



The Tunnel: Selected Poems

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This prized collection of Russell Edson's prose poems, featuring his own favorites from seven prior collections, constitutes some of the most original American art of this century. This is the book of choice for both new and committed fans of this imaginative poet.

The Tunnel: Selected Poems Details

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Glenn Russell says

Never having done any creative writing as an adult, I took my first writing course many years ago, back when I was in my late thirties. I was given conventional short stories and poems as models but nothing really clicked with me, that is, I knew I wanted to write but wasn't really inspired by those conventional ways of writing.

Then one day whilst visiting a library in downtown Philadelphia, I came across an anthology called *The Anti-Story* - a collection of various stories that were reactions against conventional form. One type of anti-story was *Against Length* and featured the following piece by author Russell Edson:

FATHER, FATHER, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

A man straddling the apex of his roof cries, giddyup. The house rears up on its back porch and all its bricks fall apart and the house crashes to the ground.

His wife cries from the rubble, father, father, what have you done?

The experience of reading this short piece of fiction was so powerful it almost put me on my knees. I knew immediately that this was it – the type of writing for me.

I spent the next eight years writing Russell Edson-style micro-fiction. Most fortunately, editors of a number of little magazines were more than happy to publish my work. And each time I had one of my books of micro-fiction published, I sent a copy to Russell Edson as a way of saying "thank you." Russell was kind enough to, in turn, send a letter back to me each time, a letter in the form of a prose poem, that is!

Anyway, I mention this as a way of encouraging readers who ordinarily shy away from poetry to check out Russell Edson. Surreal, fanciful, bizarre, enigmatic. And *The Tunnel*, a collection from seven different Edson books, is a treasure.

Here are two poems from the collection:

A PERFORMANCE AT HOG THEATER

There was once a hog theater where hogs performed as men, had men been hogs.

One hog said, I will be a hog in a field which has found a mouse which is being eaten by the same hog which is in the field and which has found the mouse, which I am performing as my contribution to the performer's art.

Oh let's just be hogs, cried an old hog.

And so the hogs streamed out of the theater crying,
only hogs, only hogs . . .

THE REASON WHY THE CLOSET-MAN IS NEVER SAD

This is the house of the closet-man. There are no rooms,
just hallways and closets.

Things happen in rooms. He does not like things to
happen . . . Closets, you take things out of closets,
you put things into closets, and nothing happens . . .

Why do you have such a strange house?

I am the closet-man, I am either going or coming, and I
am never sad.

But why do you have such a strange house?

I am never sad . . .

Since I mentioned how Russell inspired me to write micro-fiction, here's one of mine I'd like to share:

OH HOW TIME FLIES

A girl wearing a ruffled pink dress and sneakers hops on a merry-go-round and mounts what she thinks is a horse but is actually a sewing machine. She stretches her legs until her toes barely touch the throat plate.

Perplexed, sensing something woefully wrong, she peers down at all the dials: buttonhole dial, stitch-width dial, stitch-control dial, stitch-pattern dial, reverse-stitch dial.

A bell rings and the merry-go-round goes round, lights flashing, organ music playing, horses and needle bobbing. Round and round she goes until her hands and legs swell with veins, her face puckers with wrinkles, and all her hair turns silvery gray.

Kevin says

If Gary Larson was a poet . . .

Peter Landau says

Apes, clouds, cows, people, they all have a story to tell. Who's to say anyone should understand it? As long

as it makes sense in a nonsensical way; as long as it fits together; as long as its written by Russell Edson. This collection of about 20 years of poetic poems that read like narrative short-short stories, but are not prose because prose isn't poetry and this is poetry: condensed, original language that often feels as if it's missing a word, a sentence, even a paragraph, and yet is complete, sturdy like granite, and just as heavy. Funny, too. Humor is the stepchild of art, but here the disenfranchised are given the keys to the kingdom. When they open up the door we, as readers, are lucky to have a peek inside and see that things are more bizarre, wonderful and moving than truth.

Lisa says

I've been thinking of Edson since I started rereading Natalie Goldberg's "Writing Down the Bones" (-->see Lisapedia entry for "Desperate Writers Caught in Throes of MFA Program). Goldberg quotes an Edson poem about a toilet sliding into the living room, demanding to be loved. His pieces all have that kind of internal logic it's impossible to argue with. There *has been* undeniable intimacy with the commode; *why* is it so impossible to love it?

