Beyond the Prose Poem: 
Sarah Manguso’s Manipulations of Genre

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Abstract
Once seen as a subversive and even illegitimate genre, prose poetry had become increasingly accepted by critics and scholars as a legitimate literary genre. With this acceptance, however, the subversive experimental energies of the form have been effectively neutralised. In this article I examine the work of the contemporary American writer Sarah Manguso, positioning it within the critical context of prose poetry as outlined by theorists such as Jonathan Monroe and Steven Monte. I argue that the movement in Manguso’s work from verse poetry towards a generically ambiguous form of prose constitutes a response to what Monroe has termed the broader “crisis of acceptability” in which contemporary prose poetry finds itself. By expanding her texts beyond the conventional boundaries of prose poetry, I argue, Manguso has demonstrated how the genre’s subversive potential can be revitalized. She has also created a body of work that resists easy interpretation and categorization on both stylistic and thematic levels, challenging its readers to question both the assumption they make about texts and the relationships that exist between individual works in a writer’s oeuvre.

Key Words
prose poetry, poetry, Sarah Manguso, autobiography, genre, literary subversion, contemporary literature, American literature

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1. Introduction

Prose poetry has long been characterised as a subversive genre. From its nineteenth-century origins in the work of Aloysius Bertrand and Charles Baudelaire onwards, its hybrid status has been perceived as placing it outside the boundaries of mainstream literature. This position has made it an effective tool to critique the conventions of both poetry and prose. More recently, however, the absorption of the genre into the literary mainstream has placed it in what Jonathan Monroe has described as a “crisis of acceptability” (335). The prose poem has ceased to exemplify the breaking down or merging of genres and has
become just another generic category. In this essay I will examine how contemporary writer Sarah Manguso responds to this crisis by manipulating paratextual and textual tensions in such a way that the normalizing tendencies of generic classification are counterbalanced by more elusive and unstable modes of writing.

Manguso has written very few texts that can be classified as prose poems per se, yet this avoidance of the term “prose poetry” is ultimately integral to her revitalization of the genre. Since publishing her first book in 2002 her writing has traced a trajectory beginning in ambiguous zones of poetry and ending, seemingly, in the more stable genre of the prose memoir. Her first two books, *The Captain Lands in Paradise* (2002) and *Siste Viator* (2005), are nominally poetry yet exhibit significant prose elements that complicate such a characterization. Manguso’s third book, *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* (2007) is made up exclusively of short, prose poem–like texts. Both Manguso and her publisher have, however, avoided categorizing the book as a collection of prose poetry. Instead, the book has been left generically ambiguous, a fact that not only hinders its classification but also complicates any attempts at interpretation. While these first three books all exhibit profound formal and thematic ambiguities, Manguso’s two most recent books, *The Two Kinds of Decay* (2008) and *The Guardians* (2012), initially appear to possess a generic stability that their precursors lack. In both books, the first a narrative of the author’s experience of the debilitating illness Chronic Idiopathic Demyelinating Polyneuropathy, the second an elegy to a friend dead by suicide, Manguso engages in what Philippe Lejeune terms the “autobiographical contract,” the tacit agreement between writer and reader that the narrator, protagonist and author of a text are synonymous (48). Through their grounding in this contract, both *The Two Kinds of Decay* and *The Guardians* can easily be read as “primary texts,” stable points around which the fragments and ambiguities of her earlier work may be gathered together into a cohesive whole. The nuances of Manguso’s prose, however, complicate this hierarchy, destabilizing what Michel Foucault has described as the critical impulse to delineate “the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being” (107).

