

PROSE MASQUERADING AS POETRY

by Miles Mathis

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I stupidly entered a poetry contest for the first time in decades last month. It was the Telluride Fischer Prize in nearby Colorado. They offered a \$1000 first prize, so I thought “why not?” I saw the flier at Cid's, our local organic market here, and hope swelled in my breast for some odd reason. I know that poetry is dead, so what was I thinking? I am only out \$21, which was the entry fee for three poems, but as usual it is larger issues that really rankle me.

I didn't research this, which I should have. I should have looked up the judge and last year's winner, at the least. If I had, I would not have entered. But it may be for the best, since it allows me to use this latest debacle as support for something I said a couple of days ago in my reply to the big project being run against me, which is hitting one of its peaks right now. There I mentioned in passing that if I were rich and connected, as they are saying, I should have been able to get some promotion, right? My books would have been published by a major publisher, my poems would have been published, etc. Instead, nothing, to this day. Just decades of rejection from the mainstream. To be honest, I haven't even tried to get anything published in a long time. This was the first time I have submitted anything in many many years. But back in the 1990s I was getting rejected on a weekly basis for something or other. I once ripped the mailbox off the wall and stomped on it, I was so tired of getting rejections.

Does that just mean I am a hothead and a poor sport? I don't think so. Back when I was a tournament golfer, I didn't like to lose, but I didn't mind getting beaten by someone who was better than me. And yes, there were a few regional guys who were just better than me. The best guy is supposed to win, and when I was the best guy on that day, I *did* win. When I wasn't, I didn't. That is how golf is: the lowest score wins, and there is no use arguing about it. If you want to get better, you have to work harder.

But that experience didn't prepare me for other fields, where the best person *never* wins. In the arts, I found myself regularly getting beaten by people with absolutely no talent or skill. In fine art (painting, sculpture, etc.) I doubt I have to prove that to you with specific examples. You will understand what I mean immediately. Art is now so corrupt it passes all belief, and almost everyone knows that. But, as it happens, the same is true of poetry. Poetry has been utterly eviscerated in the past century, and though some insiders know and would admit that, most of the public is not so aware of it.

Before I proceed, just be aware that I am not alone in that assessment. The grand poobah of literary criticism, Harold Bloom, has said the same thing. I don't like Bloom, either, but on this we happen to agree. He has complained that modern poetry isn't poetry by any meaning of the word. He once said it was just typing, or word processing. It has no meter, no rhyme, no rules, no flow, no content, and no upper end. It is just the excuse for some privileged people to see their names in print above a set of flabby sentences. Modern poetry isn't poetry at all. It is prose, and it isn't even good prose.

To see what I mean, let's do what I should have done to start with: look at last year's winner of the Telluride first prize. She is Anna Scotti, former journalist for *People*, *Good Housekeeping*, and the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Now published all over the place—including the *New Yorker*—as a top poet.



Here is her prize-winning poem:

TANAGER

There are people who spend this pink hour of dawn walking the perimeters of skyscrapers in Houston, never looking up, gathering birds that have crashed against the great walls of mirrored windows, bewildered by all this broken sky and endless squares of cloud. And there is a weary man who crosses to Matamoros every morning, stacks of flyers on the cracked seat beside him: *La has visto? Missing seven years*. They are never coming back, the girl, the years, they are never coming back, the flocks that once darkened the plain wide skies like purple clouds, but there are goldfinch, and warblers, and martins tucked in every tree, nature's secret, until this glorious hallelujah at the orange edge of dawn. Some of the birds are dead and some will die on folded towels in boxes tucked beneath desks or in car trunks, old women's tears wetting the broken beaks, the perfect feathers, but a few will be released to wing again into the treacherous sky. Now the wayward daughter dances for a slab-faced man whose fists bristle with folded dollars, or she washes laundry for beans and oranges, or she has lain at the bottom of a rocky ravine since the morning of the slammed door, since her father's words were spoken; that can't be undone. But here a scarlet-throated bird is cupped in a man's rough palm, a thick finger strokes its bright breast, and in response, a trembling.

Is that the work of a master poet? The woman can't even spell. The word is flier, not flyer. Whatever it is, it isn't poetry, by definition. It is prose. Undisciplined prose. Poetry is supposed to be more compressed and succinct than prose. Tighter in every way. But this just flops and meanders, ending up nowhere. Reread this sentence for sense, and ask yourself if you could have gotten it past your highschool English teacher:

They are never coming back, the girl, the years, they are never coming back, the flocks that once darkened the plain wide skies like purple clouds, but there are goldfinch, and warblers, and martins tucked in every tree, nature's secret, until this glorious hallelujah at the orange edge of dawn.