The toilet leaves, flushing with grief...

WHAT IS THERE NOT TO LOVE (about poetry like that)

?

Carmen says

Different poems. One I really liked...

The Fall

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.

Sophie says

"The red mustache which you constantly refer to is the sign of office, /the change of gender, the self inflicted blow, the secondary hair of my my /manhood, the end of my menopause, the return to maidenhood, the /cerebral menses from my nose instead of my under part..., she said." -A Red Mustache

"This is the land of vibrating velvet. Eating itself. Forming itself. This is /the land of death. Endless. Absurd." -Little Dead Man

"What if once on the other side of the door there remains only the ur-/gency to use the door again?" -A Child Walking Out Of a Cow's Behind

"A man sleeps back into a /rock as it is better for a rock in a garden than a man inside himself trembling in red darkness." -The Man Rock

"Why to be alone. You are pretty are you not/you are as pretty as you /are not, or does that make sense. /You are not pretty, that is how you can be alone. And then you are /pretty like fungus and alga, you are no one without some one, in theory /alone." -Mr. Brain

"One tries to concentrate on the small effects which try to speak in a /quiet way, small scenes like the corner of a room arranging itself to /speak in symbol with its little table flanked by a meaningful shadow and /some small colonies of dust." -Signs

"The old man said to his wife, will you make him stop counting, be-/cause it's like having bugs crawling on everything. /I can't, because he do it in his head where I can't make him stop. He do /it like in secret, said the old woman." -One Two Three, One Two Three

"Dear horizontal place, I do not wish to be a rug. Do not pull at the dif-/ficult head, this teetering bulb of dread and dream..." -The Floor

"Do you see how the china is full of intestinal matter?" -Through Dream and Suppertime

"One feels that things are about to change. I have felt this all my life. It /is a readiness that robs every act of meaning, making every situation ob-/solete, putting the present into the past. /A man is a series of objects placed in a box, the sound of a train, /the sounds of his own liquids trickling through the intimate brooks of /his body, a certain number of bones, tree shadows that fall through the /flesh as nerve patterns, or blood vessels; pourings, exchanges, discon-/nections..." -The Dainty One

"The man thinks the monkey too good to waste, even if there is only /enough monkey to make one boot. /And so he has one boot made, and calls this his monkey-boot." -The Hemorrhoid Epidemic

"The stunt man keeps asking, now? as he flips and falls on his head." -Making a Movie

"The singing by the river turns out to be a radio plugging into the mouth /of a corpse. /In a nearby field a butterfly is being folded up by a preying mantis into /a small bright package." -How Things Will Be

"Do you believe in evolution, oh, thing of easy answers? /Do you believe Darwin was descended from a thing more jaw than /head?" -Darwin Descending

Alvokun says

I am still dazzled by Russell Edson's capability to conceive alternative realities, apparently created simply by observing and twisting the most uneventful and trivial side of life. Usually governed by madness and absurdity, these parallel worlds end up being certainly much more eventful than what might be initially expected from the ordinary situations triggering the insanity. Concurrently, the surrealistic nuances of some of the events taking place in the poems provide the 'realms' envisaged by the author with an obscure hue, through which the remotest hidden corners of the human mind are explored in a way.

This statement may aspire to be truthful, though, only if we take for granted that it is 'poetry' how this author's production ought to be called, which is something definitely difficult to agree on. Personally, I do not mind how it is labelled whatsoever: however reassuring pigeonholing these texts may be, the truth is that trying to classify them according to their formal presentation is indeed not very far from splitting hairs. I consider there should not be a very strong urge to categorize Edson's literary work in this regard, because its charm is actually found on its content rather than on its form; the latter is not but a mere means facilitating the transmission of ideas located beyond the constraints of a book page. Anyway, as it will not be me that deny how appealing attempting to categorize these texts is, I suggest to opt, if a single label must be chosen, for the most common name they have been given: 'prose poetry'. To my mind, the hybridism of this tag does indeed reconcile the non-poetic formal structure of all the Edson's texts with the no less conspicuous poetic tone that lies beneath some –or most– of them.

