. Without so much as a second glance, my brother was gone. Crocuses bloomed in the front yard and our open door was a cautious smile.

Stranraer

The road we took that day hugged the contours of the Galloway hills and the shoreline. It dipped and curved like a wooden roller coaster. Northern Ireland was out there, shimmering in the haar and the onshore wind was whipping the sea into white horses. I could sense the power of the currents growling and roaring below breakwaters. Somewhere in the middle of the Irish Sea was a new border. A raw, invisible scar. The late afternoon sun turned the water azure blue, streaked with purple, darker brushstrokes.

I thought of all the bridges I'd burnt in my life and the air was somehow thick with smoke. Don't look back. Don't turn to salt, I said to myself. Focus on the open road and the possibility of a ferry across the ideas that divide us. Have empathy for those families in small, inflatable boats praying for a safe passage.

Shaky Places

Oz Hardwick

I've always been interested in boundaries and margins, from the underground/alternative music scene that embraced me from my teens (and hasn't quite let go), to academic research into misericords and other half-hidden medieval iconography, to adopting the oft-distrusted form of the prose poem to interrogate the minutiae of quotidian experience. More specifically, I'm interested in the boundaries of the boundaries, the margins of the margins: the shaky places at which notions of centre and edge no longer stand up to scrutiny and all is uncertain.

At what point does I become not I? Humans shed our outer layers of skin every two-to-four weeks and, ultimately—well, dust to dust. And when does not I become I? When it is inhaled? Eaten? When it is viewed and, although remaining itself, resides in the memory for years? In the backwash of successive lockdowns and easings, with their strict (and not so strict) regulations and Public Information Broadcasts on airborne virus transmission, the boundaries surrounding personal space have become particularly prominent in cultural discourse, while endlessly contested at both social and personal levels.

To clarify my opening statement: I've always been *obsessed* by boundaries and margins, to the extent that some of my earliest memories are of lying awake thinking about where I ended and the dark began, where life ended and death began, where an infinite universe ended and what was outside of it. An odd child. When does a child become not a child? When does odd become neurodiverse?

These three prose poems are about the boundaries which are not boundaries: where poetry becomes prose; where I become not I; where past becomes present; where prose becomes poetry; where background—both literally and figuratively—becomes foreground; and where words, words, words—their painstakingly faked documents unchecked by guards too intent on admiring their own reflections—cease being an anonymous herd and become a prose poem.

Experiments in Dynamation

Everything's easy without skin, though we still paint our differences on shields, bumping bosses when we pass in corridors and rattling sabres in canteens and shared offices. Our emails are grave goods for future archaeologists and our life stories—part conjecture, part wishful thinking—will be handwritten on cards in one of those museum exhibits that everyone rushes past on their way to the dinosaurs. On lonely nights I want to lie so close to you that our ribs link like one of those puzzle rings that were popular in the '70s, but we sleep with our shields clutched tight to our breasts, bone cold and rattling.

Hive Mind

Wax skin and a honey heart, I melt a little each time the news bullies its way around my closed curtains. There's a hum in my head like a valve amp or an aircraft window, and there's a sting like a fever or a bamboo cane. *Hive mind*, I want to know, *how can I turn off this noise and still give the impression of being alive?*

Geek

Stripped of myth, the Other's just a freak, measured against *Normal* and found wanting. It wants a thread through the labyrinth but Ariadne's tidied them all away. It wants a mirrored shield but Athena's sold all her clutter on eBay. Stripped of even its own shadow—nesting moths in a locked/lost box that must never never never be opened—the Other self-identifies as inanimate; something between stick and snake, between body and bird, repulsive to touch. It wants winged sandals but its toes are broken. It wants a ring of confidence or, at least, invisibility, but its fingers are swollen like balloons. Most of all it wants silence, but the sky is nothing but thunder and even its own name hangs just out of reach.

Border crossings

Paul Hetherington

A great deal of human experience happens at the margin, or involves a crossing of borders. Furthermore, we often travel across these boundaries casually and in ways that do not recognize their deeper implications. Such crossings may constitute an important rite of passage of the kind referred to by Victor W. Turner—developing Arnold van Gennep's ideas—as “rites of transition”. These rites involve crossing over from one condition into another and are:

marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*), and aggregation ... [D]uring the ... [second phase, the] liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) is ambiguous; he [sic] passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. (1979: 235)

Prose poetry is a powerful literary form for exploring such in-between conditions. It is frequently engaged in conjuring or invoking the ambiguities of neither inhabiting the past nor what is about to arrive. The relative brevity of the prose poem form, and its emphasis on the connotative rather than the denotative, embraces unknowability, and even the ineffable. This form can provide insights into human experience without tying such experience to particular narrative resolutions, acknowledging that a great deal of experience is fragmentary and often in the process of continuously coming-into-being.

