

**The Prose Poem and Short-Short Story**  
**Mini-Anthology and Prose Poem Supplements**  
**Lex Williford**

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## A Hemisphere in Your Hair<sup>1</sup>

Charles Baudelaire

**L**ong, long let me breathe the fragrance of your hair. Let me plunge my face into it like a thirsty man into the water of a spring, and let me wave it like a scented handkerchief to stir memories in the air.  
If you only knew all that I see! all that I feel! all that I hear in your hair! My soul voyages on its perfume as other men's souls on music.

Your hair holds a whole dream of masts and sails; it holds seas whose monsoons waft me toward lovely climes where space is bluer and more profound, where fruits and leaves and human skin perfume the air.

In the ocean of your hair I see a harbor teeming with melancholic songs, with lusty men of every nation, and ships of every shape, whose elegant and intricate structures stand out against the enormous sky, home of eternal heat.

In the caresses of your hair I know again the languors of long hours lying on a couch in a fair ship's cabin, cradled by the harbor's imperceptible swell, between pots of flowers and cooling water jars.

On the burning hearth of your hair I breathe in the fragrance of tobacco tinged with opium and sugar; in the night of your hair I see the sheen of the tropic's blue infinity; on the shores of your hair I get drunk with the smell of musk and tar and the oil of coconuts.

Long, long, let me bite your black and heavy tresses. When I gnaw your elastic and rebellious hair I seem to be eating memories.

## 22 Objects from *Tender Buttons*<sup>2</sup>

Gertrude Stein

### A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

### A Box

Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.

### Dirt and Not Copper

Dirt and not copper makes a color darker. It makes the shape so heavy and makes no melody harder.  
It makes mercy and relaxation and even a strength to spread a table fuller. There are more places not empty.  
They see cover.

### Nothing Elegant

A charm a single charm is doubtful. If the red is rose and there is a gate surrounding it, if inside is let in and there places change then certainly something is upright. It is earnest.

### Mildred's Umbrella

A cause and no curve, a cause and loud enough, a cause and extra a loud clash and an extra wagon, a sign of extra, a sac a small sac and an established color and cunning, a slender grey and no ribbon, this means a loss a great loss a restitution.

### A Method of a Cloak

A single climb to a line, a straight exchange to a cane, a desperate adventure and courage and a clock, all this which is a system, which has feeling, which has resignation and success, all makes an attractive black silver.

### A Red Stamp

If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust, if they dusty will dirt a surface that has no extreme grace, if they do this and it is not necessary it is not at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue.

### A Long Dress

What is the current that makes machinery, that makes it crackle, what is the current that presents a long line

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<sup>1</sup> From Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen*: 31.

<sup>2</sup> From David Lehman's *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present* (New York: Scribner): 34-38.

and a necessary waist.

What is this current.

What is the wind, what is it.

Where is the serene length, it is there and a dark place is not a dark place, only a white and red are black, only a yellow and green are blue, a pink is scarlet, a bow is every color. A line distinguishes it. A line just distinguishes it.

### **A Red Hat**

A dark grey, a very dark grey, a quite dark grey is monstrous ordinarily, it is so monstrous because there is no red in it. If red is in everything it is not necessary. Is that not an argument for any use of it and even so is there any place that is better, is there any place that has so much stretched out.

### **A Blue Coat**

A blue coat is guided guided away, guided and guided away, that is the particular color that is used for that length and not any width not even more than a shadow.

### **A Frightful Release**

A bag which was left and not only taken but turned away was not found. The place was shown to be very like the last time. A piece was not exchanged, not a bit of it, a piece was left over. The rest was mismanaged.

### **A Purse**

A purse was not green, it was not straw color, it was hardly seen and it had a use a long use and the chain, the chain was never missing, it was not misplaced, it showed that it was open, that is all that it showed.

### **A Mounted Umbrella**

What was the use of not leaving it there where it would hang what was the use if there was no chance of ever seeing it come there and show that it was handsome and right in the way it showed it. The lesson is to learn that it does show it, that it shows it and that nothing, that there is nothing, that there is no more to do about it and just so much more is there plenty of reason for making an exchange.

### **A Little Called Pauline**

A little called anything shows shudders.

Come and say what prints all day. A whole few watermelon. There is no pope.

No cut in pennies and little dressing and choose wide soles and little spats really little spats.

A little lace makes boils. This is not true.

Gracious of gracious and a stamp a blue green white bow a blue green lean, lean on the top.

If it is absurd then it is leadish and nearly set in where there is a tight head.

### **A Dog**

A little monkey goes like a donkey that means to say that means to say that more sighs last goes. Leave with it. A little monkey goes like a donkey.

### **A White Hunter**

A white hunter is nearly crazy.

### **A Leave**

In the middle of a tiny spot and nearly bare there is a nice thing to say that wrist is leading. Wrist is leading.

### **Suppose an Eyes**

Suppose it is within a gate which open is open at the hour of closing summer that is to say it is so.

All the seats are needing blackening. A white dress is in sign. A soldier a real soldier has a worn lace a worn lace of different sizes that is to say if he can read, if he can read he is a size to show shutting up twenty-four.

Go red go red, laugh white.

Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get.

Little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles of mutton.