2. Paratextual Tension in *The Captain Lands in Paradise* and *Siste Viator*

Both *The Captain Lands in Paradise* and *Siste Viator* come with a variety of paratextual markers that identify them as poetry. *The Captain Lands in Paradise* is published by Alice James Press, a house described in the book’s colophon as “publishing exclusively poetry.” Both books are also described on their covers and in their front matter as consisting of “poems by Sarah Manguso.” The majority of the texts contained within these books, however, feature significant prose elements that work against this classification. In *The Captain Lands in Paradise* and *Siste Viator* Manguso’s poetry utilizes a technique similar to that described by Ron Silliman in his analysis of the early American prose poet Fenton John. Silliman points out that in John’s writing “each sentence is a complete paragraph,” a patterning that, with its “clear, if simple, sentence: paragraph relation” works to draw “the reader’s attention back time and time again to the voice of the narrator” (83). The brevity of the sentences, combined with this one–to–one sentence/paragraph relation, effectively breaks the linear flow of the prose and anchors the text at the level of an individual voice. Craig Morgan Teicher, in fact, states that Manguso’s poems in these books are heavily “voice–driven,” “personally inhabited” by a strong sense of lyrical self. This additional identification with lyrical poetry works against the more prosaic elements of her texts, generating a tension that further
complicates any kind of clear cut prose/poetry distinction.

Many of the texts in these books consist of long unbroken end–stopped lines. At times these lines correspond to a single sentence, at others they extend well beyond the boundaries of the right hand margin into paragraphs of several sentences. Manguso does insert spaces between these textual units, a feature that lends them something of the structure of strophes of free verse. This appearance is counterbalanced, however, by other more prosaic features. Marjorie Perloff has observed that, for the average reader, “when the lines run all the way to the right margin, the result is prose” regardless of any stylistic features and/or generic category the text may have been paratextually assigned (143). This prose appearance is strong throughout both The Captain Lands in Paradise and Siste Viator. Several of the texts in The Captain Lands in Paradise are, in fact, presented on the page in single justified blocks of texts, a feature that clearly aligns them with prose poetry. The presence of these unambiguous prose poems reflects back upon the more generically ambiguous poems in the collection, reiterating their prose–like appearance and keeping them suspended in a state that is neither verse nor conventional prose poetry. As Steven Monte points out, “prose poetry, like any other literary kind, has to be understood as constituting itself against or in relation to other kinds,” differences between texts providing the reader with the opportunity to make generic distinctions (23). Both The Captain Lands in Paradise and Siste Viator complicate this process by cancelling out each prose/poetry signal with a contradictory signal. This undermining of generic categories constitutes a kind of textual self–subversion, rendering any judgement as to the nature of the books’ genres strictly provisional. The reader is forced to hover, as it were, over the surface of the texts, able to settle upon them momentarily but unable to pin them down as fixed objects of understanding.

These structural tensions are complemented by thematic tensions present in the texts themselves. A great deal of Manguso’s writing in these two books articulates a sense of epistemological ignorance. The ambiguously defined narrator is constantly confronted with a realization of the fragile and impermanent nature of knowledge, a realization that manifests itself through a markedly indefinite, almost uncertain use of language. In a block of seven prose poems included at the end of The Captain Lands in Paradise, the word “someone” occurs three times, the word “somewhere” four times, and the word “something” five times (49–55). This vocabulary results in an accumulation of imprecision that causes the transparent, truth–oriented tendencies of prose, associated as they are with clarification and revelation, to dissolve into the vagueness of a consciousness unable to make sense of its own experience (49–55). Traditionally, as Helen Vendler describes it, lyric poetry has been directed towards a stabilization of the self through the projection of the lyrical voice onwards from the speaker towards “an invisible other.” This other becomes “the site where urgent questions of guilt, love, hope and trust can be explored and even resolved”(80). In Manguso’s texts, however, the voice of the narrator encounters no such site of stabilization. The self–affirming qualities of traditional lyric poetry dissolve along with the transparency of prose, lost in the wandering, self–subverting lines of Manguso’s unsettled prose/poetry hybrid.