Furthermore, during rites of transition, many sustaining expressions may become insufficient to the task of articulating what matters. Prose poetry that addresses this breakdown in articulation foregrounds the difficulty of speaking confidently about transitional experiences, and also tends to question whether human identity is fixed or readily able to be communicated. Instead, prose poetry thrives on the conflicting existential tugs that characterize so many human encounters.

The three prose poems that follow are engaged in liminal and threshold moments. They are expressed in second person—an uncanny space between first- and third-person narration. The direct address, “you”, propels the reader into the prose poem and simultaneously challenges them to resist its imperatives. In these works, the focus is on discordant and transformative aspects of utterance and a concomitant strangeness. Boundaries are transgressed and liminality foregrounded even in the voice's harnessing of breath and air.

Washed-up

The beach contains you, long since cast out by family and friends. You believe you deserved it—blunt know-it-all that you were; full-on didactic. They said “leave us alone”, moved away, and you had no-one to maunder to, rambling through your forgetting in massage parlours and poor bedsits. But, now, at the caravan park, they nod to you, calling you “scrounger”, “beachcomber” and—behind your back—“lost geriatric”. You find in your aftermath, yourself; and ideas of tides, the weather, the washed-up things. You take them home, decorate bookcases with the arduous beauty of shells and driftwood, build furniture from the thrown-away. A young woman occasionally visits to discuss her life with you. She is like a new daughter; a nonplussing kindness. Together, you peer in rock pools, observing the anemones.

Opera

You wish for a sense of the old music that you listened to when you were young, when your parents lived together; of the airy arias that crashed against your body when you

knew no better than any seven-year-old; when you father threw you at the sky. You listen to the records now, on the aged, limping turntable, but their sound is weirdly hollowed, the ancient voices belonging elsewhere. Your mother walked out, saying, "I'll be back by nightfall", and that night still moves, like a brush blackening mind. *La Traviata* played—your father had it on the turntable repeatedly—and no-one went to bed; hours sat like digesting leeches. If the police had found her you may have been forgiving, but her disappearance remains palpable, wriggling and darkening—"Addio, del passato bei sogni ridenti".

Yap

The dog in the street yaps at your footsteps. You're not familiar with the city and you feel taken up by the repeated sound, as if you've become an utterance of a creature without human language—an expressive failure of meaning. You're attenuated, only breath and air, losing your sense of a body. Yet, soon enough, your feet begin to pain you and you locate yourself in each twinging step in new, uncomfortable shoes. Language returns as protest—not unlike your unwieldy early cries; not unlike a dog's high-pitched bark. You wrap your tongue around the local form of the verb "to shout". A tram driver frowns; you're in a seat crossing the metropolis. To bark, to shout, say poems, speak of love. You send a message to a woman you met in a library, remembering her gestures beneath the "No Talking" sign—an expressive, unreadable mime.

Elastic time

Paul Munden

There's an episode of *Black Books* in which Bernard and Mannie, despairing of the "drivel" in children's books, decide to write one of their own. They limber up at their blackboard in the middle of the shop as if to splatter the rectangular space with ideas like Jackson Pollock filling a canvas. "No rules," says Bernard. "I get it—anything goes!" replies Mannie, getting in the mood, but "Nooooo!" screams back Bernard. It's a scene that returns to me often, especially when writing prose poetry.

There's a case for viewing prose poetry as one logical extension of so-called free verse; once lines are in free-fall, why not let them fall away altogether? But with free verse, it's not the case that "anything goes": it's free insofar as it evolves individual forms of its own, from one poem to the next, geared to specific purpose. If prose poetry follows that maxim, it's with a curious result: yes, it is free of traditional poetic lineation, but it opts for an alternative stricture—that of prose. It goes further, tending to eschew the use of paragraphs in favour of a single block, with no escape. It can be claustrophobic. And that's why I personally need a particular reason for choosing to write a prose poem, rather than a poem with lines (and line *breaks*) that allow for greater judicious pauses—spaces, breaths—and visual counterpoint.