Little sales of leather and such beautiful beautiful, beautiful beautiful.

### **Book**

Book was there, it was there. Book was there. Stop it, stop it, it was a cleaner, a wet cleaner and it was not where it was wet, it was not high, it was directly placed back, not back again, back it was returned, it was needless, it put a bank, a bank when, a bank care.

Suppose a man a realistic expression of resolute reliability suggests pleasing itself white all white and no head

does that mean soap. It does not so. It means kind wavers and little chance to beside beside rest. A plain.

Suppose ear rings that is one way to breed, breed that. Oh chance to say, oh nice old pole. Next best and nearest a pillar. Chest not valuable, be papered.

Cover up cover up the two with a little piece of string and hope rose and green, green.

Please a plate, put a match to the seam and really then really then, really then it is a remark that joins many many lead games. It is a sister and sister and a flower and a flower and a dog and a colored sky a sky colored grey and nearly that nearly that let.

### **Peeled Pencil, Choke**

Rub her coke.

### **It was Black, Black Took**

Black ink best wheel bale brown.

Excellent not a hull house, not a pea soup, no bill no care, no precise no past pearl pearl goat.

### **This is This Dress, Aider**

Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch, aider whow, aider stop the muncher, muncher munchers. A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let.

### **The Blue Stones<sup>3</sup>**

Isak Dinesen

There was once a skipper who named his ship after his wife. He had the figurehead of it beautifully carved, just like her, and the hair of it gilt. But his wife was jealous of the ship. "You think more of the figurehead than of me," she said to him. "No," he answered, "I think so highly of her because she is like you, yes, because she is you yourself. Is she not gallant, full-bosomed; does she not dance in the waves, like you at our wedding? In a way she is really even kinder to me than you are. She gallops along where I tell her to go, and she lets her long hair hang down freely, while you put up yours under a cap. But she turns her back to me, so that when I want a kiss I come home to Elsinore." Now once, when this skipper was trading at Trankebar, he chanced to help an old native King to flee traitors in his own country. As they parted the King gave him two big blue, precious stones, and these he had set into the face of his figurehead, like a pair of eyes to it. When he came home he told his wife of his adventure, and said: "Now she has your blue eyes too." "You had better give me the stones for a pair of earrings," said she. "No," he said again, "I cannot do that, and you would not ask me to if you understood." Still the wife could not stop fretting about the blue stones, and one day, when her husband was with the skippers' corporation, she had a glazier of the town take them out, and put two bits of blue glass into the figurehead instead, and the skipper did not find out, but sailed off to Portugal. But after some time the skipper's wife found that her eyesight was growing bad, and that she could not see to thread a needle. She went to a wise woman, who gave her ointments and waters, but they did not help her and in the end the old woman shook her head, and told her that this was a rare and incurable disease, and that she was going blind. "Oh, God," the wife then cried, "that the ship was back in the harbor of Elsinore. Then I should have the glass taken out, and the jewels put back. For did he not say that they were my eyes?" But the ship did not come back. Instead the skipper's wife had a letter from the Consul of Portugal, who informed her that she had been wrecked, and gone to the bottom with all hands. And it was a very strange thing, the Consul wrote, that in broad daylight she had run straight into a tall rock, rising out of the sea.

### **The Blue Bouquet<sup>4</sup>**

Octavio Paz

I woke covered with sweat. Hot steam rose from the newly sprayed, red-brick pavement. A gray-winged butterfly, dazzled, circled the yellow light. I jumped from my hammock and crossed the room barefoot, careful not to step on some scorpion leaving his hideout for a bit of fresh air. I went to the little window and inhaled the country air. One could hear the breathing of the night, feminine, enormous. I returned to the center of the room, emptied water from a jar into a pewter basin, and wet my towel. I rubbed my chest and legs with the soaked cloth, dried myself a little, and, making sure that no bugs were hidden in the folds of my clothes, got dressed. I ran down the green stairway. At the door of the boardinghouse I bumped into the owner, a one-eyed taciturn fellow. Sitting on a wicker stool, he smoked, his eye half closed. In a hoarse voice, he asked:

"Where are you going?"

"To take a walk. It's too hot."

"Hmmm—everything's closed. And no streetlights around here. You'd better stay put."

I shrugged my shoulders, muttered "back soon," and plunged into the darkness. At first I couldn't see anything. I fumbled along the cobblestone street. I lit a cigarette. Suddenly the moon appeared from behind a black cloud, lighting a

<sup>3</sup> From Ann Charters' *The Story and Its Writer*, Second Ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's): 564-565.

<sup>4</sup> From Irving Howe and Ilana Wiener Howe's *Short Shorts: An Anthology of the Shortest Stories* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982): 163-165.

white wall that was crumbled in places. I stopped, blinded by such whiteness. Wind whistled slightly. I breathed the air of the tamarinds. The night hummed, full of leaves and insects. Crickets bivouacked in the tall grass. I raised my head: up there the stars too had set up camp. I thought that the universe was a vast system of signs, a conversation between giant beings. My actions, the cricket's saw, the star's blink, were nothing but pauses and syllables, scattered, phrases from that dialogue. What word could it be, of which I was only a syllable? Who speaks the word? To whom is it spoken? I threw my cigarette down on the sidewalk. Falling, it drew a shining curve, shooting out brief sparks like a tiny comet.