“A Short Essay on Love,” one of the prose poem–like texts from The Captain Lands in Paradise, provides a prime example of this kind of self–subversion. The text announces itself, through its title, as an “Essay,” a form traditionally associated with prose. No sooner has this identification been made, however, than the first two lines of the poem proceed to work against it by orienting the text towards introspective lyric poetry: “Once I learned how to read the lines on the side of my hand, / I was never the same.” Hav-
ing set up the two opposing genres of the essay and the lyric, the text then undermines the conventions of both, presenting in their stead a meandering sequence of images and descriptions. Donald Wesling’s description of prose poetry is particularly apt here: as he puts it, “every sentence is laid on like a new stroke, a new color of intention,” varied strokes building up into sequences of imagistic “slideliike patches of paragraphs” and “discontinuous panels” of language (185). In the case of “A Short Essay on Love,” these panels of language at times seem obliquely appropriate to the the text’s stated theme of “love,” as in the lines “Go to a high school football game. / Everyone there knows what love is,” or in the clichéd sexual symbolism of “The train goes into the tunnel and comes out the other side.” For the most part, however, the connections are less obvious, as in the opening lines of the poem: “I was in the alley and then I was in the restaurant. / Something had happened and I didn’t know what it was,” or, at a later point: “Another love story : / I think there is a knife in my head somewhere” (31). Viewed as a whole the text fails at being a prose essay through its failure to construct any kind of coherent argument about “love.” Simultaneously, it fails to be a lyric poem through its inadequate construction of a lyrical subject. Rather than creating for itself a unified generic identity, the poem performs a kind of collapse of unity, its structure and discursive patterning rising to the surface only to falter and fall back in on itself. Christine Hume has described Manguso’s project in these books as being an “ongoing search for the status of knowledge.” Here, however, Manguso succeeds only in constructing a fragmentary, collage–like collection of phrases, clichés and digressions.

A similar kind of self–subversion is found in “Winter Poem,” also in The Captain Lands in Paradise. Here, the title presents the piece as a poem, an identification that clashes with the text’s prose paragraph format. The poem itself is an exploration of error and impermanence. One key paragraph reads: “To the unschooled, everything under the layer of smooth muscle looks like a heart, including cancer, even though it’s mostly water.” The poem concludes with the lines: “When the boy throws the girl in the snowdrift, the shape she leaves in the snow looks nothing like her. // When the snow melts around the cavity, will you recognize her?” (46). This sentiment is echoed in a later poem in Siste Viator, “Address to an Absent Lover”: “The scar on my hand I got cleaning the house for you has outlasted you. In this way you are indelible, but only as long as I have my hand” (43). In “Winter Poem” the body of the girl marks out a shape, a trace in the white medium of the snow. Yet this trace is by no means a representation of the girl. It has become, instead, a text detached from its referent; at its center there is nothing, a “cavity” that marks out a provisional, limited moment of signification. The melting of the snow leaves only absence. The final question posed by the text, “will you recognize her,” is rendered meaningless, neither the gap in the snow nor its absence providing a recognizable link to the girl. There is nothing at the core of the mystery, no identity around which the question can be resolved. “The girl” herself, like the hand in “Address to an Absent Lover,” has been revealed to be an empty signifier, fundamentally fragile and transient. The lyrical center of the text is knocked off balance, the generic borders that define it made to seem less concrete and reliable.

3. Doubt and Uncertainty in Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape

Manguso’s third work, Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape, initially appears to be more generically straightforward than her first two books. The collection is strikingly different in form from its predeces-
sors, consisting of eighty-one prose paragraphs, none longer than a page in length, bound together in a small, hard-covered volume. The book itself is square in shape, each individual block of justified text neatly framed on its own page. Visually the texts can be identified as prose far more easily than those in *The Captain Lands in Paradise* and *Siste Viator*. Other paratextual features of the book, however, work against any kind of straightforward generic identification.

In a departure from Manguso’s first two books, *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* does not include a table of contents. This omission prevents its texts from being easily arranged into any one set pattern. The resultant sense of suspension is heightened by the fact that each individual paragraph is assigned a number rather than a title. On the one hand, these numbers give the paragraphs a sense of order. On the other hand, the lack of descriptive titles denies the reader the kind of interpretive context such paratextual markers provide. The “point” of the writing is left ambiguous, lost in the gaps that open up between individual passages.

