

An interview with Walter Bargaen, first poet laureate of Missouri, author of *The Feast: Prose Poem Sequences*

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Interviewed by Karen I. Johnson

Q. Another collection of your poetry, The Feast, has just been published. In this volume, the poems are described as prose poem sequences. How would you define prose poem sequences?

A. Originally, I coined the work “povella” for the prose poem sequence, feeling that it is something more than a series of prose poems. The “povella” has the energy, the rhythm, and the imagery of poetry and, at the same time, the narrative thread and characters of a novella, even if the narrative is held together by a tenuous thread, such as a repeating image. Well, I quickly tired of the frown and audible grunt when I mentioned the word “povella” to friends, so it’s a “prose poem sequence.”

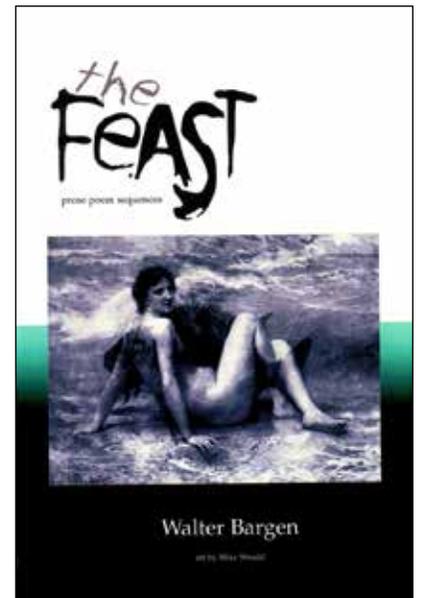
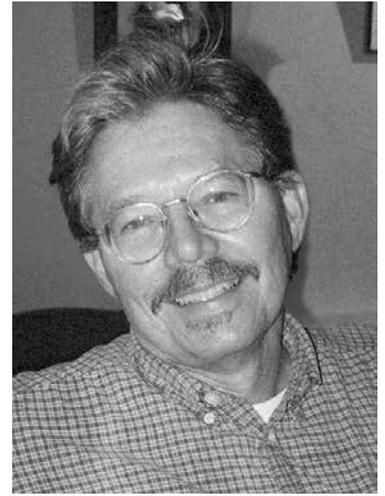
In the late 1960s and early 70s, poets were interested in the way poems sounded. They were trying in their poems to pick up and improvise on the sound patterns of ordinary speech. A way to catch that was to eliminate punctuation and capital letters—both late additions to the art of writing—and focus on the plain words and how you lay them out in a line and how that changes the rhythm and the emphasis of those words. I am comfortable with that—as a way of writing and of reading my poems.

Q. In earlier poetry collections you have written poems in the more traditional style of verse poetry. Do you still write verse poetry and why did you begin writing paragraphed or prose poetry? Finally, how has your prose poetry been received?

A. I tell myself, “Just write it anyway that I can! Don’t worry about form until later.” I continue to write both verse and prose poems. Sometimes when a prose poem is floundering, I rewrite it as verse, and it’s better in that form. The reverse process of verse into prose poem, also works to clarify what’s working in the writing and what’s not. It’s not a blunt line that demarcates the difference between verse and the prose poem. The prose poem can use all the craft and skill of verse except end rhyme and strictly measured lines. Parts of *The Feast* have appeared in the *Georgia Review* and the editors labeled it fiction while what was published in *Prairie Schooner* was listed as poetry. I don’t care what others call it, I like writing it.

Q. You have been described as a prolific writer, at one time writing a poem every day but later being content with perfecting one poem a week. Do you still produce a finished poem a week and where do you find your inspiration?

A. It might sound a little glib, but maybe I don’t know what a finished poem is. I lean toward the school that a poem is never finished, it’s just abandoned. Years later I can read a poem, see things that I want to change, e.g., images, ideas, line breaks. Of course, I want to abandon a poem in the best condition possible. I change over time and my perception of the poem also changes, hence endless revision. I sometimes worry that I spend more time revising than writing new poems. Perhaps revising a poem makes the poem new, but it’s not as satisfying as throwing myself into new writing and surprising myself with what I discover. Unfortunately, I’ve fallen off the poem a day schedule. I



should try to get back to it. Writing is a kind of centering, a kind of meditation. I find it to be profoundly rewarding. Actually, I'm an addict. If I go too long, and so far that hasn't been longer than a week, I start to feel unsettled, nervous. I begin to feel that I'm not engaged, a disconnection is threatening my world, that I'm being passed by and I'm both failing myself and the world by not writing about it. I can't wait for inspiration. If I wait for inspiration, I stop writing and spend all my time waiting. Everyday is an inspiration for writing, and the best advice that I can give to any writer is to write daily.

Q. You describe one of your earlier volumes, The Body of Water, as the most musical. You describe another, At the Dead Center of Day, as the most topical. The current book, The Feast, deals with a variety of offerings, as any feast should. If you were to describe The Feast in a sentence or two, what would you say?