I walked a long time, slowly. I felt free, secure between the lips that were at that moment speaking me with such happiness. The night was a garden of eyes. As I crossed the street, I heard someone come out of a doorway. I turned around, but could not distinguish anything. I hurried on. A few moments later I heard the dull shuffle of sandals on the hot stone. I didn't want to turn around, although I felt the shadow getting closer with every step. I tried to run. I couldn't. Suddenly I stopped short. Before I could defend myself, I felt the point of a knife in my back, and a sweet voice:

"Don't move, mister, or I'll stick it in."

Without turning, I asked:

"What do you want?"

"Your eyes, mister," answered the soft, almost painful voice.

"My eyes? What do you want with my eyes? Look, I've got some money. Not much, but it's something. I'll give you everything I have if you let me go. Don't kill me."

"Don't be afraid, mister. I won't kill you. I only going to take your eyes.

"But why do you want my eyes?" I asked again.

"My girlfriend has this whim. She wants a bouquet of blue eyes. And around here they're hard to find."

"My eyes won't help you. They're brown, not blue."

"Don't try to fool me, mister. I know very well that yours are blue."

"Don't take the eyes of a fellow man. I'll give you something else."

"Don't play saint with me," he said harshly. "Turn around."

I turned. He was small and fragile. His palm sombrero covered half his face. In his right hand he held a country machete that shone in the moonlight.

"Let me see your face."

I struck a match and put it close to my face; the brightness made me squint. He opened my eyelids with a firm hand. He couldn't see very well. Standing on tiptoe, he stared at me intensely. The flame burned my fingers. I dropped it. A silent moment passed.

"Are you convinced now? They're not blue."

"Pretty clever, aren't you?" he answered. "Let's see. Light another one.

I struck another match, and put it near my eyes. Grabbing my sleeve, he ordered:

"Kneel down."

I knelt. With one hand he grabbed me by the hair, pulling my head back. He bent over me, curious and tense, while his machete slowly dropped until it grazed my eyelids. I closed my eyes.

"Keep them open," he ordered.

I opened my eyes. The flame burned my lashes. All of a sudden he let me go.

"All right, they're not blue. Beat it."

He vanished. I leaned against the wall, my head in my hands. I pulled myself together. Stumbling, falling, trying to get up again. I ran for an hour through the deserted town. When I got to the plaza, I saw the owner of the boardinghouse, still sitting in the front of the door. I went in without saying a word. The next day I left town.

## My First Goose<sup>5</sup>

Isaac Babel

Savitsky, the commander of the Sixth Division, rose when he saw me, and I was taken aback by the beauty of his gigantic body. He rose—his breeches purple, his crimson cap cocked to the side, his medals pinned to his chest—splitting the hut in two like a banner splitting the sky. He smelled of perfume and the nauseating coolness of soap. His long legs looked like two girls wedged to their shoulders in riding boots.

He smiled at me, smacked the table with his whip, and picked up the order which the chief of staff had just dictated. It was an order for Ivan Chesnokov to advance to Chugunov-Dobryvodka with the regiment he had been entrusted with, and, on encountering the enemy, to proceed immediately with its destruction.

"... the destruction of which," Savitsky began writing, filling the whole sheet, "I hold the selfsame Chesnokov completely responsible for. Noncompliance will incur the severest punitive measures; in other words I will gun him down on the spot, a fact that I am sure that you, Comrade Chesnokov, will not doubt, as it's been quite a while now that you have worked with me on the front . . ."

The commander of the Sixth Division signed the order with a flourish, threw it at the orderlies, and turned his gray

<sup>5</sup> From Nathalie Babel's *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel*, Translated by Peter Constantine (New York: Norton), 230-233.

eyes, dancing with merriment, toward me.

I handed him the document concerning my assignment to the divisional staff.

“See to the paperwork!” the division commander said. “See to the paper work, and have this man sign up for all the amusements except for those of the frontal kind.<sup>6</sup> Can you read and write?”

“Yes, I can,” I answered, bristling with envy at the steel and bloom of his youth. “I graduated in law from the University of Petersburg.”

“So you’re one of those little powder puffs!” he yelled, laughing. “With spectacles on your nose! Ha, you lousy little fellow, you! They send you to us, no one even asks us if we want you here! Here you get hacked to pieces just for wearing glasses! So, you think you can live with us, huh?”

“Yes, I do,” I answered, and went to the village with the quartermaster to look for a place to stay.

The quartermaster carried my little suitcase on his shoulder. The village street lay before us, and the dying sun in the sky, round and yellow as a pumpkin, breathed its last rosy breath.

We came to a hut with garlands painted on it. The quartermaster stopped, and suddenly, smiling guiltily, said, “You see we have a thing about spectacles here, there ain’t nothing you can do! A man of high distinguishings they’ll chew up and spit out—but ruin a lady, yes, the most cleanest lady, and you’re the darling of the fighters!”

He hesitated for a moment, my suitcase still on his shoulder, came up very close to me, but suddenly lunged away in despair, rushing into the nearest courtyard. Cossacks were sitting there on bundles of hay, shaving each other.