The publication context of the book heightens this sense of ambiguity. While the texts that make up *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* resemble prose poetry in their brevity and resistance to broader narrative structure, neither Manguso nor her publisher explicitly position them in this generic framework. Manguso herself, in her acknowledgments, refers to them simply as “stories.” The strength of this assertion is, however, significantly weakened not only by the prose poem—like appearance of the passages, but by the fact (stated on the same page) that some of the pieces were originally published in the *Columbia Poetry Review* (85). The situation is complicated further by the fact that *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* was originally published as part of a box set with two other volumes—Dave Eggers’ *How the Water Feels to the Fishes* and Deb Olin Unferth’s *Minor Robberies*—collectively entitled *One Hundred and Forty-Five Stories in a Small Box*. The set is a production of the independent publishing house McSweeney’s Books. A self-styled maverick publishing house, McSweeney’s specialises in experimental formats and texts that blur generic boundaries. Eggers, the founder of the company, has described how it was originally “assembled from those articles not fit for other magazines—a quarterly of orphaned stories” (vii). While many of the passages that make up Manguso’s volume resemble the prose poems included in *The Captain Lands in Paradise*, this identification is made problematic by their position within McSweeney’s deliberately ambiguous publishing context. The book is presented neither as a collection of poetry nor of prose poetry, but, by implication, as a kind of under-defined “orphaned” text existing outside the scope of legitimate genre classification. Denied any more consistent paratextual context, the reader is unable to judge just what kind of text the book constitutes. *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* is, as a result, cast into a kind of generic limbo. Monte has stated that context “is especially important for the prose poem” due to the fact that individual prose poems, when stripped of paratextual context such as “author, title, publication date” and so on, frequently prove formally indistinguishable from other forms of prose (2). It is precisely this kind of stabilizing context that Manguso’s texts are denied. Just as most of the writing in her first two books can, at best, be termed prose-like, the texts that make up *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* can at best be described as prose—poem like.

The generic ambiguity that results from this significantly hinders the interpretation of the book itself. The paragraphs that make up *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* cannot be identified as fiction, or autobiography, or any other genre that would provide a straightforward framework for understanding. As in
the cases of *The Captain Lands in Paradise* and *Sister Viator*, this paratextual ambiguity both contributes to, and is heightened by, the thematic ambiguity of the texts themselves. The individual passages of *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* are highly enigmatic in their subject matter. While featuring significant narrative components, they fail to follow the more fully fleshed-out narrative patterns of the novel or the short story. In them, fragments exist in isolation, infused with a first-person intensity yet still possessing something of the (supposed) transparency of prose. Description is minimal. Throughout the book, characters are referred to either by their first names or, more frequently, are simply described as “the person,” “my housemate,” “our mutual friend,” “my friend” and so on (3, 8, 21, 37). Passage eight, for example, tells the story of a dinner party between “the book critic,” “a novelist,” “another novelist” and “a third novelist” (10). In passage four, the narrator describes her relationship with “the animals who live in the woods,” animals which are known only by “their trace” (6). The term “animal” and “animals” are used four times in this short passage, no more precise or detailed descriptions being offered. These animals, like the dinner party guests who are known only by their titles, are marked by specific signifiers that seem to denote specific subjects. The fact that no further information is given as to the nature of these subjects, however, works against this specificity by leaving their identity undefined. By refusing to pin down these things in descriptive particulars *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* makes it impossible for the reader to know exactly who or what is being referred to. As a result, its subject is left suspended in an ambiguous state that hampers any attempt at definitive understanding.

The reader is not alone in being denied this kind of specific detail. The unidentified narrator of *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* likewise finds herself relying upon unreliable sources of information. As a result, her knowledge of the world around her comes across as partial and uncertain. In passage fifty-one, for example, the seemingly college-aged narrator is told by her “least favorite colleague,” her “coeditor at the news desk,” that an estranged friend has committed suicide. This revelation takes place at lunch in “the newspaper room.” The passage continues:

The advisor asks my coeditor to leave the room. He tells me to send a letter to my friend’s family telling them I loved their daughter and would miss her. I do it. The family never responds, and I never find a listing of the death in the local newspaper. To this day I don’t know if she’s really dead. (53)

The narrator never discovers whether her friend is dead or alive, or how her family receives the letter, or even what other motivations the “least favorite colleague” might have had for making a possibly false statement. The setting of this revelation in “the newspaper room” and the colleague’s status as “coeditor at the news desk” is especially significant. Her colleague does not provide her with any kind of accurate “news” concerning her estranged friend, and an alternative source of information, the “local newspaper,” similarly fails to clarify anything. In fact, the absence of the death notice merely adds to the narrator’s doubt as to the veracity of the information. Unable to find the information necessary to bring events into context, the only way the narrator can bring the text to a close is through an admission of her ignorance. The “estranged” friend ceases to be simply estranged; she is cast into an inaccessible space in which her very existence becomes problematic.