Leaving –superfluous– classifications aside, it is doubtlessly in the occurrences of Edson's 'prose poems' where they reach their true dimension: a woman fighting tooth and nail against a tree, a father who suddenly happens to be an ox and lives as such at home, another woman who offers herself to be cooked... All the same, whereas some of them are directly built around either the mental derangement of the characters or around the apparent irrationality of the events, other texts –probably a minority within the collection, but not at all few in number– do contain a noticeable poetic essence that endows the compilation with a cosmic and ethereal touch, alien to the distorted routine character of the situations mentioned above. Nevertheless, even if we acknowledge the coexistence of two types of 'ecosystems of ideas' within the selection, there will still be only one certainty: Russell Edson's universes are literary ambrosia for the reader who is open-minded enough to expect what cannot be expected.

Aún estoy asombrado por la capacidad de Russell Edson para concebir realidades alternativas, aparentemente creadas mediante la simple observación y posterior torsión del lado más aburrido y trivial de la vida. Normalmente gobernados por la demencia y la absurdez, estos mundos paralelos terminan siendo mucho más azarosos de lo que en un principio cabría esperar de las situaciones ordinarias que terminan desencadenando la locura. Al mismo tiempo, los matices surrealistas de algunos de los acontecimientos que tienen lugar en los poemas tintan de oscuro los 'reinos' imaginados por el autor, explorando así, en cierto sentido, los recovecos más recónditos de la mente humana.

Este comentario puede aspirar a ser cierto, no obstante, solo si damos por hecho que es ‘poesía’ el nombre que corresponde darle a la producción de este autor; algo en lo que es sin duda difícil ponerse de acuerdo. Personalmente, no me importa en absoluto cómo se la etiquete: por muy reconfortante que pueda resultar encasillar estos textos, lo cierto es que intentar clasificarlos atendiendo a su presentación formal no queda demasiado lejos de lo bizantino. Considero que no debería haber una necesidad demasiado grande de categorizar la obra literaria de Edson en este sentido, porque su encanto radica, de hecho, en su contenido más que en su forma; esta última no deja de ser un mero medio que facilita la transmisión de unas ideas ubicadas más allá de los límites de la página de un libro. En cualquier caso, como no seré yo quien niegue lo atrayente que resulta intentar categorizar estos textos, sugiero optar, si tenemos que quedarnos con una sola etiqueta, por el nombre más común que se les ha dado: ‘poesía en prosa’. Para mi gusto, el hibridismo de esta etiqueta concilia la estructura formal no poética que poseen los textos de Edson con el no menos notorio tono poético que subyace en algunos –o muchos– de ellos.

Clasificaciones –superfluas– al margen, es sin duda en los acontecimientos de los ‘poemas en prosa’ de Edson donde estos alcanzan su verdadera dimensión: una mujer que lucha encarnizadamente contra un árbol, un padre que resulta ser un buey y vive como tal en casa, otra mujer que se ofrece a sí misma para que la cocinen... Aun con todo, mientras que algunos están contruidos directamente en torno al desequilibrio mental de los personajes o a la aparente irracionalidad de los sucesos, otros textos –probablemente una minoría en la colección, pero ni mucho menos pocos en número– sí que contienen una esencia poética definida que dota a la recopilación de un toque cósmico y etéreo, ajeno a la cotidianidad deformada de las situaciones mencionadas arriba. Aun con todo, incluso si reconocemos la coexistencia de dos tipos de ‘ecosistemas de ideas’ dentro de la selección, seguirá habiendo una única certeza: los universos de Russell Edson son ambrosía literaria para el lector que sea lo suficientemente amplio de miras como para esperar lo inesperable.

Brian Foley says

Emily's mom loves this book and showed it to her as a kid.
I like to think about kids reading this.