The idea of boundaries was highly appealing in this respect. I wanted to relate each poem's cramped structure to a physical confinement, and to explore that with regard to the passage of time. As I have written elsewhere (Munden 2017), it's the elastic nature of time that lets us as readers *move* within a prose poem whose every other effort is often to focus our attention on a single moment and space, effectively trapping us within a cell. The prose poem is, perhaps, something of a benevolent prison, having no rules. Just don't think that "anything goes".

Playground

Released from our arithmetic class, we burn off energy in what looks like a crazy free-for-all, a dogfight, a scribbling of colour across a grey square. One of the crayons makes a dash for another, snatches a kiss, and now it's her turn. Miniature bottles of slightly warm milk are squadroned in crates by the classroom door, ready to refresh us. Or make us sick. The timeless ritual doesn't care. Who invented the game nobody knows. Everyone understands the rules, and has to join in. There's just one thing that none of us quite grasps: play is permitted only within this designated patch of tarmac; not in the corridors, or on the road home; not in later life, unless perhaps in dreams, and even then there will be serious repercussions.

Not to Scale

Before the Earth was googled, we mapped things for ourselves, in feet and inches, miles and myths. The most meticulous survey gave way to speculation: the square mileage was

just a small part of the picture; a flat surface ruffled by wind; the cover of a book. So many centuries of peat have seeped from the banks that the water is impenetrable. A swimmer might complete one lap in thirty hours, but for thirty years the unplumbed depths of dark continue to send shivers of mystery through her veins. Every tree-branch rolling in the current looks alive; every arcing shadow suggests a secret unlocked. Even now, I want so badly (by which I mean so very much) to see something break the surface that I'm tempted to stage it. And if we're honest, which of us can say we've never made some pretence—to prove the worth of our imaginings?

The Star Inn, 24/11/21

The barman's photo shows us sitting behind a polished oak table, together for the first time in forty years. Your husband left us so we could *catch up properly*. Lunch has been cleared away, though two untouched glasses of water remain. The log fire has been carefully included in the frame. For all the chat there are things I haven't said, though I have put my arm around you. For the shot. It's later that night that the blaze rips through the bar, the roof, the thatch so densely packed that all dousing is deflected.

The streets are silent lines that hold us like unvarying rivers

Shane Strange

One thing that marks prose poetry as a form is its "generic uncertainty", its play and crossover with both prose and poetry and its unsettling settlement with both forms. If it does nothing else, prose poetry foregrounds where the boundaries exist, and what investment is made in policing those generic limitations. While prose poetry does remove from the poet's toolkit lineation and enjambment—which for some is "freeing", for others something akin to the profane—I would argue it enforces boundaries on the prose side of things, demanding concision, a concentration on imagery, the perfecting of sentences. Looseness is an anathema to a good prose poem.

For me, coming from the world of prose, prose poetry has been an excellent entrée into the world of poetic composition: a revelation about language and the limits of form; a welcoming invitation to bask in the possibilities of keeping things small and deeply considered. I don't often engage in the lengthier possibilities of the form, but rather see it as the perfect vessel for fragments: of thoughts and ideas and feelings. Like lightning illuminating a darkened landscape and offering only fleeting understanding. Or an accidental photograph.

These three prose poems aim to engage with the boundaries between life and death, the boundaries between people, and the boundaries between ways of knowing. They are imagistic, perhaps everyday; they seek no solutions, and I hope remain open. "Lyneham Motor Inn" comes from the simple observation of seeing tiny bugs circling in sunlight, in what was an otherwise drab and somewhat grim urban scenario, and extrapolating the spiral forms of DNA, of eddying waters, of the combinations of life, of love. "Intimacy" is born from clearing out my grandparents' house when my grandmother passed away in the cruel haze of dementia, that affected her with an enormous and unrelenting anger and frustration. And it is something I wonder about, the delicate repetitions of long relationships, of endurance, of how we are formed in the light of others. "Bequest" is about parental guilt, the weight of generations, the possibilities of loss and the burden of responsibility.

At the Lyneham Motor Inn with Gemma

Unvarying, they hold us—the silent lines of streets. Cast stone onto stone. We have returned to find versions of ourselves—caught in light, understanding we are not what we were but so close we can touch—our skin made of spirals—combining and recombining like bugs caught in sunlight on a field, or plankton caught in the eddy of a maw waiting like sunset to close everything in the absence of light.