Frequently, in fact, details of the narrator’s own existence seem to be similarly inaccessible, even to the narrator herself. Throughout the book there is a sense that she is unable to pin down the subject of her own writing, that the text has taken over her narrative to the detriment of mimesis and coherency. In one
of the most intriguing passages in *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape*, the narrator tells of a school trip to Europe where, as she puts it, “most of the time we get stoned and lie down in various combinations.” She goes on:

> I never do lie down with Daniel and regret it all my life. Years later my parents move into a smaller house. While helping them pack I open my boxes of papers and find the journal I wrote that summer in Germany when I wanted to lie down with Daniel. In the journal is a detailed description of how he touched me, what we said to each other, and how it ended. It isn’t until I read the pages that I remember it’s true. (26)

On the surface this piece seems to describe writing as an aid to memory, the rediscovered journal reactiving the narrator’s dormant memories of her European trip. Yet the manner in which this process of recollection is described works against any real sense of rediscovery. The narrator does not write about the school trip as something vague and half–forgotten. Instead of writing, for example, “I can’t remember what happened between myself and Daniel,” she emphatically states “I never do lie down with Daniel.” Her reading of the journal does more than unlock a memory of the past, but rather casts the reliability of memory itself into doubt. The fact that one piece of writing can so radically alter the narrator’s perception of past events suggests that the discovery of another entry could cause further alternations. The only truth that the journal has manifested is a textual truth, divorced from any sense of an actual past that the text might reference. Without such referential grounding all that is left is text upon text. This revelation has significant implications for *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* as a whole. It effectively causes any strong sense of mimesis to drop away from the book, replaced instead by a shuffling of signifiers.

The narrator’s inability to pin down the past also finds a parallel with Manguso’s denial of clearly–defined structure and unambiguous paratextual indicators, a denial that itself can be related back to the orientation away from coherence and consistency evident in Manguso’s earlier self–subverting poetry. As Linda Wagner–Martin has pointed out, the very act of naming has authoritarian connotations in that it constitutes an act of designation that fixes the named individual in a position subordinate to the namer. A refusal to name from a position of authority, Wagner–Martin claims, can be interpreted as a resistance to the establishment of such a power structure; the writer does not attempt to fully define the subject, but rather lets it exist in an underdetermined space. Wagner–Martin goes on to argue that such underdetermination is also brought about through openness of structure. The anti–authoritarian writer, she claims, avoids the pretense of “knowing which structure to choose,” and instead leaves the weave of her text open (70). In just this way, the uncertain world of memories and loss presented in *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape*, coupled with the open structure of the work, can be read as an attempt to escape the very kind of closure the book’s relatively conventional prose initially seems to gravitate towards. The book and its subject, while contained within the square borders of its small compact pages, ultimately remains elusive.

4. *The Two Kinds of Decay* and *The Guardians* as Stabilizing Center

Manguso’s two most recent books initially seem to mark a significant movement away from this early deferral of authority. Both *The Two Kinds of Decay* and *The Guardians*, like *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape*, are written in prose. Unlike the earlier books however, this prose appears to be positioned in the relatively stable generic category of the prose memoir. The subtitle of *The Two Kinds of Decay* is “A
Memoir,” and on the inner dust jacket sleeve a blurb states that in it “Manguso recounts her nine–year struggle” with an “enigmatic affliction,” a “wildly unpredictable disease that appeared without warning.” The Guardians similarly announces its nonfictional status as “An Elegy for a Friend,” and presents a series of meditations on the death of a close, mentally troubled friend who commits suicide by throwing himself in front of a commuter train. These paratextual signals effectively set up Lejuene’s autobiographical contract before the reader even opens the book. There seems no doubt that the word “I,” when it occurs in the text, refers specifically to the author Manguso.

Both The Two Kinds of Decay and The Guardians adhere, at least on the surface, to conventionally linear narrative structure. While both books are made up of relatively short prose passages (like her earlier work), here these passages link together into chapters unified through the consistent voice of the autobiographical narrator. Furthermore, in The Two Kinds of Decay Manguso uses a conventional contents page and titles her chapters to give the book structure and coherency. These chapter titles make the linear, unified nature of the book especially explicit, the first chapter announcing itself as “The Beginning” (3) while the final chapter rounds the work off with the title “The End” (183). As always in Manguso’s writing, however, other features work against such paratextual and structural elements to create a more nuanced mode of writing.