Steven says

Usually when reading a poet’s selected work, especially one spanning almost twenty years, it is rare to see much consistency in tone, subject matter and form. Instead, one can typically trace threads of influence throughout a career and observe how the poet has shifted through different phases. Russell Edson’s selected poems are the exception to this rule. Since his first volume was published in 1964, Edson has satirically skewered through the territory of human evolution, Freudian psychology and human logic, using the surrealist prose poem form first made famous by French poets such as Frances Pongé. However, because of this consistency, I found it difficult to maintain my attention through a collection this long, as once his “game” (so to speak) is figured out, only the poems that somehow expose or connect to actual human emotion, behavior or logic are engaging and therefore memorable. The other pieces read like funny or gross humor; once the punch line is revealed, they lose their potency. In spite of this, one never feels in the presence of a simple mind at work; the poems that are poignant are deeply so and the others are still impeccably constructed, with much attention paid to aural devices (most notably alliteration and repetition) and the juxtaposition of interesting, bizarre images. Because of this craft work, I found it valuable to read

through the entire collection and see how well these elements can carry a poem.

s.penkevich says

'The head is death with hair upon it. Also it is a vehicle upon which it is itself to ride through dream and supertime.'

The Tunnel, the selected poems of Russell Edson (1935-2014), is the most refreshing collection of 'poetry' that I have encountered in a long time. To call it *brehtaking* would invoke the right ideas but would also miss the mark by miles—reading Edson is less like losing your breath in beauty and more like being given new lungs and a new atmosphere in which to breath. It is like seeing a strange and alien world that is also unmistakably your own and registering near-nonsense as the most fit method of discussing the abstractions of reality. It would be easy to recommend Edson's work as a sadistic amalgamation of the elliptical surrealism and playfulness found in James Tate and Charles Simic, but Edson has a voice and style distinctly his own that more categorizes him alongside these wonderful poets rather than 'of them'¹ Edson tends to defy classification, as is pointed out in the indispensable article about him published in *The Believer* by Sarah Manguso. One might refer to Edson as surreal prose poetry, yet in articles he scorned the usage of those signifiers. As to surrealism, Edson says '*why do we have to be surrealists? Brenton didn't invent our imagination.*'² Edson also disliked the term 'prose poem' (though I am glad to see the prose poem talked about as an accepted idea; I recall a classroom with an overturned chair as I stood shouting at several of my peers who refused to accept prose poetry as anything other than scraps of writing that were of no benefit to literature. I lost the argument.) seeing it as too artificial a term for a subject matter that truly has no defined form: '*the prose poem has yet to yield up a method.*' This is all a circuitous rambling that should sum itself up that Edson's poetry is something to come to on its own terms, as to attempt to classify, cage and give shape to it would miss the ghostlike quality and ethereal, haunting beauty of the tiny tales he spins in each. They are like short fables, unsettling and elusive, managing to avoid direct discussion by residing in eternal metaphor to discuss the darker underbellies of existence and humanity. Apes, for example, make a frequent appearance, often as a symbol of the wild, untamed and uncivilized impulses in all of us, such as when a wife fornicates with an ape before bashing his brains out, shoving him in an over and serving him for dinner—a pretty ribbon tied carefully around his genitals. The imagery is bizarre, but not for the sake of the weird but for the sake of understanding the abstract through its own devices. Edson's work may seem nonsensical, bizarre and so removed from the standards of anything we have taken comfort in, yet it registers on all the proper emotional and intellectual levels as if coming in sideways and overtaking us like a mist rather than a head-on assault of logical and comprehensible teachings. *The Tunnel* is a wild, untamed ride through a frighteningly wasteland of the real, where nothing is as it seems. It is a ride surely not to be missed.

4.5/5

¹Russell Edson and Charles Simic—my personal favorite poet—were in fact good friends. Simic published a wonderful eulogy of sorts for his friends Edson and Bill Knott in the *New York Review of Books*, in which he says of Edson '*The real surprise comes when we realize that what we are reading is not the work of a jokester, but of a satirist and a serious thinker.*' This does well to summarize the playfulness found in Edson. In *The Tunnel* there are a few poems dedicated to James Tate and Simic (as well as William Carlos Williams, Donald Hall and more). The second poem to Simic is particularly intriguing:

With Sincerest Regrets

Like a monstrous snail a toilet slides into a living room on a track of wet, demanding to be loved.

It is impossible, and we tender our sincerest regrets. In the book of the heart there is no

mention made of plumbing.

