

Selection from

Traffic: New and Selected Prose Poems, by Jack Anderson

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Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press since 2001, the Series publishes one to two books annually. It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.

Return to Work

I have returned to the job from which I was fired a whole decade ago. The funny thing is, no one recognizes me.

The same fat jolly bleached-blond woman who was my department head then is my department head now. We get along well together. From the very first we share favorite jokes.

The same vice president who fired me then is vice president still. He is tall, skinny, nervous. He doesn't like my looks, he keeps lecturing me about duty. Yet he has to approve my appointment. What a bastard he is.

And there at their desks are all my pals from the old days: Bill, Carol, Russ, Al, Serena, David, Monty, and Cliff. Just as before.

And not one of them recognizes me. I have begun anew, totally anew.

Sometimes I think my fat blonde department head recognizes me. She smiles at me as though she's guessed my secret. But I know that's a subject she'll never bring up. Best of all, the skinny bastard vice president, though he may not like my looks, doesn't realize who I am.

So I sit at my desk as though I never sat there before. I sit there powerful in my secret knowledge. How wonderful.

I am a new man. How wonderful. How wonderful it is to return to work.

The Party Train

To bring joy and friendliness to the New York subway system, which is all too often bleak and indifferent, I propose that a special train be instituted to be known as The Party Train. Each day, this train would follow one or another of the city's existing routes, sometimes on the local, sometimes on the express tracks. No extra fare would be charged, the cars would be painted exactly the same as those of any other train, but inside there would be a perpetual party. The poles and straps would be festooned with streamers, and Japanese lanterns would hang from the ceiling. Food and drink would always be available, ranging from corned beef to caviar, from beer to champagne. Strolling musicians would roam from car to car. And the last car would be transformed into a gigantic bed where anyone could take a date, no questions asked.

The Party Train would not only be fun to ride, the very knowledge of its existence would be a source of cheer. For the route it would follow on any given day would never be announced in advance, but would always come as a fresh surprise. Thus any citizen waiting in any station could hope that the next train to pull in—accompanied by a shower of confetti and a whiff of pot smoke—would be The Party Train, so he could step aboard and glut himself on cashew nuts and kisses from the Battery to the Bronx. Or if he were in a local station and The Party Train happened to be an express that day, he could watch it rumble by, glimpsing paper hats and saxophones bouncing in the front cars and naked bodies flickering among the pillows at the back. Then he would chuckle to himself, glad that there was something interesting to look at while waiting for the subway, and wishing that tomorrow The Party Train might finally stop for him.

A Poem of Coffee

Sometimes, even as you drink it, you cannot say how it tastes. Yet you keep on drinking it, day and night.

It is the winter morning with the snow still falling. The summer morning with the light on the curtains. It is the hot summer night in the greasy spoon, the cold winter night there because the car won't start, when you sit for hours with nothing to do. It is the lead in pencils, the ink in pens. It is riding the el past kitchen windows. It is a porch light left on. A light left on at the back of the house.

It is a snowy morning in winter, a summer light on the curtains. It is the drive across Ohio. The drive across Texas. Trucks shifting gears. The way a Greyhound bus smells. It is listening to the men with murmuring voices who play records on FM all through the night. It is driving at night with the car radio booming. It is long talks with Mother. Chain-smoking cigarettes. And an ashtray filled with cigarette stubs. A press room. A seminar room. A county jail in the sticks. It is waiting to change buses. Waiting to change trains in dim, empty stations. It is staying up late. Or getting up early. It is the first thing after toothpaste. The last thing before bed.

It is the winter morning with the snow still falling, the summer morning with the light on the curtains. It is a habit, a ritual. Your job. Your small pleasure. It is what keeps you going day after day, what makes you get by on your nerves alone. It is what you take in with the Sunday paper. It is printing, a black typeface. And a piece of white paper without any words. It is darkness in the pencil, snow on the page.

It is this piece of white paper with this snow still falling, this light on the curtains, this pencil writing. It is these words before you, any time of the year, any time, any day.

Traffic

There is the traffic. Outside the window. At all hours. It comes and goes. Surges. Recedes. Like thoughts. Like breath. Anyone's breath. Anonymous. Yet particular. You can hear it. Even with your back turned. There it is. The traffic. Coming and going. At any hour. Any time of day. Yet always coming out of night. Always going into night. Into darkness. Beyond our hearing. Out of sight. But at this point there is traffic. It is there. Like a thought. Like breathing. Like the breath of anyone. Of anyone out there in those cars. Anonymous. Particular. There. Like our breathing. First in. Then out.