Both books consist of very short sections—in The Two Kinds of Decay these are presented as chapters, in The Guardians they are simple short prose blocks—usually between fifty to one hundred words in length. Significantly, in The Two Kinds of Decay these sections are printed with a uniform left–hand margin, paragraph breaks being signaled by a line space rather than by an indented line. This presentation frames each paragraph with a border of white space that causes it to visually resemble an individual prose poem. This is especially noticeable in the shorter chapters, such as the one reproduced below in its entirety with its margins preserved:

THE FIRST TIME
Unused to being frail, I returned to college and stayed up very late that first night reading mail and writing papers and cleaning out the refrigerator, and in the morning I lay in bed vomiting into the wastepaper basket from fatigue, and less than two weeks later I was back in the hospital. (33)

The brief sections of The Guardians achieve a similar prose poem–like effect through passages like this:

Harris met the train with his body, offered it his body.
The train drove into his body.
It drove against his body. It sent him from his body.
The conductor went down onto the track and touched the body and lifted and carried the body.
There was no need for a doctor.
The body was removed from the track and rested for two days without its name. (11)

The accumulative effect of such short, concise prose sections is to give both books, despite their linear structure, a highly episodic feel. Sequential chapters, as a result, give the impression of being suspended in
their own discrete spaces, separate and distinct from one another despite the narrative threads that link them together. This visual prose aspect also brings to mind the more overtly ambiguous texts that make up *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape*. Consider for example the following passage, again reproduced in its entirety with its margins preserved:

The entire morning passes but I’m already tired of all the old themes. In the afternoon, still we love and are unloved, still we understand no one, still we and our love will die, still reality is hard to admit and harder to escape, still the essential moments are unexpected yet nothing is new, still we were wrong about the past but the future is about to begin, still things make sense, still there is but one reliance.

(54)

After reading the previously quoted passages from *The Two Kinds of Decay* and *The Guardians* it is tempting to position this earlier text in the same autobiographical genre. The short prose format, the sparse and elliptical sentences, and the themes of uncertainty and dis-ease link all three texts together as part of the same broader writing project, the “I” of the text specifically identifiable as Manguso. This identification anchors the work around its author’s voice, lending it a sense of thematic and generic stability that otherwise it would lack. Richard A. Lanham has described how the presentation of a text in prose raises immediate expectations in the minds of most readers. “In prose,” he argues, “we expect not only a particular range of topics but a transparent style to express them clearly.” He continues: “we expect to look through prose, to the subject beneath, but at poetry where the language forms part of the subject” (81). Traditionally, prose poetry has been thought to subvert this expectation, undermining the supposed transparent referentiality of prose and forcing the reader’s attention to the surface of the text. As Svetlana Boym has pointed out, however, despite the postmodern tendency towards openness and fragmentation much contemporary critical interpretation still holds fast to ideals of stability and cohesion, concepts that have their origins in the Romantic belief that textual unity is an imitation of the “organic unity” of natural life—that there exists a wholeness beyond the text against which the unity of that text can be measured and modeled (116). Indeed, prose poetry’s “long standing affinities with the art of autobiography or diary writing,” (119) as identified by Michel Delville, make *The Two Kinds of Decay* particularly open to interpretations that favor mimetic transparency and cohesion. The persuasiveness of this kind of interpretation, strengthened by the presence of the autobiographical contract, causes the word “Manguso” to become a complex kind of signifier. Transformed by Lejeune’s merging of author and narrator into a protagonist with an existence that extends beyond the borders of the text, it provides a center of gravity around which a diversity of otherwise fragmentary texts can be pulled into orbit.