“Fighters!” the quartermaster began, putting my suitcase on the ground. “According to an order issued by Comrade Savitsky, you are required to accept this man to lodge among you. And no funny business, please, because this man has suffered on the fields of learning!”

The quartermaster flushed and marched off without looking back. I lifted my hand to my cap and saluted the Cossacks. A young fellow with long, flaxen hair and a wonderful Ryazan face walked up to my suitcase and threw it out into the street. Then he turned his backside toward me, and with uncommon dexterity began emitting shameless sounds.

“That was a zero-zero caliber!” an older Cossack yelled, laughing out loud. “Rapid-fire!”

The young man walked off, having exhausted the limited resources of his artistry. I went down on my hands and knees and gathered up the manuscripts and the old, tattered clothes that had fallen out of my suitcase. I took them and carried them to the other end of the yard. A large pot of boiling pork stood on some bricks in front of the hut. Smoke rose from it as distant smoke rises from the village hut of one’s childhood, mixing hunger with intense loneliness inside me. I covered my broken little suitcase with hay, turning it into a pillow, and lay down on the ground to read Lenin’s speech at the Second Congress of the Comintern,<sup>7</sup> which *Pravda* had printed. The sun fell on me through the jagged hills, the Cossacks kept stepping over my legs, the young fellow incessantly made fun of me, the beloved sentences struggled toward me over thorny paths, but could not reach me. I put away the newspaper and went to the mistress of the house, who was spinning yarn on the porch.

“Mistress,” I said, “I need some grub!”

The old woman raised the dripping whites of her half-blind eyes to me and lowered them again.

“Comrade,” she said, after a short silence. “All of this makes me want to hang myself!”

“Goddammit!” I muttered in frustration, shoving her back with my hand. “I’m in no mood to start debating with you!”

And, turning around, I saw someone’s saber lying nearby. A haughty goose was waddling through the yard, placidly grooming its feathers. I caught the goose and forced it to the ground, its head cracking beneath my boot, cracking and bleeding. Its white neck lay stretched out in the dung, and the wings folded down over the slaughtered bird.

“Goddammit!” I said, poking at the goose with the saber. “Roast it for me, mistress!”

The old woman, her blindness and her spectacles flashing, picked up the bird, wrapped it in her apron, and hauled it to the kitchen.

“Comrade,” she said after a short silence. “This makes me want to hang myself.” And she pulled the door shut behind her.

In the yard the Cossacks were already sitting around their pot. They sat motionless, straight-backed like heathen priests, not once having looked at the goose.

“This fellow’ll fit in here well enough,” one of them said, winked, and scooped up some cabbage soup with his spoon.

The Cossacks began eating with the restrained grace of muzhiks who respect one another. I cleaned the saber with sand, went out of the courtyard, and came back again, feeling anguished. The moon hung over the yard like a cheap earring.

“Hey, brother!” Surovov, the oldest of the Cossacks, suddenly said to me. “Sit with us and have some of this till your goose is ready!”

He fished an extra spoon out of his boot and handed it to me. We slurped the cabbage soup and ate the pork.

“So, what are they writing in the newspaper?” the young fellow with the flaxen hair asked me, and moved aside to

<sup>6</sup> The division commander is punning, substituting the word *udovolstvie*, “amusements,” for *prodovolstvie*, “provisions.” [translator’s notes]

<sup>7</sup> The Third Communist International, 1919-1943, an organization founded by Moscow by the delegates of the twelve countries to promote Communism worldwide.

make room for me.

“In the newspaper, Lenin writes,” I said, picking up my *Pravda*, “Lenin writes that right now there is a shortage of everything.”

And in a loud voice, like a triumphant deaf man, I read Lenin’s speech to the Cossacks.

The evening wrapped me in the soothing dampness of her twilight sheets, the evening placed her motherly palms on my burning brow.

I read, and rejoiced, waiting for the effect, rejoicing in the mysterious curve of Lenin’s straight line.

“Truth tickles all and sundry in the nose,”<sup>8</sup> Surovkov said when I had finished. “It isn’t all that easy to wheedle it out of the pile of rubbish, but Lenin picks it up right away, like a hen pecks up a grain of corn.”

That is what Surovkov, the squadron commander, said about Lenin, and then we went to sleep in the hayloft. Six of us slept there warming each other, our legs tangled, under the holes in the roof which let in the stars.

I dreamed and saw women in my dreams, and only my heart, crimson with murder, screeched and bled.

## Prishchepa<sup>9</sup>

Isaac Babel

I’m making my way to Leshniov, where the divisional staff has set up quarters. My traveling companion, as usual, is Prishchepa, a young Cossack from Kuban, a tireless roughneck, a Communist whom the party kicked out, a future rag looter, a devil-may-care syphilitic, an unflappable liar. He wears a crimson Circassian jacket made of fine cloth, with a ruffled hood trailing down his back. As we rode, he told me about himself.

A year ago Prishchepa had run away from the Whites. As a reprisal, they took his parents hostage and killed them at the interrogation. The neighbors ransacked everything they had. When the Whites were driven out of Kuban, Prishchepa returned to his Cossack village.

