

Short

by

Liz Henry

© 2002, 2008 Liz Henry  
Tollbooth Press  
Redwood City, California  
bookmaniac.net

*Second Printing*

Short



A short poem compresses images and actions into an impossibly small canvas. There's a blank page, and then just a few words burst up from it, directing your neurons to fire, layering images and hints of narrative.

In 1977, Samuel L. Delany wrote "About Five Thousand Seven Hundred and Fifty Words" about how we experience compressed textual information. Judgement of meaning runs quick and deep.

Delany paints narrative subtlety in a single lovely sentence, slowing our readerly response to unfold the reality of a bit of text. "The red sun is" brings expectation, intimacy. "The red sun is high;" adds warmth, as well as a sense of place and time, a landscape's noon. "The red sun is high; the blue" sets us up for the broadness and normalcy of sky. Then, the beautiful twist. "The red sun is high; the blue low."

Delany describes how bad prose can lead the reader into a maze of

unrewarding correction and backtracking word to word and phrase to phrase. Quality and meaning depend in part on the context of genre, so that “The red sun is high, the blue low” makes bad naturalist fiction, yet good science fiction. Science fiction is subjunctive; it's what has not yet happened, what could happen, it is possible futures. Fantasy, Delany claims, is reverse subjunctivity; what could not have happened. It requires a different sort of correcting, so that in the time it takes to read the phrase “winged dog” we shift our location and assume a world that allows for such a beast.

Balancing those course corrections is especially difficult in a very short poem. In these I first aspired to what Delany calls “a resonant aesthetic form”.





---

Camellias -  
a nymph, drunk,  
lit all her matches at once

---

*advice to little redwoods*

Carrot fennel feather top

stickin out elbows -

Get up and stretch - stretch green!

---

the mouse-tense

brownbird

spots a crumb

(SNAKEstrike)

---

*Nakedness*

Quince flower in fog -  
Bold garter pink on a black leg  
dripping with sweat  
hoochie coochie mama  
in the beer-smoke swill.

---

*Tree with dew*

If I shook you,  
silver beads would drop  
to patter at my feet.  
A broken necklace  
makes no difference to the rain.

---

The earth with her hood up  
pulled over by the side of the solar  
system  
might still be good for scrap

---

Meret Oppenheim's skull x-ray  
again  
I'm in love with a dead girl

---

It hit me  
right in the tender underbelly  
love's got nothing on this  
golden pillow  
where the light lets in

---

a rat's nest, love,  
crack-spined books  
bathtub-thumbed

---

Cormorant-  
dive splash-  
mackerel sky.

---

*Desire*

Two ravens were tearing  
a dead bird in the snow  
Since it was night,  
the blood was black.

I ate their hearts.

At that moment I understood  
murder.

---

Certain men  
in the garden of eden  
would have said  
Tree? What tree?

---

A dream

I pop up naked out of a cake;  
poem-confetti  
scatters everywhere!

---

*Arjuna's chariot*

We thought the chariot  
would carry us to battle  
without effort.

The horses, impatient.  
Their heads strain to tender grass.  
Explain again why....?

Great place for a long  
conversation.

---

*On foot*

the bus rumble  
says hurry,  
fumble for a quarter

& the fat thbbbppp  
armchair bumpsoft  
motorbike, no muffler

cars leafswish past

a fire-siren -  
graceless - hurry!

---

*Car*

Battlesteel  
hurtlebox,  
turtlesell,

solar throat  
to the sky road

Hercules  
labored to make you  
so don't dare stop

---

Poetic  
exercise -

Look at a plant.  
Write only verbs.

---

Rider, swing on,  
grip the saddle pommel,  
the gate opens -  
six seconds, bucking!

---

*Moon*

If you are my sister  
why shine so hard my  
head splits

---

Underneath  
earth

star  
words

flash  
morse

---

Harvest

little by little

I choose and reap and cook

---

In the dry time  
make ready  
for winter rain.

---

at stoplights  
comfortable  
I write in my lap

---

dreaming  
poems come out of my pen  
already typed

---

home's train horn  
sounds then fades

---

~

---