That just makes my head spin. It is some sort of double or triple run-on, I don't know. And it undercuts her thesis, doesn't it, if these birds are tucked in every tree. How are we supposed to lament the loss of birds if they are tucked in every tree? Then we get another quick switch, which also gives me whiplash. Those birds tucked in every tree have woken and cried out beautifully at dawn, but then in the next sentence we get

Some of the birds are dead and some
will die on folded towels in boxes tucked beneath desks or in car trunks...

Wait, some of the birds who woke up and chirped are dead? No, other birds. We are getting quick cuts from dead birds to living birds to dead birds. Can't you keep up!

She undercuts it again in her conclusion, where the man pets the trembling bird. But wasn't she just trying to sell us the bad man, abducting and murdering the girl? Isn't that what we started with: the birds killed by skyscrapers and the abducted girl? What does the nice man at the end have to do with that? I guess he is about to bite its head off.

And we don't have an actual girl here, we have a blobby composite of potential girls, one who may be a hooker, one who may be a housegirl, and one who seems to be dead. Are we really supposed to feel something for these newspaper sample girls, because I don't. All I feel is annoyance at having to read bad propaganda posing as poetry.

What about this year's winner, Michelle Bitting? Are you seeing a pattern? Six of this year's seven finalists and winners are women. The seventh is an Hispanic man. Clearly, I need not have entered. Bitting's poem is not posted yet, but its title tells us what we need to know: "Everything Crumbling Becoming Something New". Are you expecting great things from Bitting? I'm not.



That's her with her husband, the actor Phil **Abrams**. According to Wikipedia, she got her MFA in poetry in 2009 and by 2012 she was poet laureate of Pacific Palisades. So she didn't get too many rejections in the mail, did she? Her first book of poetry won the DeNovo Prize and was published by C&R Press. You will say she is just that good. Is she? Let's see. This is the one she leads with on her own site:

Morning, Highway 126

Farmers heft and truckers load crates of lemons onto flatbeds at first light.

The skillet trees stream past,
silhouettes of yellow fruit and shadowed green
like something aquatic. Here I go,
sucked under, again. I love what won't belong to me
and so sit tight, fingering the wound,
the open sinew, sticky gem pot
in the lap of the matter.

At any moment, my heart a bowl of pabulum,
stirred or eaten. Flimsy houses whiz by
the flanks of my eyes, jimmed

plank to dust
by the cranks of decline.
I drive while reason takes a hike.
Let me spin, I say.
Let me crumble in your hands,
my raw materials, my soil
ganged up on. You
and your gorgeous worms
that won't stop working on it.

Good lord, mainstream “poetry” just gets worse every decade. Again, that isn't poetry, it is bad prose. That first sentence tells us all we need to know. “Farmers heft and truckers load”. Redundant. The farmers *are* the truckers, aren't they, so why do we need to be told twice they are loading lemons? No reason, just to be cute. Why is the second line just the one word “light”? No reason, just to be annoyingly modern. Or maybe she wanted to claim a rhyme with first and past, but wasn't able to come up with any real rhyme or meter.

Most amazing, perhaps, is that she admits in line 10 that her heart is a bowl of pabulum. The dictionary defines “pabulum” as bland or insipid intellectual fare. It makes us wonder if she knows that. She then says, “I drive while reason takes a hike”. She also seems to *write* while reason is taking a hike. “Jimmied plank to dust by the cranks of decline”? She is trying to force these internal rhymes with flank, plank and crank, but only achieves it by ignoring what the words mean. How do you jimmy a plank to dust using a crank? Is this what they teach you in MFA programs now? You begin to see why I don't have an “advanced” degree in anything.

Let us compare those “poems” to my own entries. Knowing the modern sensibility, I nodded somewhat to the judge with my first entry

You

First, fold your lips into that narrow plummy
shadow you shake and winnow in your ways.
Place your eyes deep inside, awake, yes, but as under
a sunny coverlet, or as under a grey bank
of moss and black-orange earth, where fishes wait.
Your hands must go here and there, like they do—
moths disappearing in dusk.
And your ears, put them properly beneath the soft brown eaves,
yes, with gentle thumbtips.

It doesn't rhyme, and the meter is subtle, but it isn't prose because I am very concerned with tempo, the sound the words make, and the compression of thought and feeling into an abbreviated whole. It is the opposite of flabby, and it doesn't meander all over the place. It moves in a straight and voluptuous line from first to last. It helps to read it outloud, after reading the ladies above outloud. Just read the first two lines outloud, noticing how I achieve the triple internal slant rhyme of narrow, shadow and winnow without you even being aware of it. This is because I do it without trying to force their meaning. They mean what they always mean, you just don't normally see them stacked like this. Putting the word plummy in there also helps, since its double consonant makes it work with narrow and winnow, which also have it. But it acts to separate and disguise the three “ows”. It does that because plummy is the most evocative word of all of them there. It draws your attention because it is the color of those lips—

and because it is a word you don't see a lot. Shake also works with shadow, to do the same thing. First and fold go together, and winnow and ways also go together. So you see the complex interleaving of words and sounds here, which you hardly notice at first.