It was morning, daybreak, peasant sleep sighed in the rancid stuffiness. Prishchepa hired a communal cart and went through the village picking up his gramophone, kvas jugs, and the napkins that his mother had embroidered. He went down the street in his black cloak, his curved dagger in his belt. The cart rattled behind him. Prishchepa went from one neighbor’s house to the next, the bloody prints of his boots trailing behind him. In huts where he found his mother’s things or his father’s pipe, he left hacked-up old women, dogs hung over wells, icons soiled with dung. The people of the village smoked their pipes and followed him sullenly with their eyes. Young Cossacks had gathered on the steppes outside the village and were keeping count. The count rose and the village fell silent. When he had finished, Prishchepa returned to his ransacked home. He arranged his reclaimed furniture the way he remembered it from his childhood, and ordered vodka to be brought to him. He locked himself in the hut and for two days drank, sang, cried, and hacked tables to pieces with his saber.

On the third night, the village saw smoke rising above Prishchepa’s hut. Seared and gashed, he came staggering out of the shed pulling the cow behind him, stuck his revolver in her mouth, and shot her. The earth smoked beneath his feet, a blue ring of flame flew out of the chimney and melted away, the abandoned calf began wailing. The fire was as bright as a holy day. Prishchepa untied his horse, jumped into the saddle, threw a lock of his hair into the flames, and vanished.

## A Story about the Body<sup>10</sup>

Robert Hass

The young composer, working that summer at an artist’s colony, had watched her for a week. She was Japanese, a painter, almost sixty, and he thought he was in love with her. He loved her work, and her work was like the way she moved her body, used her hands, looked at him directly when she made amused and considered answers to his questions. One night, walking back from a concert, they came to her door and she turned to him and said, “I think you would like to have me. I would like that too, but I must tell you that I have had a double mastectomy,” and when he didn’t understand, “I’ve lost both my breasts.” The radiance that he had carried around in his belly and chest cavity—like music—withered very quickly, and he made himself look at her when he said, “I’m sorry. I don’t think I could.” He walked back to his own cabin through the pines, and in the morning he found a small blue bowl on the porch outside his door. It looked to be full of rose petals, but he found when he picked it up that the rose petals were on top; the rest of the bowl—she must have swept them from the corners of her studio—was full of dead bees.

<sup>8</sup> A pun on “truth,” *Pravda*, which is also the name of the Russian daily that the narrator is reading to the Cossacks.

<sup>9</sup> From Nathalie Babel’s *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel*, Translated by Peter Constantine (New York: Norton): 260-261

<sup>10</sup> From David Lehman’s *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present* (New York: Scribner): 143.

## The Mayor of the Sister City Speaks to the Chamber of Commerce in Klamath Falls, Oregon, on a Night in December in 1976<sup>11</sup>

Michael Martone

It was after the raid on Tokyo. We children were told to collect scraps of cloth. Anything we could find. We picked over the countryside; we stripped the scarecrows. I remember this remnant from my sister's obi. Red silk suns bounced like balls. And these patches were quilted together by the women in the prefecture. The seams were waxed as if to make the stitches rainproof. Instead they held air, gases, and the rags billowed out into balloons, the heavy heads of chrysanthemums. The balloons bobbed as the soldiers attached the bombs. And then they rose up to the high wind, so many, like planets, heading into the rising sun and America . . . .”

I had stopped translating before he reached this point. I let his words fly away. It was a luncheon meeting. I looked down at the tables. The white napkins looked like mountain peaks of a range hung with clouds. We were high above them on the stage. I am yonsei, the fourth American generation. Four is an unlucky number in Japan. The old man, the mayor, was trying to say that the world was knit together with threads we could not see, that the wind was a bridge between people. It was a hot day. I told these beat businessmen about children long ago releasing the bright balloons, how they disappeared ages and ages ago. And all of them looked up as if to catch the first sight of the balloons returning to earth, a bright scrap of joy.

## Blue Hair<sup>12</sup>

Michael Martone

Mister Pepe lowers the clear plastic canopy over my head, flicks a few switches. The engines throb to life. My blue hair, woven into whistling rollers, a snug helmet, bristles with bobby pins. The women on either side of me thumb through their magazines, but I am flying, flying over the checkerboard of friendly fields. The leafy woods below look like mats of hair on a linoleum floor. The engines roar. My wing men tuck in beside me, our staggered flight piecing together the formation of the whole bomb group. Now the contrails peel off our leading edges. We bank together, coming to the heading that will take us back to the Ruhr. The sky, severely clear. Mister Pepe pokes a puffy cloud with his rattail comb. The starched white cliffs of Dover drape away below us. The flashing sliver of shears dart in and out. Nimble pursuit planes. Escorts with belly tanks nipping at our stragglers.

It was my hair, after all, that won the war.

Years ago, I knew the war was beginning to come to an end when the bombers left the plants with their aluminum skins unpainted. No need to camouflage the Boeings with that European forest green. It was only a matter of time.

Hair, too, a matter of time. My hair would grow back. I watched as wave after wave of silver Forts lumbered over, climbed above the sound, the pounding of their engines rattling the bones in my head, my bare neck chilled by the breeze blowing in off the water.

