“Here we have essays that have passed through a shrinking machine, stories thick as bread, poems clean as mirrors; here we have Holy Mother facing off against All Saints; here kestrels and shrews and a hawk giving a ground squirrel a make-over; here we have diapers and dictators; here a missive from Lazarus; here elegies and jeremiads; here St. Francis meets Mel Brooks; here we have the Dalai Lama playing Name that Tune; here a concatenation of questions about the soul; here we have what I would do if I were pope; here free throws as worship, holding hands as prayer; here we have Brother Brian Doyling up the world for us yet again, awe and aha, as no one else can.”

—Lance Larsen, poet laureate of Utah
A Shimmer of Something

Lean Stories of Spiritual Substance

Brian Doyle

Foreword by

Jill Peláez Baumgaertner

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For my brother Peter Joseph Doyle,
with love and admiration
How I would love to speak
To everybody on the street
Just for once to break the rules
I know it would be so cool

—Joe Strummer, “Willesden to Cricklewood”

Poetry is “memorable speech . . . about birth, death, the Beatific Vision . . .
the awards and miseries of desire, the unjust walking the earth and the just
scratching miserably for food like hens, triumphs, earthquakes, deserts . . .
the gratifications and terrors of childhood, the impact of nature . . . the
despairs and wisoms of the mature . . . the mark on the wall, the joke at
luncheon, word games . . . the dance of a stoat . . . the raven’s gamble . . .”

—W. H. Auden, The Poet’s Tongue
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Foreword

I have always called them “box poems,” each poem a rectangle of words that somehow, always, ends up perfect on the page with justified margins and nothing leftover. Take the lid off and you will see, crammed corner to corner, characters ardently living and fiercely dying; children vastly loved by the parents they frustrate; good priests and bad; the exhilaration of the game, usually basketball but sometimes baseball; and all of the sad, thrilling, reverent, heartrending events of a life copiously lived.

The poet calls them “proems,” perhaps part prose, part poem or, even better, part prayer, part poem; and they are that, too. The traditional appellation “prose poem” also fits but in the end does not do them justice, for they offer more than any prose poem I have ever read. Whatever this odd and original genre is, it is irresistible, and my file of accepted poems at The Christian Century is bulging with them. Like an addict, I can never get enough, and now, it seems, I am also something of a hoarder with Brian Doyle poems, accepted but not yet typeset, piling up for future savoring by eager readers. I now regularly receive weak imitations of these box poems from other poets who have seen what Brian Doyle does and are now trying it out for themselves. Feeble attempts, of course, reminders that no one but Doyle can write a Doyle proem.

At the heart of what drives these poems is story. “Or here’s a story,” the poet begins several poems, or “Every day, as you know, one story arrives / And bangs on your head like it was a door.” And the stories are everywhere, ready to be coaxed out of a person Doyle meets, or rediscovered in childhood memories, or imagined as he walks through a cemetery full of “stories buried.” Stories, he insists, are “so often how we say the things we do not say.” Brian Doyle is, above all, a storyteller, his own story and those he tells of others connecting in a long line back to another Storyteller, who used parables to say to his listeners, “Pay attention!”

And that is what these box poems do best: entice us into paying attention. As Doyle writes,
You know how everything seems normal and usual and orthodox
But actually everything if you look at it closely with all four eyes
Is utterly confusing and puzzling and mysterious and astonishing?

We live our lives in a daze, and how much of what surrounds us do we ever really see, or for that matter how much of what happens to us do we ever really remember? “Sometimes we are starving to see every bit of what is right in front of us,” Doyle writes. It is not just that we miss the facts of our lives as they whiz by us on their way to the deep recesses of our un-memory. It is that we miss the true nature of reality—that which happens to us every day of our lives—which contains mystery, and if we miss that, we miss the reason for our existence.

So, yes, these poems are in part prayers. I usually intensely resist this identification of poetry with prayer because prayers, in spite of all of the words we may use to craft them or to cry them or to fervently and silently mouth them, are so often either too carefully planned, too rote, or, alternatively, too deep for words. That, too, Brian Doyle knows, and he reaches into the box and pulls out yet another story that once again surprises us, steering us away from the predictable and routine, saying all of those things that are unsayable, and capturing our attention so that we can see what we were just about to miss.