I also entered my poem *Asterie*, which is more traditional, with full rhyme and meter. I won't reprint the whole thing here, since it is long and I don't wish to analyze all the mystery out of these poems. But I will show you the last three stanzas:

The laverock let them pass with an orgulous look
from beneath his dark green leaves.
The yarrow bent and the groundsel shook
and the hart's tongue licked its bluish greaves.

The girl woke at home with eaves overhead
and smoke from the peat-tended fire.
Raffia littered her bed on the floor,
and her mind danced like silver wire.

But a cricket calmed her, and her sisters' sounds,
and she rubbed one foot with the other.
Varuna continued her subtle rounds
and the four owls left with their mother.

Obviously, we are in another world entirely here than the world of modern "poetry". I am told by some that they don't know these words, making my poetry unreadable. I guess they say the same about Shakespeare, and refuse to read him either. How about looking up the words? You might find them interesting. You might actually. . . learn something. But, I forgot, that isn't what MFA programs are about. They are about how to promote yourself to mainstream monsters.

I am told this is no big deal: rhyming is actually easier than not rhyming. It looks effortless, right? Or, that's what the Allen Ginsberg character (played by Daniel Radcliffe) told you in *Kill Your Darlings*. The problem? It isn't true. Try it. Try writing just one stanza with meter where the rhymes don't look forced. It is very difficult to do, which is why no one tries to do it anymore. If you are trying to tell a story at the same time, it is extremely difficult. And if you have to avoid pastiche and being derivative—because you don't want to be lumped in with all the rhymers of the past—it is even more difficult.

I have written both ways, modern and classical, and I can tell you it is much much harder—and rewarding, for both me and the reader—to write in the old way. If the old way is supposed to be so easy, request that your favorite modern poet prove it by cranking out a beauty in the old style. You will be waiting a while. I can copy the moderns in my sleep, but they can do nothing like I can.

Then I am told it has all been done—the rhyming and stuff. Has it? I have read a lot of historical poetry, and I can't think of any poem like *Asterie*, either in word usage or content. Some of my poems nod obliquely to Gerard Manley Hopkins and his non-standard word usage, but other than they are all mine. I am doing things no one has done before. *No one*. If you can't see that, you just aren't looking.

For example, my third entry

Death is an Otter

Death is an otter
swimming rings around the moon
river daughter writing runes around the sun

Life is a fish
gills wide in flight from webby paws
scaled son-of-stars, stippled child of middlenight

Death is a bear
dancing a buzzing whirlpool, fur fearless
and honeycomb drunk

Life is a bee
pollen-dusted in sexy flower hop
unaware of ursa dipping overhead

No rhymes, but this clearly isn't prose. It has full meter, meaning it is melodic and can be scanned. It isn't in traditional meter, strict iambic or trochaic, for example. Hopkins' readers would say it is **sprung** rhythm. But the point is it *has* a rhythm. It flows. That is because I was paying attention to rhythm all along. And the lines are cut for a reason. They aren't cut willy-nilly, like modern non-poetry, they are cut with full intent. The whole poem is *shaped*, as a whole and in all parts.

You may think the subject matter is arcane, but compared to modern non-poetry it is actually very straightforward. No, it isn't banal. It isn't about some crap you might have seen on the evening news, but it has a clear meaning, if you want to get it. As a hint, read it like a dream, not like the newspaper or the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

I may be told that it is unseemly to review or promote your own poetry. Frankly, I agree, which is why I haven't done it before. I have been waiting for decades for someone else to see what is clearly there, and do this for me. But they haven't, and I can see that they aren't going to. So I guess I can either kill myself or teach people how to think again. As you know, I have chosen the latter. In many fields I have chosen to expose all the frauds and charlatans, the rich people pretending to be artists and scientists and historians. But I don't just destroy Modernism, I try to rebuild something in its place, sometimes by bringing back the best parts of classicism, sometimes by inventing new things myself.

I have briefly reviewed my own work to give a hint to others, I suppose; but also to show how it is done. This is what they used to teach in schools, and should again. Those who want to be real poets instead of fake poets may learn something from what I said above, so I don't apologize for it. I am not young anymore, and who knows how long a life is. If I have something to say, I should just say it. Those who are offended can go elsewhere. But some are still keen to learn, and for them I may have said too little. Amazingly, I have been told that in emails. Difficult to believe that anyone thinks I have said too little on any subject, I admit, but there it is.