“The hair, it is dead,” Mister Pepe whispered in my ear. This was later when I first came here. He rinsed my hair of color, the tarnished yellow coiling down the drain. He had me peer into a microscope in the backroom of his salon. Curling in behind me, he tweezed the knobs on the machine. I saw the shaft of the hair he had plucked from my scalp rip apart then reassemble, watched as my sight dove right through the splitting hair, my vision melting then turning hard.

“There,” I said when it came into view, kinked and barked like a tree limb, blue as ice.

“Let me see,” Mister Pepe said, wedging in to look. “It is damaged, no? The over-treated hair. The frazzled ends. You need my help, yes?”

And years before that the general had said, “You cannot tell anyone why you cut your hair.” I was a young girl in Seattle. My parents stood in the doorway of our kitchen, hugging each other as they watched the WAC snip a few locks. She held them up to the light, then draped the strands across the outstretched arms of a warrant officer. He slid the hair through his fingers, stretched it out straight, and lowered it into a box like the one florists use for long-stemmed roses.

I was a blond, and my hair had never been crimped or permed or ironed. I never knotted it up into braids, only trimmed the fraying. It was naturally straight. I brushed it every night a hundred times and shampooed it with eggs and honey. When I slept, my hair nestled in behind me like another person slipping up against my back as I breathed, a heavy purring weight.

“It’s a secret,” the WAC had said, evening the ends. “Let me look at you.” She held my chin in her palm, her fingers squeezing my cheeks. “You look all grown up now. Not a word until the war is over. Tell people it was too much bother, a waste of water washing it.” She plucked one single strand that clung to my sleeve as if she were pulling a stitch through me. She pulled until the other end swung free, and then she placed it with the rest in the box.

And only last week with my hair all done up, I was flying. From the air, the Rockies looked flattened down. The way the shadows fell fooled me into thinking the peaks were really craters. Then the clouds piled up below, and the jet

<sup>11</sup> From Jerome Stern's *Micro Fiction: An Anthology of Really Short Stories* (New York: Norton): 96-97. (Winner of *Sundog's* World's Greatest Short-Short Story Contest, 1986.)

<sup>12</sup> From Shapard and Thomas's *Sudden Fiction (Continued): 60 New Short-Short Stories* (New York: Norton): 161-164.



climbed to evade the weather. The Air Force had bought the seat next to me for the bombsight. It was in its crate sitting there.

The cadets in Colorado had given it to me. An honor guard had marched across a checkerboard courtyard. And now it is home on the coffee table with the magazines, a conversation piece. It looks as if it should be potted with some viny plant, its tendrils hooking on to the knobs and buttons. Flying home after the ceremony, I wrestled it out of the box and plunked it down on my lap. It had the heft of a head, a lover gazing up at me and me stroking his hair. I leaned forward, lowering myself to the cold metal. It smelled of oil and polish. I squinted through the lens as the plane bumped beneath me, riding the turbulence over the mountains. There was just enough light, a white dime-sized hole of light. I saw the crosshairs, crisp and sharp, my dead hair, half a century old, sandwiched between the glass deep within the machine. Outside the clouds broke apart, and in the Great Basin, the lights of each tiny city lit up as the sunset fell on each of them.

And now I have been staring at this *Redbook* spread on my lap, and my eyes won't see the words. The dryers want to lull me to sleep. From up here, the letters on the page look like the ruined walls of buildings, remains of burned foundations, blocks of pitted houses, alleyways that lead to nowhere. I follow the footprints of bombs. I was reading about hair, about its history, about its chemistry, about how we know more about it now than ever before. Below me, the words explode as I read them. One after the other. There is the roar in my ears. I sit here waiting. Soon it will be my turn again.

### The Wig<sup>13</sup>

Brady Udall

**M**y eight-year-old son found a wig in the garbage Dumpster this morning. I walked into the kitchen, highly irritated that I couldn't make a respectable knot in my green paisley tie, and there he was at the table, eating cereal and reading the funnies, the wig pulled tightly over his head like a football helmet. The wig was a dirty bush of curly blond hair, the kind you might see on a prostitute or someone who is trying to imitate Marilyn Monroe.

I asked where he got the wig and he told me, his mouth full of cereal. When I advised him that we don't wear things we find in the garbage, he simply continued eating and reading as if he didn't hear me.

I wanted him to take that wig off but I couldn't ask him to do it. I forgot all about my tie and going to work. I looked out the window where mist fell slowly on the street. I paced into the living room and back, trying not to look at my son. He ignored me. I could hear him munching cereal and rustling paper.

There was a picture, or a memory, real or imagined, that I couldn't get out of my mind: Last fall, before the accident, my wife was sitting in the chair where now my son always sits. She was reading the paper to see how the Blackhawks did the night before, and her sleep-mussed hair was only slightly longer and darker than the hair of my son's wig.

I wondered if my son had a similar picture in his head, or if he had a picture at all. I watched him and he finally looked up at me but his face was blank. He went back to his reading. I walked around the table, picked him up, and held him against my chest. I pressed my nose into that wig and it smelled not like the clean shampoo scent I might have been hoping for, but like old lettuce. I suppose it didn't matter at that point. My son put his smooth arms around my neck and for maybe a few seconds we were together again, the three of us.

### Mockingbird<sup>14</sup>

Laurie Berry

**P**eter has just returned from Mexico, where his face turned the chalky pink color of Pepto-Bismol. Rachel is at that swooning stage of love, stupid with happiness at his return.