Yet the kind of protagonist constructed through these prose poem—like chapters does not in itself constitute a stable, unified center. Just as the voices in Manguso’s first three books emanate from uncertain, ambiguously defined figures unable to fully come to terms with their own identities and the world around them, Manguso’s more recent autobiographical narrator finds herself confronted with a reality that is “hard to admit and harder to escape” in the form of a chronic debilitating illness and the death of a loved one. The autobiographical contract has formed the self of the author into a kind of unity, yet this unity can
do little more than bear witness to its own loss of coherence and agency. Read in this way, the tendency of the text to revert to prose poem–like fragmentation comes to parallel the protagonist’s inability to control the course of her own life narrative.

5. Contextualization and Recontextualization

The weakening of mimesis that results from this is radically at odds with the sense of autobiographical referentiality upon which linear readings of both *The Two Kinds of Decay* and *The Guardians* are centered. As I have described, in *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* a kind of subversion is carried out not only through a mingling of prose and poetry, but through the denial of the prose poem genre itself. When Manguso’s two memoirs are read in the context of these earlier, oblique texts, the coherence and stability of her prose is further undermined, gaps and fissures emerging in what initially appears to be a unified whole. Alternatively, however, the sense of mimesis and autobiographical unity generated by the presentation of these two later texts as memoirs can also be used to give Manguso’s earlier, more oblique texts a sense of mimesis and coherency.

Just as a memoir writer traditionally uses memory to examine and re–evaluate the past, so the reader of *The Two Kinds of Decay* is drawn to re–examine Manguso’s earlier texts in the context of the autobiographical detail the memoir reveals. One of the prose texts from *The Captain Lands in Paradise*, for example, describes a surreal episode in which a girl, walking with the aid of a cane, climbs a sand dune “careful not to get sand in her heart” (59). In the ambiguous context of its original publication, this line is impenetrable. At best, it might be interpreted as a metaphor for the girl’s emotional state. An alternative reading, in line with the oblique, self–subverting nature of the book as a whole, is that it is simply a piece of poetic play designed to confuse any reader searching for straightforward rational meaning. A passage from *The Two Kinds of Decay*, however, provides an alternative way to read the sentence. In her memoir, Manguso describes the central line she wore inserted into a chest vein for the facilitation of frequent blood transfusions. She writes: “I had been reminded by the surgeons, every time one of them implanted a line, that nothing powdery should be used near the entry site, because the powder could get right into my bloodstream” (45–46). This detail enables the earlier prose poem to be understood in a radically different way.

The text can now be read literally, the girl identified as Manguso herself, wary of the sand due to the central line implanted in her chest. In fact, after reading the chapter of *The Two Kind of Decay* titled “Death,” in which the narrator claims that, after her illness, the fear of death “never goes away,” it becomes tempting to read such an obsession into almost every element of her earlier work (62). The self–subverting lines of *The Captain Lands in Paradise* and *Siste Viator* can themselves be interpreted as the manifestation of a consciousness confronted with its own mortality, while the doubt and uncertainty prevalent in *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* and *The Guardians* can be seen as the product of a world–view in which both one’s own body and the body of loved ones are terminally vulnerable. The very title of Manguso’s second collection of poetry, *Siste Viator*, becomes significant; the Latin translates as “Halt Traveler,” a reminder of mortality once commonly found on roadside Roman tombs.

Yet as I have already indicated, this process of contextualization works two ways. While a reading of Manguso’s two most recent books may initially stabilized her earlier works in an autobiographical context, the attempted application of this context can double back to undermine the memoir itself. Near the end of
The Two Kinds of Decay, the narrator asks: “How can I stop thinking about the disease long enough to write about anything else?” (179). Considering the way in which descriptions of the illness dominate every page of the memoir, the relative absence of such subject matter from her earlier Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape prompts the reader to ask the same question. In just two of the eighty–one short texts in Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape the narrator refers to being ill. Even in these instances, no details are given of the illness itself, the focus being instead on how illness affects the narrator’s social life (38, 41). Read in the context of The Two Kinds of Decay, these references are enough to identify Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape as autobiography. Yet at the same time, the fact that there are just two such references in the entire book stands out in marked contrast to the centrality of the illness to the later memoir.

These inconsistencies in Manguso’s writing makes manifest the textual nature of her autobiographical work and weakens the mimetic transparency of its prose. The reader is prompted to question just what “facts” may have deliberately been left out of both the memoir and these earlier texts. Simultaneously, it raises the possibility that other, more “fictional” or playful elements may have been introduced. The mimetic clarity of Manguso’s clean, simple prose clouds over. In its place is left a much more complex mode of writing, one in which both the form of the text and the figure of its author are thrown into doubt.