Intimacy

They had misplaced conversations. Like holes in a woollen scarf, they found a pattern disturbed, a structure given way, edges to rub against a finger. If asked they'd say the leavings of memory are insincere but tantalise nevertheless. Insect bodies appeared in cupboards as material stored for further examination. The peels of lemons hardened on unwashed plates. There was rat poison in the crockery. And in each drawer: an unpaid bill; a clump of needles; a photograph, pages torn from magazines. But in the piss-stained rugs they found, in the unpicking of fibres, their own version of wonder.

Bequest

Did I abandon you like my father did to me and then my mother? If so, when did I do it? Can you mark the time you felt left by me? When you mistook silence for disregard, or maybe felt stifled by silence, like a soaked woollen shroud cast over your face—each breath wet and close?

Is this why you tried to cast yourself into the lake with your hoodie covering your face? To make real what must've only been the shadow of me and mine, and all that came before and all that was after until time ended with you ending.

Between here and now

Jen Webb

As a first-year student studying statistics I bumped up against a conundrum that has occupied me since. "When," asked the lecturer, "does two become three?" He did not provide a satisfying answer, saying only that two probably becomes three when human communities say it does. The uncertainty about how to define the line between here and now, quick and dead, thee and me is at the heart of these three poems: not that they are themselves riddles, but they are part of my enduring attempt to find an answer to that question.

I suspect that all creative practice involves the struggle to bring clarity into a confusing, convoluted and complex world, and the various beings that coexist in that world, in part by crossing borders, shattering boundaries, and in part by focusing on one fragment of the all-there-is, regardless of its context. Draw a perfect line; build a story out of impressions and observations; notice and then preserve an image that contains within itself the sort of shimmering that must, surely, be the product of like butting up against unlike; of three trying to muscle its way out of two, and claim a place in society. For me, it is poetry in general and prose poetry in particular that affords this: its bounded paragraph-box removes a perhaps more superficial openness associated with lineation, and allows the fragment of the whole to take on an intensity and a multiplicity of possibilities—a blurring of the frame of convention.

"The Limit of the Map" starts with the banal fact of my lack of a bump of locality: a boundary between self and the world that is nullified by the world itself. "'In the midst of life, we ...'" is the opening phrase of a hymn by Martin Luther (1524) which reads in full "In the midst of life we are in death"—perhaps the most perplexing instance of that problem of when the shift occurs between one state and the next. And in "Cross Hatching" I am reflecting on one too many social occasions characterized by shifting boundaries.

The Limit of the Map

To some extent it's about being lost. Your mother wanders off and is never seen again. You yourself have been mislaid many times, as you are again today, paused between river and rock, scouting out your escape.

When the first maps were made, the making was slow: child tracing a path around the broken tree, past tall anthills, back home; woman steering wooden boat along the stream, sketching what she sees, knowing she will be able to find her way back home.

You have been walking a slow circle while the earth tilts, trembles, tilts—a giant, breathing. Just when you are on the edge of losing hope, a windmill glints beyond the saltbush stand, and the lanky bay notices you and calls out, nickering.

"In the midst of life, we ..."

All bets are off and I am living in black and white after years of glaring colour. *Don't die*, you told me when I balanced on the edge of the roof, *you'll regret it later*. And later you held me, and briefly I could breathe, and then you talked until the night called uncle.

Now silence has won. Your absence consumes the air, but nonetheless death suits you, beloved, wipes out the table of obligations. After all your honour and betrayals, after all my rage, the IOUs lie shredded on the floor. How it thuds against the skull, that old *Mitten wir im Leben sind*. How always it's silence wins out in the end.

Cross Hatching

We're out to dinner again because no one wants to cook, and the waiter pours our wine with one arm wrenched behind his back. Sarah says *Be nice, he's just a child*, and you laugh out loud, ignoring the look on her face that says *mate, I think that's it for us*. The ravioli doesn't come although the restaurant prides itself on timing. The water is still though

we ordered sparkling, and Julian insists he can't eat the garlic bread though his coeliac is strictly for show. Or so we believe. I change seats so I'm beside Sarah and begin the slow sweetness I hope will bear fruit. The waiter brings fresh drinks. The waiter brings fries for the table. Later we will take home the leftovers and tomorrow not eat them and the next day will throw them in the bin.

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