

STILL LIFE WITH POEM

CONTEMPORARY NATURES MORTES IN VERSE



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AN INTIMACY WITH THE THINGS OF THE WORLD

INTRODUCTION BY JEHANNE DUBROW

Still Life with Poem started with a conversation on Facebook, that twenty-first-century exhibition of snapshots of pets on couches, pictures of people's lunches and dinners and cupcakes topped with birthday candles. A friend posted a request for recommendations: poems about or in the form of still life paintings. Reading through the discussion online, only a few came to mind. Wallace Stevens's "Study of Two Pears." Philip Larkin's "Home is so Sad." Pablo Neruda's odes to tunas, lemons, artichokes.

For weeks after the discussion had disappeared from my Facebook feed, I kept wondering why there weren't more examples. A poem too is life stilled—it seemed to me—objects arranged on the page for the purpose of beauty or story or allegory. I kept thinking about Mark Doty's observation in *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*:

I have felt the energy and life of the painting's will; I have been held there, instructed. And the overall effect, the result of looking and looking into its brimming surface as long as I could look, is love, by which I mean a sense of tenderness toward experience, of being held within an intimacy with the things of the world.

What new intimacies, I wondered, could poets create just by being encouraged to look and to look into? And so I approached my coeditor, Lindsay Lusby, with an idea. While our first anthology, *The Book of Scented Things*, had examined one of the more underprivileged senses, that

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of smell, *Still Life with Poem* would focus instead on sight, perhaps the sense that poets use most frequently when constructing images. With *The Book of Scented Things*, we had asked contributors to write poems in response to individually selected vials of perfume. This time, we would ask contributors to construct their own still lifes and to write poems inspired by these fixed scenes.

With a tradition that can be traced to Pompeii, the genre of the still life or *nature morte* has most often been used since the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as a vehicle for symbolism and metaphor, objects serving as stand-ins for philosophical ideas, religious principles, or moralizing messages. In this way, the still life can be seen as an embodiment of the creative writing dictum *show, don't tell*; concrete, tangible things are used to express abstract concepts by evoking the five senses. The still life paintings we've all seen in museums are cluttered with flowers, fruits, dead animals, skulls, maps, weapons, playing cards. There are banquets, breakfasts, and pantries, the stuff of kitchens and markets. There is ostentation and abundance. Some arrangements urge moderation in the viewer: *Vanitas* pictures warn that earthly possessions are transient, fruit going rotten in the bowl, petals dropping from a plucked rose. The painter's technique of *trompe-l'œil* deceives us. How persuasive and three-dimensional the violin seems, hanging from a nail by a string, a stained piece of sheet music wedged behind the instrument.

We gave our contributors simple instructions: *Your poem should not be based on a preexisting painting or photograph but on an original still life that you construct (or imagine) yourself.* The choice of objects, the subject matter—we left entirely up to each poet. A still life poem, we explained,

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could function as ekphrasis or *ars poetica*, as meditation on love or on the impermanence of life (*omnia mors aequat*), as cabinet of curiosity, as scientific study, as found art. We encouraged contributors to take photographs of their assemblages. *Send them to us*, we said.

The poems that we received create meaning through the juxtaposition of objects, the shapes they form, the shadows. They make stories out of things placed on a neutral, flat surface, positioning the bottle of pills or the succulent plant within the frame of language. These poems speak to one of the great problems of still lifes, which art historian Norman Bryson summarizes in *Looking at the Overlooked*:

[S]till life is the world minus its narratives or, better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest. . . . The law of narrative is one of change: characters move from episode to episode, from ignorance to knowledge, from high estate to low or from low to high. Its generative principle is one of discontinuity: where states are continuous, homeostatic, narrative is helpless. But still life pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs: there is wholesale eviction of the Event.

Poets are accustomed to working at the level of material existence—red wheelbarrows, for instance, plums stolen from an icebox—and to finding some small chronicle even in the ordinary. Writing about the work of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, art critic Robert Hughes argues that “[t]he props of his still lifes, which were also the normal appurtenances of his home life, become like familiar faces: the patriarchal mass of his copper water-urn, raised on

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a squat tripod; a white teapot with a rakish finial; the painted china that signified his growing prosperity..." The same transformation may occur in poetry, objects made characters, first observed and described, then later serving as opportunities for self-reflection and revelation.

The great risk of *Still Life with Poem* was that we would gather together texts crowded as tables at a yard sale, crammed with tchotchkes, bric-a-brac, knickknacks gathering dust. In *How Poets See the World*, Willard Spiegelman warns that "[w]hen language attempts to imitate or reproduce still life and to use description with no suggestion of action or its possibility, it is doomed to failure." Instead, we received poems that use the still life to engage with our current political moment, speaking with the urgent, anxious gestures of protest. We were sent thoughts about art and art-making, domestic scenes, memories, anxieties about the body and desire, meditations on faith, engagements with landscape both urban and rural, and of course elegies, because what is a still life if not a collection of things that simultaneously resist death and acknowledge its crumbling presence?

In compiling *Still Life with Poem*, we worried not only about the need for narrative and for movement but also about a concern that scholar Hanneke Grootenboer raises in *The Rhetoric of Perspective*:

Still lifes in general...possess the rare quality of raising the issue of the nature of their own representation. Their combination of a high level of lifelikeness, an absence of narrative, a shallow space, and an almost serene silence have filled scholars and writers throughout the ages with mixed feelings of admiration and

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irritation—admiration because of the artist's virtuosity in rendering a nearly perfect image of reality, and irritation because the image has nothing more to offer than a meticulously painted recording of meaningless daily life objects. Such discussions of still lifes offer us interesting examples of how they have confronted scholars with the simple yet disturbing question of what still lifes are “about.”

Faced both with constructing still lifes and with representing them through words, our contributors too were forced to confront the about-ness of this art form. Many used the intimacy of a first-person voice to create depth in the composition's “shallow space,” the autobiographical endowing “meaningless daily life objects” with meaning. Again, this is often the work of poetry. To observe. To describe. To transform description into a chance for story and discovery.

As with *The Book of Scented Things*, *Still Life with Poem* is a project of the Literary House Press: the publishing arm of the Rose O'Neill Literary House, a center dedicated to the “articulated word” at Washington College. Lindsay and I oversaw all stages of the book's production, but we also turned to Julie Armstrong for assistance with its marketing and promotion. Caroline Harvey, the 2016 Literary House Press Intern, worked closely with all of the contributors, proofing each poem in the anthology. Jennifer Clarvoe, who contributed a poem to the anthology, also took the striking still life photograph that is featured on the book's cover.

Still Life with Poem is itself a compendium of made things, a still life of still lifes. It's a project that owes its existence

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to poets interested in finding the stories that begin with the act of looking. They were willing to identify objects, to arrange them in evocative rows and clusters, and to write poems that suggest the narrative contained in the ordinary bottle of hot sauce, the bag of ripe mangoes, the spider perched on the skin of a drum.