An even stronger example of this kind of self–subversion can be found through a reading of another of Manguso’s ambiguous, prose poem–like pieces. Entitled “But the Order of Lives is Apparent,” this text is stylistically similar to those included The Two Kinds of Decay. It also, however, contains elements that complicate the autobiographical status of both texts. Uncollected since its first publication in issue 17 of McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern (2005), “But the Order of Lives is Apparent” engages the reader in a game of reveal–and–conceal. While the majority of the texts published in the same issue are easily identifiable as short fiction, the editors make no explicit attempt to categorize them according to genre. In this under–defined context Manguso’s text stands out as especially enigmatic. The piece begins with a description of the narrator’s great–uncle “Oscar Shapiro.” At one point, the narrator informs the reader that “He had written me a letter seven years earlier, when I was in the hospital. In the letter he had referred to my disease as if it were an inconvenience that would disappear soon” (6). A page later, she goes on: “when I got my nerves, my legs were paralyzed, and I’d stopped playing the piano, but I could type, with the eraser–end of a pencil, on a laptop computer” (7). Read in the context of The Two Kinds of Decay this detail seems to clearly identify the narrator with the protagonist of Manguso’s memoir.

A critical moment in the text, however, destabilises this identification. The narrator describes how she receives a gift from her great–uncle: “When I first opened the small white envelope that said for S—M—in Oscar’s rectangular letters, I took out the letter and immediately smelled it” (7). This use of elision sends a puzzling signal to the reader. Such en–dashed initials are a technique more common to fiction, where they work to assign a character the individuality and sense of realism imparted by a name while leaving that name ambiguous. Here, however, the reason for the occlusion of the full name is obscure. At an earlier point in the text the narrator states: “I was named Sarah, after Oscar’s mother” (5). This detail sets up an immediate link between the narrator of the text and its author. With this link already in place, “M—” is inevitably read as “Manguso.” Because of this, there seems no point in using initials when the majority of readers will instinctively fill in the dashes with “Sarah Manguso.” Appearing as it does near the conclusion of a text that until this moment has seemed faithful to the autobiographical contract, this elision destabi-
lises the connection between the author and the narrator. “But the Order of Lives is Apparent” is clearly a
text narrated by someone named Sarah whose life history has some parallels with that of the writer Sarah
Manguso. It may even be that this character’s name, under the mask of its elision, is “Sarah Manguso.” Re-
gardless of this, the very act of elision opens up a fissure between the character S—M— and Manguso the
author. With this mimetic bond weakened, autobiography becomes only one possible generic category for
the story. Autobiographical referentiality ceases to be the stable point around which Manguso’s work or-
bits. It becomes instead simply one factor in the diverse field of her writing, a factor that both comple-
ments and contradicts its more oblique and playful elements.

As Monroe puts it, “the refusal to identify one’s work with the prose poem” is itself an action “in keeping
with the utopian project of a genreless genre, a genre that is not a genre” (334). It must be emphasized,
though, that Manguso’s work does not aspire to any idealised “genreless genre.” Rather than seeking to
erase generic distinctions, it performs a balancing act between such perceived binaries. Her writing ma-
nipulates genre and form in ways that ensure they never dominate the text, yet at the same time care is
taken so that they are never entirely broken down. Indeed, it is the way Manguso’s work slips between
boundaries, setting up generic signals while at the same time denying and transcending them, that en-
ables it to successfully navigate a course through prose poetry’s “crisis of acceptability.” Generic and
authorial identity cease to be the central points around which texts orbit. Instead, they are shown to be
simply factors in the play between openness and closure, patterns that emerge from and influence texts
without dominating them. Despite Monroe’s valid concerns about the neutralization of prose poetry’s sub-
versive potential, Manguso’s growing body of work demonstrates its continuing vitality. By revealing the
porous, mutable nature of its own frames of reference, her writing uncovers the shifting nature of all inter-
pretation. In this way, it reveals how prose poetry can function within generic boundaries while simulta-
neously exceeding them.

Works Cited

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