A. I wrote *The Feast* over a three month period in 1994. I was pretty much writing a page per day. Over the next ten years, while looking for a publisher, *The Feast* went through many revisions and reorganizations. It became my introduction to writing the prose poem, though I'd been an admirer of the form since I'd read *Another Republic* edited by Simic and Strand in the late '70s. In Thomas Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he points out that often when a scientist switches fields of study, say quantum physics to botany, he or she often make discoveries that revolutionize their new field. I think that happens when a writer moves from one form or genre to another. Adopting the prose poem, allowed me to think and write more openly and broadly, and to extend and sustain a subject or object of attention more that I could in a verse poem.

Q. The Feast is divided into eight sections. Tell me about the structures of these sections and how they are connected.

A. Retelling the Biblical tale of Jonah swallowed by a great fish became the underlying organizing principle of *The Feast*. The book begins with "Belly of the Beast," where a modern day Jonah lives, if not literally then psychologically inside a great fish. Jonah is swallowed by life. The book ends with "Sea Sea Rider," where Jonah is still in intimate contact, literally and figuratively, with the sea, but in more psychologically tormented ways. Between the beginning and ending sections, Jonah surfaces and disappears. The two sections that are farthest from Jonah, "Baltic Days and Shadows of Troy," both have the sea in the fore-and background.

Q. You have chosen five epigraphs for the entire book and have titled them "Some Doubts." Do you consider the epigraphs an important part of this collection? What is the process you use to select epigraphs?

A. In a way, "Some Doubts" is a found poem. Over the years of revision, these quotations most addressed the concerns of the book. They are like road signs giving directions to the reader about how fast and deep he or she will be traveling. I have "found" and placed this type of poem at the beginning of a number of my books. I think these poems set the tone for what follows.

Q. In the collection's first section, "Belly of the Beast," the focus of all nine poems is the Biblical story of Jonah. You allow your readers to extend their field of vision by describing Jonah's living conditions within his rib-roofed house and by bringing Jonah to modern shores before he is disgorged by the fish. During his time in the fish's belly, Jonah passes through many events in history and encounters a major figure from Greek mythology. How did you happen to write about Jonah and what is the significance of the inclusion of modern events and mixing mythology with a Bible story?

A. I have a propensity, an obsession, to write about water. There is what I call my "water" trilogy that just recently was reissued under one cover as *The Body of Water*. One day the story of Jonah came to mind, I started writing, and "Belly of the Beast" was the result. One advantage to writing about historical figures, such as Jonah or Odysseus, is that the writing becomes quickly layered. The characters come with a recognized story with established expectations that the writer can carry along or work against. It also opens up unexpected possibilities that are magnified by combining the old story with a new one. A famous recent example of this would be *The Hours* based on *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.

Q. In two later sections of the book, "Nine Lives on the Western Front and Unholy Rooms," we meet Jonah again. He is no longer in the belly of the beast. Tell me about the Jonah in these poems.

A. In “Nine Lives on the Western Front” Jonah is telescoped through time from his childhood to his figurative death in a shower where water turns to hair and sand. Picking up on the idea that cats have nine lives, there are nine sections that lean heavily on the metaphor of war. Jonah’s life is one of conflict. The “Unholy Rooms” are the places where Jonah finds himself doubting who is.

Q. Your focus is on mythology in the section, “Shadows of Troy.” These poems are not only titled but they are also divided into sixteen books, following the pattern of The Iliad and The Odyssey. Again, you have mixed ancient and modern times. In the first book a man studies a museum diorama so intensely that he becomes a part of the display. Was such a visit to a museum the inspiration for these poems or was there other inspiration?

A. Yes, actually it was a visit to a museum and studying a diorama that inspired “Shadows of Troy.” After the initial museum experience, Odysseus came to mind, and then the fractured telling of a modern day journey that does not end in a return home but sadly at the edge of an abyss.

Q. References to Greek mythology, ancient Greece, and landmarks in Greece are prominent throughout the collection. Other poets have used mythology as a theme for their writing. For you, what is the allure of mythological figures and what can we learn from them?

A. I want to say “sometimes,” then “most of the time,” and finally “never”-we just don’t seem to learn very much from history and from our mistakes. Humanity stumbles through life befuddled. Returning to earlier texts and giving them a modern setting highlights how we are repeating ourselves with little intervening progress to show for the passing eons. As I mentioned before, writing about a recognized story has many advantages.

Q. In your poems, you relocate landmarks. For example, in “Lost Crew” you have placed Mount Parnassus, a Greek mountain of importance in mythology, in the Sangre de Cristo mountains in New Mexico. Tell me not only about this one example but about the technique of relocation of places and events from one era into a poem about an entirely different place or time.