That evening they drink cold vodka and gossip about a child-laden couple they know, who rise at dawn for work and return home at seven to bathe the three-year-old, console the eight-year-old, and struggle through dinner in time to collapse in bed by ten.

"Even so they have a great house," she says. "And nice things. They make a lot of money."

Peter shakes his head and says offhandedly: "I'd rather inherit it."

They are both shocked by the statement. An island of silence bobs to the surface. Rachel swallows the last of her vodka, and with it the realization that she is in love with a man who has just traveled to a third-world nation to play tennis.

"By the way—" He looks up guiltily, making a game of it. "Promise me you'll never tell anyone I said that."

This makes her laugh, freshens her love. They laugh some more. Talk their slow way toward dinner. Spy on the remarkable albino Mexican boy playing in the yard next door. Make love with the windows open and then lie there listening to the mariachi music that pumps through her Houston barrio neighborhood.

Everything is soft, very soft. And luck abundant as johnsongrass. The mimosa trees' green canopy. And the mockingbirds, not yet vicious, waiting for the fierce end of summer.

<sup>13</sup> From *Story* magazine (now defunct): First Prize: *Story's* Short Short Competition.

<sup>14</sup> From Jerome Stern's *Micro Fiction*: 42-43. (Winner of *Sundog's* World's Greatest Short-Short Story Contest, 1989.)

**Molibi**<sup>15</sup>

Leigh Hancock

**T**here is not a spare inch of flesh to Molibi. She presses leather palms into my own, murmuring, “Miss Allen, Miss Allen.” All elbows and knees and teeth when she dances, Molibi crooks one arm over her head and wraps her feet around the desk-chair when she sits for an exam. Her cheeks are tight drumheads, and her neck as scrawny as the sugarcane she gnaws. Only her eyes and lips are soft, abundant, wet.

Quentin, my British colleague, says Americans are heavy on the hips and adjectives. He kindly excludes me from both judgments, but with Molibi I fall from grace. I want to describe her in flowing sentences, to pad her with adjectives, to protect her against an inevitable life of maize-stamping and childlugging. I want to convince her that she needn’t haul water all her days, nor follow boys out to that narrow strip they call the Metsi-masweu, Once-a-River. These things demand wide hips and square shoulders, a jaw that can clench and a soul that dog-shakes disappointments like water. Molibi has none of these and I worry for her and the place she must find in her country.

Although—Quentin assures me—I shouldn’t. The boys, all knees and loose shoes themselves, don’t care for the delicate girls, the fine bones and weedy waists. Such etched beauty is lost in the tangle of bony acacia on this desert plain. The boys want to drive themselves into flesh as pliant and welcoming as old, rotting wood. They choose workhorses, sofas and readily furrowed fields as their life’s loves.

For a while—Quentin promises and his lips gleam—Molibi is safe.

**Baby, Baby, Baby**<sup>16</sup>

François Camoin

**L**et’s taste each other’s bodies now without pleasure,” Martha says.

The living room is full of dogs—she has three, I have four. They have no names; we just call them all “dog” and they never fail to understand which one we mean. It’s early evening and the boys from the gas company are lined up in the street outside singing a Jerry Lee Lewis medley. They’ve got the grand piano strapped on the back of a flatbed truck parked under the maple trees.

They sing like angels. Breathless. Great Balls of Fire. Hang Up My Rock ‘n’ Roll Shoes.

“Touch me here, and here,” Martha says.

High School Confidential. There’s a Whole Lot of Shakin’ Goin’ On. They’re all castrati, of course, with those thin pure high voices that signify otherness and absence.

“Baby baby baby,” Martha says.

“You were the one who said without pleasure.”

“It came over me like a big wind,” Martha apologizes.

She looks skeletal. Ribs like an anatomy lesson. God, I love her, but what can I do? This morning I made fajitas and she picked out all the bits of chicken, sailed her tortillas like Frisbees to the grateful dogs. Toyed with a piece of green pepper, swallowed slivers of onion.

Tomorrow afternoon it’s supposed to be Utah Power and Light doing Janis Joplin. Big women in meter-reader uniforms singing the blues. On the far side of the room, under the moiling dogs the twins are playing. One says “Mama.” The other answers “Mama Mama.”

**Stone Belly Girl**<sup>17</sup>

Jamie Granger

**T**hat year when the St. Kitts carnival came around, the stone belly girl had a cold. Three months before, she’d begun to bleed down there, and her aunt had explained to her all that that meant. And even though she had told her father no, not this year, she held his big calloused hand—his other grasped the hammer—as they mounted the wooden steps to the stage. Before the grand stand, the children, policemen, and steeldrum band, the mothers, masqueraders, and the soft drink and Sno Cone stands, she waited for the crowd to subside, like the sea sometimes did before it rained.

