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*Data Mind* by Joanna Fuhrman

Curbstone Books, 2025

“Despite the odds,” Charles Simic said, prose poems “look like prose and act like poems,” “mak[ing] themselves into fly-traps for our imagination.” It’s almost as if he had Joanna Fuhrman’s new collection in mind when he wrote, “In prose poetry, pulling rabbits out of a hat is one of the primary impulses. This has to be done with spontaneity and nonchalance, concealing art and giving the impression that one writes without effort and almost without thinking.”<sup>1</sup> Fuhrman’s *Data Mind* is a unique example of how prose poems can be beautifully poetic in their cadence and figuration. At the same time, the rabbits Fuhrman pulls are disjunctive and surreal.

*Data Mind* is a play on the term *data mine*, the machine learning process that extracts patterns and knowledge from large amounts of data. In 60 prose poems, Fuhrman mines the attitudes and behavior of a culture addicted to digital screens. Her poems reflect a state of mind overstimulated by the internet in a way that seems uncannily accurate. Take, for instance, “Poetica Fondant” from the opening section, in which she bakes several fantastical cakes:

... So I crafted a cake in the shape of my face. It had curly hair, glasses, and an open mouth that could keep talking even when no one was listening. In my big marble-cake nose, I hid my people’s struggles, the escape from the pogroms and the years of overly salty chicken. ... So I baked a cake that was messy like New York. I cut it open and rode the subways inside, eating my way through dirty, glistening sidewalks like a hungry Frank O’Hara. ... So I baked a cake shaped like the internet, and when I cut it open, everyone who tasted it said it tasted just like the internet, and I kept eating it and eating it and eating it, in a kind of durational performance, until the cake itself was the internet and I myself the somewhat delicious crumbs.

As with any prose writing, the work in Fuhrman’s *Data Mind* occurs on the sentence level (as opposed to the line). Her sentences often begin with a plausible enough phrase, such as “When she gives a lecture on loss,”

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1 <https://plumepoetry.com/essay-on-the-prose-poem-by-charles-simic/>

only to finish with a comic non-sequitur: “all the Barbies tear off their own heads” (“The Least Witchy Witch on the Internet”). The sentences accrue into small stories that almost make sense—in the way of Escher’s stack of books.

In “How It Started/How It’s Going,” the narrative effectively describes the act of going down an internet rabbit hole: “I was reading a blog, trying to find a recipe for lentil stew” seems a reasonable opening but things quickly devolve into the story of Cinderella: “but the story about the writer’s stepdaughter’s missing slipper went on for so long that by the time I arrived at the ingredient list the building our apartment is in had been sold”—an exaggeration that makes sense to anyone who’s been distracted by following one hyperlink too many. But Fuhrman keeps going until she’s off the rails completely: “and resold and sold again, and even worse our kitchen had been replaced with a digital oven that turned all ingredients into different flavors of miniature muffins.” The muffin flavors are none that you’ve heard of, ranging from “tofu piccata muffins” to “death metal NFT muffins” and “raspberry nepo-baby marble dildo muffins.” We also encounter an activist Slack feed, revolutionary bakers, and anti-capitalist baking augmented by militant muffin throwers.

I’m struck by Fuhrman’s loose meter. Her sentences don’t fit a strict pattern of iambic pentameter or tetrameter, nor does she use rhyme. But when reading the poems aloud, I can hear a pleasing cadence of iambs, anapests, trochees, spondees, and dactyls that put me into the aural space of poetry: there is nothing quotidian in its rhythms. The vocabulary is simple and conversational, every word choice razor sharp. Some of the poems create the illusion they are written by a machine mind. Grammatically correct in syntax and punctuation, the statement is nonsensical but familiar—as when you squint to see the shapes in an abstract painting. To a computer, words are just symbols. One can mix letters and phrases in many ways that seem intelligible but don’t have meaning. It takes human consciousness to make meaning. A fun example of this is the first of the book’s two title poems, where Fuhrman offers what seems a pretty great definition of the internet itself: “Rainbow sprinkles cascade onto a cake made of *just* rainbow sprinkles.” Here’s the beginning of that poem:

Data eats the edges off our temporary selves, and we emerge with our skin tags zapped, our missing leg hair a ridge between infancy and now. Here, people work and sleep with their feet buried beneath

expense reports and Nerf bananas. We plunder, jangle unfastened words, and yell *skedaddle* to the frog-masked ghosts. Money disappears and reappears as language, then glass.

Like the internet, *Data Mind* can be overstimulating, with page after remarkable page. If optimized for SEO, the collection's keywords would include "translate," "metaphor," "algorithm," which appear repeatedly—along with Barbie and rainbow sprinkles. Seven sections are separated by black and white jpeg memes that serve as visual poems: "In my past life, I was only 57 1/2% data;" and "It's still a language if no one understands it." One of these is a riff on a defining statement about metaphor—it's an illustration of thick eyelashes drenched in tears, with the caption "Liquid is always both tenor and vehicle." The final section begins with the meme "If my eyes are actually windows, I'm happy to draw the blinds." The poems here are loosely connected by their mention of eyes and windows—apt metaphors for digital screens.

Not every poem in the book features the internet. There are political references, concern for the environment, social injustice. One of my favorite sections includes poems about movies and actors: *The Matrix*, of course, but also *The Warriors*, Gwyneth Paltrow, Melanie Griffith, Ally Sheedy and Olivia Newton-John, Cocteau's *Orphée*. Yet the computer is the window through which we access it all. A poem near the end of *Data Mind*, "My American Name is Money," yearns for an analog past:

Strangers ask how you feel about terror, but when you hear *Tell her* you wonder, *Who is this "her" and why is she getting all the attention?* This is a problem with coalition building. You think you are holding hands with another, but it's actually an empty rubber glove. De Chirico was right about the *Song of Love*. Cruelty makes more sense when you are looking at an empty piazza than a bustling square. In the algorithmic state, the town square is a cage where we think we are having sex until we wake up and find we are thumb wrestling a robot ghost. Understand, I didn't grow up in this pixelscape. I don't know how to remake my face into the face one recognizes in the mirror. Do you still remember how it felt to share a boysenberry milkshake in the back of a truck? Have you ever felt real seafoam on another person's thinning hair? You know I was a person once with actual wet boots. Back then, I only gurgled like protodata when it rained.

Fuhrman's depiction of omnipresent life online puts me in mind of The Borg from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a fictional storyline in which human brains become drones connected to cells of the mother ship mainframe: *Prepare for assimilation. Resistance is futile.* Fuhrman holds up a mirror of our obeisance with humor and sympathy. The alarm she raises may be camouflaged with whimsy, yet we hear it no less.