And though we have spent out intimacy many times with you, you belong to an unfortunate reference, which we would rather not embrace...

The toilet slides away on another track of wet...

The work is humorous and dark, probing at the aspects of life that we must all accept as reality but do not discuss, the toilet working as a wonderful metaphor here. However, the real joy is in the line '*In the book of the heart there is no mention made of plumbing*, a line with all the humor, wit, cadence and near-distinctness of Simic's writing that it made me want to flip through all his books as it seemed it *must* have come from him somewhere. It should also be noted that the closest resemblance to *The Tunnel* that I've read is Simic's *The World Doesn't End* (which is, in fact, dedicated to Tate).

²André Breton (1896-1966), often considered a founder of surrealism, was a French writer and poet most known for his Manifestoes of Surrealism.

A Journey Through Moonlight

In sleep when an old man's body is no longer aware of its boundaries, and lies flattened by gravity like a mere wax in its bed...It drips down to the floor and moves there like a tear down a cheek...Under the back door into the silver meadow, like a pool of sperm, frosty under the moon, as if in his first nature, boneless and absurd.

The moon lifts him into its white field, a cloud shaped like an old man, porous with stars.

He floats through high dark branches, a corpse tangled in a tree on a river.

Sheep

They are in the house. They move like clouds over the floors.

They are in the bedrooms. They return from the cellar. They wander in the attic like balls of dust.

A man is sitting in the kitchen, his face in his hands. He is crying, his tears wetting through fingers.

The sheep baa and to him they gather, licking his hands for salt.

A ewe then sweetly offer herself in heat.

He turns her on her back, his face in the wool of her breast...

Killing the Ape

They were killing the ape with infinite care; not too much or it runs past dying and is born again.

Too little delivers a sick man covered with fur.

....Gently gently out of hell, the ape climbing out of the ape.

Antimatter

*On the other side of a mirror there's an inverse world,
where the insane go sane; where bones climb out of the
earth and recede to the first slime of love.*

And in the evening the sun is just rising.

*Lovers cry because they are a day younger, and soon
childhood robs them of their pleasure.*

*In such a world there is much sadness which, of course,
is joy.*

The Fall

*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.

secondwomn says

so why have i not read russell edson before? shit! i adored the style of these poems, especially the early ones. "A Love Letter" is gorgeous. "Fire is Not a Nice Guest" is brilliant. i'd describe edson's work as what might happen if salvador dali wrote russian folktales. i admit that the poems towards the end didn't carry the same crackling energy for me, they felt a bit more tired, less of a universe-in-a-waterdrop. at his best, though, edson packs a lot of insight about human nature and about the relationships between people, things, time, space, animals, ideas, landscape, everything into something compact and readable.

Jesse says

If it were easier to find Russell's individual books, this collection might not be a five-star item. The work included here spans about thirty years and you will doubtless favor some given time period over another (personally, I'm less moved by the earlier pieces). You have to dig around a little for Edson's best poems (and you'll be surprised by the extent to which they resemble the middling ones) but the work is well worth it. Once you've found some favorites, read them aloud to a lover. You'll laugh all night (that's the point, right?).

Marcus Mennes says

This book has an odd shape (8x8) and it juts out from my bookshelf, which is indicative of the irregular content within. Edson is an original, his prose poems operate on their own skewed internal logic, a grotesque/uncanny universe with pigeons the size of horses, electric monkeys, and women delivering toads out of their armpits...stuff a fourth grade kid might make up to gross out his kid sister. But I'm underselling Edson. His imagination is quite eclectic, and this is a collection of surprises, head scratchers and belly chuckles. Each "story" can be read in under a minute, and I think these bite-sized nuggets of absurdity must be good food for the psyche.

Lindsay says

Delightful, Kharms-esque, walking the fine line between flash fiction and prose poetry (and often, in my estimation, crossing it)... Perhaps overly fond of ellipses... Although perhaps those were fashionable in previous decades... I personally prefer sentences to do their own work, without the gooey weirdness of ellipses...

Bud Smith says

My friend Joey said to read this and I said I didn't want to. But I read the book after all. And they all lived happily ever after. Except Russell Edson probably because all writers suffer infinitely even if you love their book, ya feel me?