Jill Peláez Baumgaertner
Acknowledgments

Many of these tiny inky lads and lasses appeared in magazines and newspapers and webzines and such, which was a great pleasure (for me, anyway), and I bet they made readers around the world spit out their coffee and call the cops. Boy, it’s fun to have a proem in print. My particular thanks to Jill Peláez Baumgaertner of The Christian Century, Cathy O’Connell-Cahill of U.S. Catholic, Paul Lake of First Things, Jim Torrens, SJ, of America, Philip Harvey of Eureka Street in Australia, and Tim McKee, Andrew Snee, and Sy Safransky of The Sun, in North Carolina, for their constant crazy generosity.

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Brian Doyle
A Quiet Sergeant Tells a Story

A plane crashes into a building and people jump
Out of the windows and he catches, in this order,
A small man, a small woman, a tiny shy woman,
A small woman, and finally an imposing woman,
As he says. She pause a second before she jump,
He says, and she yells down to me I am real fat!
And I yell you jump now! which made her jump,
And I bend my knees, you know, to try to reduce
The blow but my back has been all a mess since.
We been friends since then, six years to the day.
We laugh a little now at how we met each other.
She says honey no man but my husband put his
Hands there before or since, and then she laugh.
One hundred eighty-nine people were murdered
That day at the Pentagon where she worked, but
Not her, so she says her job is to remember them
And not let their memory be murdered too, crazy
The good Lord let the fattest lady in the building
Be the one to make it, price being one sergeant,
His poor back, and God bless me if she and I do
Not laugh and laugh when she says that, though
I have to tell you, it hurts like the devil to laugh.
Lines on Discovering a Vast City of Thirteen-Lined Ground Squirrels While Shuffling in Calvary Cemetery on a Brilliant Afternoon Deep in Illinois

Where you wouldn’t believe the endless armies of corn eight feet tall
And seas of whispering soybeans, and hawks every other phone pole,
And clouds the size of aircraft carriers, and apparently seven million
Ground squirrels about ten inches long and quick and lean as arrows,
Who do indeed have thirteen gold lines in their russet deerskin coats
As I discover while bellied by a burrow and one pops up and sees me
And nearly has a heart attack on the spot, he sort of moans and faints
And slumps back in the hole like some kind of furry Blanche DuBois,
And it hurts my feelings to be seen as such a horror and terror and all
And I scrinch up closer to the hole and speak into it and say hey man,
Don’t be such a drama queen, I am not here to eat you, and by god if
A second thirteen-lined ground squirrel doesn’t pop up, a redder one,
And we are about three inches apart, and while the craven part of me
Immediately thinks I might be about to have my roomy nose reduced,
The rest of me is so startled that as usual I start rambling all freeform,
So there I am at age fifty on my belly in the grass amid vast cornfields
Telling a squirrel that yes, it’s interesting that this cemetery is divvied
Up into Saints Michael, Maximilian, Martin, Joseph, Clare, & Thérèse,
And it’s haunting to find all these young soldiers, and girls married age
Seventeen and eighteen and all, and whole entire clans buried together,
And there’s something incredibly moving to me in cemeteries, all those
Stories buried there really, all those riveting hours of all those lives, all
The adventure and misadventure and grace and pain and joys and wars,
But what really nailed me this afternoon was the lengthy line of graves
To the west, along Falconer Road, those are all the babies who died at
A day or a week or a month or a year old, some of their stones grassed
Over so that you had to kneel down and clear it away to see the names.
I don’t know, I said to the squirrel, it just seemed the right thing to do
To clear away the grass a little. Maybe that’s a kind of creaky prayer.
All this time the squirrel was staring at me with that wild blank regard
That animals have, you know, like they are from a galaxy far far away,
And the instant that I stopped speaking, having nothing further to say,
He or she disappeared utterly, and I staggered up and shuffled back to
Saint Joseph’s block, feeling that he above all men would understand.
The Black Dog

Driving through a dense dark moist night by the ocean
I ask my friend *hey man how you doing* and he is quiet
A few minutes because he knows I mean the black dog
And he wants to answer the unanswerable without lies,
Without the usual bob and weave and dodge and parry.

The tide isn’t all the way out, he says. I trip on the dog.
I carry a piece of paper in my wallet with all the names
Of all the things I love. It’s a really long list. The other
Day I got it laminated because it was getting all messy.
People must think I’m some kind of religious crackpot

Or lost and checking directions because I pull it out all
The time. But I sure need to read *that* map, you know?
There’s a long silence in the car after that and then out
In the ocean there’s an incredible moaning bellow, real
Loud and long, it must be a tanker or a barge or a ferry

Or something, and we totally lose it laughing, and then
Spend some minutes speculating that it’s a blue whale
Passing a kidney stone or a lighthouse with major lust,
After which we spend the rest of the trip telling stories,
Which is so often how we say the things we do not say.