

Selection from

A Handbook For Writers: New & Selected Prose Poems
by Vern Rutsala

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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.

CARPE DIEM

This morning he knows exactly what he has to do—it is all very clear and so simple it surprises him—and he packs his gear with great care. He wears his freshly washed and starched fatigues and feels as sharp as he had in the army, boots spit-shined, belt buckle glistening. Moving briskly as he works he likes the ozone flavor of the autumn air and the pure blue sky which seems as clear as his plan. He thinks again of leaving a note on the fridge but knows his plan is far too complex to spell out in words however clear it seems to him. Later, his wife and kids will understand. The plan simmers just above his heart and he is dead certain that it is right. Today will be a great day.

In spite of having drunk malt liquor all night he feels sober, reflexes in perfect order, eyes and fingers in ideal harmony. He drives along his usual route, not speeding, enjoying the light traffic and the purring gurgle of his pickup at stop lights. He thinks of his job, remembering those abstract motions, that lifting, bending and rising, the dance that danced its mania into him is gone now, invisible. He feels no anger about it. *They'll understand.* He takes it as a good omen when he finds a parking slot easily and at the time clock he loads a clip and slips the safety off and decides to hell with the foreman and just opens fire.

SLEEPING

Though winners are rarely declared this is an arduous contest similar, some feel, to boxing. This fact can be readily corroborated by simply looking at people who have just awakened. Look at their red and puffy eyes, the disheveled hair, the slow sore movements, and their generally dazed appearance. Occasionally, as well, there are those deep scars running across their cheeks. Clearly, if appearances don't lie, they have been engaged in some damaging and dangerous activity and furthermore have come out the losers. If it's not dangerous—and you still have doubts—why do we hear so often the phrase, *He died in his sleep?*

THE HOUSE OF YOUR DREAM

I enter your house with stealth, making sure I'm dressed properly—checking buttons, the shine on my shoes—trying to look normal because you say your dreams are so ordinary and I don't want to stand out. You say you spend your dreams packing and shopping, engaging in small talk. But inside your dream I notice a strange light, the light that colored your childhood, and your suitcases are covered with exotic stickers. The very streets you windowshop along are unlike any streets I remember—each store a museum of the mysterious, each window faceted like a diamond. I follow a few paces behind you as you buy tea and apples—the tea seems alive with the sounds of India and each apple has a window where families look out and wave. Each object you meet glows with that old light, even the sidewalk looks like a rainbow—because it is your dream and I am a stranger here.

HOW WE GET BY

By hook or crook, by shoestring and bootstrap, by running and hiding, by mortice and tenon, by moving under cover of darkness, by wit and dumb luck, by spit and polish, by weights and measures, by love or money, by hurrying up and waiting, by word of mouth, by bread and board, by slice and dice, by not letting the left hand know, by bed and breakfast, by nuts and bolts, by nodding and smiling, by mortar and pestle, by hammer and tongs, by never crying over what we spill, by backing and filling, by surf and turf, by health and safety, by soup and sandwich, by bourbon and water, by offense and defense, by being as dumb as an ox is strong, by mind and body, by day for night, by sturm and drang, by fire and ice, by hit or miss—oh yes, by hit or miss.