

THE WORLD
IS GOD'S
LANGUAGE

Prose Poems

Dane Cervine



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P R E F A C E

I would like to acknowledge my debt to Gary Young, the prose-poem maestro living in Santa Cruz, California. His pioneering work has helped to shape a Japanese-style short form, a kind of blended American haiku and *haibun* in prose-poem format, creating a new poetic focus for Western poets and readers.

Other influences on my work include Simone Weil, French philosopher, mystic, and political activist, who wrote “Attention is prayer”—a perspective that fills these pages—and the Buddhist teacher Kukai, who taught that the world is made up of a pictorial alphabet of image-letters (*monji*), spelling out the universe-body to any who would read it.

Poetry is a way of reading this world.

— Dane Cervine, Santa Cruz, California



Breast

It was in some obscure motel room, cheap, and I was young. But there it was, luminous orb falling from my mother's bra as she changed clothes in close quarters. I had no memory of infant days—swell of milk, suckle of nipple—no glimpse of the days yet to come. All I knew, in one moment, was how it begins: the shape of loss, its sweet curve.

Secret Lover

I wake wrapped in my own arms, hand having found bare shoulder under shirt. Embarrassed, I start to withdraw my limbs, but then linger in this embrace. Who else could love me from the inside out?

Mystery of the Locked Door

I remember Saturday morning cartoons, watching Coyote chase Roadrunner while my parent's bedroom door remained locked. But one morning, *surprise!* They emerge giggling, father chasing mother down the hallway, around the kitchen, with a huge zucchini squash held between his legs. So unusual in our house, but it made me happy: secret joy spilling out from behind the locked door.

Communion

My father was a preacher. At age five, I was too embarrassed to follow the others to the altar where he gave communion, but afterward my body crumpled into his as he soothed, brought me alone behind the choir benches, the organ, the towering cross, to the room where bits of bread remained on the silver tray, a few tiny shot glasses still filled with grape juice. I hungered for him, my remote father dressed in Sunday black—so when he pressed the crumbs into my hand, the purple stain to my lips, said, *This is my body, this is my blood*, I took him inside, believing.

Angels

Mother tells us of her drive home from the airport, a flat tire along the road—hints at feeling old, unsure. How two young Mexican men stopped, helped her change tires, refused any money. In her story, the disenfranchised watch over each other—like guardian angels who know what it means to fall.

The Unseen

My wife circles the winter pond in Madison, Indiana, having spent the day with her father in the adjacent nursing home. He knows his daughter, but grabs at thin air to touch a fruit tree, a dog, a tombstone no one else can see. marvels as she walks right through them. She tells me this as her words rise invisibly through the cold steam of her breath to travel via cell phone towers to my ear in California. Though I can't see her, I know she is there.

The World Is God's Language

—*Simone Weil*

Andi tells us how the best coffee in Bali comes from beans eaten by a fox, passed through undigested, roasted, sold at exorbitant prices. That the whole banana tree is used for food, baskets, prayers. Everything in Bali has both use and spirit. Even the careening motor scooters. At the curb, adorned with bamboo prayer baskets, filled with red hibiscus petals.

Sometimes the Gods Sing So Loud I Can't Hear

Green cicadas the size of thumbs announce the coming dusk with deafening sound in the trees near our balcony. Their small chests expand and contract rapidly, breast armor creating sound akin to immense electric saws. The cicadas loose their ear-splitting sound only when it is quiet—and always just before dark. I press my thumbs to both ears. God's music, deafening.

The Parable of St. Matthew Island

The Coast Guard brought twenty-nine reindeer to this island in the Bering Sea as a backup food supply for the nineteen soldiers stationed there. After World War II, the base was closed. Thirteen years later, a thousand reindeer fed on the four-inch-thick mat of lichen that covered the island, then six thousand a decade later. In just three more years, travelers found only a small herd, not much lichen, and fields of reindeer skeletons. Soon, it was only skeletons.

The Dreams of Antelope

In Yellowstone, wolves were reintroduced into the mountains and then fed again on the antelope, which stopped over-eating the willow trees, so the birds returned to sing and beavers started making dams again from the fallen branches, resurrecting the marshes, and once more everything started turning green because a wild predator was allowed back into the dreams of antelope.

Transparent

A full ochre moon rises over the ridge by Cherry Lake, illuminates the smoke from lightning-strike fires drifting down currents of air into the valley. I sit at midnight in cool sand by the stream feeding the lake, quiet pools meandering for millennia. What it means to be human so transparent: belonging to smoke, fire, water, tree. Brain stem empty of chatter. Heart quiet and happy as a hen warming the perfect oval of desire.

The Empty Hand Holds the World

For the first five hundred years, the Buddha was represented by an empty seat, a tree with no one beneath it, a pair of footprints. *Tathāgata: one who has thus gone*, hence able to contain the whole world. Greek settlers in India turned him into a statue—a stone hero—rather than wind, or earthquake, or inconsolable rain.

Bamboo Prayers

While resting on a park bench—exhausted by history—across from Hiroshima’s A-Bomb Dome memorial, my wife and I are approached by a cheerful old Japanese man in a bright red shirt, walking an antique bike. He asks if he can practice English conversation with us—it’s his homework. We mime some words, he sounds out others. He seems a secret Zen master, deflecting our apologies for the war and the bomb. *We are friends*, he says, *it is the war generals we should fear*. At the end, he hands us each a bamboo prayer stick with black calligraphy: pictograms for *peace* and *family*. The A-Bomb Dome hunches like a dark dream across the river.

Presidential Mask

Wandering the vast shopping malls of Kyoto, my wife darts into a small shop, poses next to a contorted rubber mask of Trump, all grimace and orange hair. It is a macabre likeness, not unlike any mask of power. Even the shoguns might be impressed with its snarl. But the centuries make a caricature of power, and even a president may find his head stuck like a mannikin in some lost stall of the world.

If we imagine the world as a flipbook, each page—each moment—merging into coherence as it flutters through time, it can be discomfiting to try and apprehend a single, discrete moment frozen in the cascade. That is why Dane Cervine’s poems often create a sense of vertigo as the reader is lifted out of the surge of a fractious reality and given an opportunity to contemplate distinct moments isolated from the clamor and roar. Cervine reveals a sanctified world built of memory, history, and grace, where God is evanescent, transient but eternal, and where, Cervine makes clear, we are “just visiting.”

—**GARY YOUNG**, author of *That’s What I Thought*

These little visions wander freely between the focused clarity of Chinese poetry and the genial musings of Montaigne. Humane, engaging, informal in the best sense, they offer us a world of dazzling scope and depth, from a California childhood to the temples of Kyoto and the coral reefs of Bali.

—**DAN VEACH**, author of *Elephant Water* and *Lunchboxes*



Dane Cervine’s *The World Is God’s Language* is rich with both wit and wisdom. His paired prose poems are like snapshots, each one revealing an unexpected insight. The poet’s perception of each moment’s synchronistic interaction with eternal themes reflects his grounding in the Beat tradition as well as Buddhist precepts.

Sometimes sexy and irreverent, always deeply philosophical, these poems are steeped in the place and the culture of Northern California while ranging the world from Japan to Bali, Indonesia to India, Central America to the American South. As we travel with him, Cervine’s capacious awareness subtly illuminates every experience. Generous and humane, the work in this collection reminds the reader that poetry can be both joyous and profound.



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