A. If there is a technique here, perhaps it’s similar to how a good metaphor works. It’s not saying that the Sangre de Cristo Mountains are like Mount Parnassus, but that they are Mount Parnassus, or, at the least, that the latter is found there. Also, it’s a great way to dislocate a reader’s expectations and cause them to see a landscape, a geography, entirely differently. After all, aren’t poets supposed to make it new (Pound)? More concisely, I relocate to dislocate to reinvigorate to discover new geographies of mind and soul.

Q. Another characteristic of your poems are threads woven throughout many poems. Sometimes these threads are found only in one section of the book. Other times, the threads continue through poems in different sections, much like the threads or themes of a novel. One thread that traverses sections are two earrings, one of a man with a crooked penis and one of a woman with one leg. The earrings first appear in the poem, “Night Elegies.” They resurface much later in the book in the poem “Pain in the Neck” and then the earrings become real in “Triathlon.” What is it about these threads or themes that bring you back to them?

A. The earrings represent that internal dialogue that most of us have between the feminine and masculine sides of our personalities. For me, Rilke carries on that dialogue through most of his work and so you find him with the earrings and his name Rainer Marie in “Night Elegies.” Then in the section “Unholy Rooms,” Jonah picks up this dialogue, wearing the earrings in “Pain in the Neck.” It’s not an easy dialogue to have with one’s self. In “Triathlon,” the earrings become real persons while still wearing the earrings. Having the earrings appear through a number of the sections, enables *The Feast* to carry on a multiplicity of dialogues/ideas simultaneously, and also it creates a more complex greater sinewed whole.

Q. The section, “Baltic Days,” gathers poems about philosophers. Although the subject is serious, I find humor in your treatment of the subject and those who espouse it. As a student of philosophy, how would you describe your approach to the subject?

A. Sometimes I think my Achilles heel as a writer is wanting too much to please and make people laugh. When you consider the tomes that Heidegger, Hegel, Wittgenstein, et. al., wrote, so weighty, so serious, and so underread. In most of “Baltic Days,” I tried taking one of their ideas and worked/played it to its irrational conclusion, looking to discover an even greater sense. The titles of many of the pieces are plays on the titles of their books, such as, “Being Its Time” is really Heidegger’s “Being and Time,” and “Twilight of the Dogs” is Nietzsche’s “Twilight of the Gods.”

Q. Finally, we get to the section that is the book's namesake, "The Feast." Would it be accurate to say that the poems in this section deal with relationships and sensual feasts?

A. Can't I hide behind the table that appears in each of the poems? Yes, it is about the difficulty of relationships. In "Giant Dirty Trick," the table is first a door, then a bridge, then a window, which is the opening of section "The Feast." The table is unstable, the two people around it can't ever be certain about the stability of their relationship. In "Garden of Delights," the garden becomes the table from which they feast on each other, which ends that section.

Q. What is your next project? You have written a water trilogy. Are there any specific topics you are writing about now?

A. One of my problems is that I have too many manuscripts, which are my projects that I keep jumping back and forth between. *Remedies for Vertigo* is forty five poems looking at flight is as many ways as I have thought of to write. *West of West* is an attempt at demythologizing the West only to remythologize it in its modern neglect and decadence. *Spared Nothing* and *Trouble Behind Glass Doors*, are two versed manuscripts that are all finished as far as I finish anything, but have not found publishers. I just finished another manuscript of prose poems, *Theban Traffic*, which is about Stella and Jake living in contemporary society but with the tragedy of Thebes hanging over them. There's something of *The Feast* in it.

Q. As a follow-up to an earlier question, in the epigraphs that comprise the "found" poem, you have included a portion of a poem by C. P. Cavafy. My research suggests he is somewhat obscure and his poetry, written in Greek, was not published until after his death. So my questions are: How Cavafy? Why Cavafy? And finally, what road sign does this particular refrain provide the reader?

A. I'm not sure that he's anymore obscure than the great majority of living poets. In fact, I thought that there a resurgence of interest in his work. I discovered on October 7, 1994, (The receipt was in the book.) the Keeley and Sherrard translation of Cavafy's collected poems around the time that I was writing the first draft of *The Feast*. I read individual poems previously and knew that I liked his work. One element of his style that I love is his ability to create a mythic world and write about it as if it exists in the present. In the lines, and I put it to my lips/and kept it there a long while-/the blood against my lips . . . Cavafy is holding bandages removed from a wound, and it's as close to love as he can get in the relationship. Perhaps I should also have included: "Wise as you will have become, so full of experience, you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean." C.P. Cavafy

Q. How did a person obsessed with writing about water happen to settle in the landlocked Midwest?

A. I don't know. Or I could claim that it's part my myth to rise out of the land and journey to the sea. Or maybe it's the separation from the sea that generates the haunting and longing that drives my writing. Or that ninety percent of the Earth is covered by water; and there's no escaping its shaping influences, so I'm not really landlocked, my imagination won't allow that. Or the quotidian, I grew up in the military and this is where I was dropped off.