Then the stone belly girl got down on her back, sniffled, and lifted her thin cotton dress toward her narrow chest. This dress was so unlike the gowns the girls in the Miss St. Kitts Pageant wore. But she’d worn it every year since the first, when her father, loud and drunk, had pushed her into the mud behind the grandstand and busted a small flat rock on her stomach with a nailhammer. Now her father came toward her with the big rounded stone, smooth as a calabash in his hands, and lowered it gently down, sea salt glistening on its black skin, onto her brown belly. The stone belly girl wanted to blow her nose, but instead relaxed under the weight, as she had learned to do, and watched the polished hammerhead go up and come down. Once and then once more before the stone broke like an egg, the two halves rolling off her, and she stood

<sup>15</sup> From Jerome Stern’s *Micro Fiction*: 126-127. (Winner of *Sundog’s* World’s Greatest Short-Short Story Contest, 1987.)

<sup>16</sup> From Jerome Stern’s *Micro Fiction*: 60-61. (Winner of *Sundog’s* World’s Greatest Short-Short Story Contest, 1991.)

<sup>17</sup> From Jerome Stern’s *Micro Fiction*: 68-69. (Winner of *Sundog’s* World’s Greatest Short-Short Story Contest, 1994.)

up and coughed.

## Hospice<sup>18</sup>

Cathy Day

I was trained to save lives, but have chosen instead to help people die. That's what a hospice nurse does. Laying pills on tongues, I lift cups to their lips and hold their hands until the end. Sometimes, though, they're already gone, like this one, tonight. I get the call late, and my children, home for Christmas break, say they will drive me into Cincinnati so that I can pronounce a thirty-one year old man dead. AIDS. In the car, I tell my children what I must do: comfort the family, listen for the pulse that will not be there, call the funeral home and the coroner, bathe him (if the family wishes), and confiscate all narcotics since the patient no longer needs them. All this will take an hour, maybe more. My daughter says, "We'll stay in the car and wait," and my son exits the highway. The house could be in a bad neighborhood, and I feel safer making this call with my children, who, unlike me, aren't afraid of big cities at night.

Christmas lights twinkle in the cul-de-sac, and we park on the street outside the house, a brown split-level with the porch light burning. I knock on the front door, and a woman in a red-plaid robe answers. In the narrow, paneled foyer, I hug her. Over her shoulder, I see my children in the car watching me embrace this stranger.

In the middle of the living room next to the Christmas tree, a skinny man lies on the couch, a cat curled up asleep on his stomach. He's dressed in sweats with an afghan thrown over his legs. The family mills about—brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles—drinking from holiday plastic cups. After I enter the room, the family moves quietly away from the couch, and it is only then that I see. The cat doesn't awaken as I hold my stethoscope to the man's chest, and I realize that from now on, every Christmas will remind the family of this moment, me hovering over this couch.

On the phone, I give the funeral home the address, and while we wait for the hearse from the funeral home, the woman in the plaid robe offers me a drink. I say no, my children are waiting for me in the car, and the woman, who assumes they are children, says, "Why did you leave them alone? Please, bring them in." But I say, no, they are twenty-two, twenty-six, and they are fine. Standing alone in kitchen, I look out the frozen window and see the exhaust billowing up from our running car, and I remember another Christmas long ago. My husband and I were taking the kids to Christmas Eve service, driving down an icy road when the car in front of us disappeared. So smoothly, as if we had been practicing for this moment all our lives, my husband jumped out of our car while I moved over into the driver's seat. He ran to the pond, where the car had broken through the ice and was sinking, and I drove to the nearest house to call for help. My children were young and began to cry, so I held their hands while we sat in that stranger's house, waiting. The woman of the house offered me coffee, while the man threw on a coat over his pajamas, muttering that he'd have to fill in the pond. This had happened three times already. Two sleepy children came down the stairs, rubbing their eyes, disappointed to find us in their living room and not Santa, as they'd hoped. Even though the house was dry and hot, we never took off our coats. My husband couldn't save the driver. Divers plunged through icy water to pull his body free, but they left the car sitting at the bottom of the pond. Tonight, on the way home from here, my children and I will pass by the place, just a shallow dip covered now by grass, like a grave. And I know that when we drive by, we will all be thinking of the same thing, although we no longer have to remind each other to remember.

The woman in the plaid robe helps me flush all the medication, and as we stand over the bowl watching the colored pills swirl, she tells me that her son was a genius, a composer who studied at Julliard. He contracted the virus his freshman year, and everything was fine until six years ago. She's trying hard not to cry and shows me his picture on the mantel in the living room, so that I will know what he really looked like. In the photo, he's holding the cat, and I look over at the couch. The mother nods and says, "We got him that cat for company, but it wouldn't have anything to do with him, until now."

## Bunch Grass #37<sup>19</sup>

Robert Sund

The ranchers are selling their wheat early this year, not holding it over for a better price in the spring. Next year the government lifts restrictions on planting, and nobody is sure what will happen when wheat grows "fencerow to fencerow." This morning another man has come out from the Grain Growers to help us out. John and I haven't got time to cooper boxcars and handle trucks too.

At lunchtime, he takes his carpenter's apron off and sits on a grain door in the shade of a boxcar, resting before he eats. I go out to join him and notice a Bible resting on the ledge under the rear window of his car. He says he doesn't read it much, and because he is anxious not to appear narrowly Christian, I want to know more about him. He is sixty-five, about to retire; a lonely man, it seems. There is something unspoken in him. His eyes squint to keep out the bright sunlight falling now just where the boxcar's shadow stops. I say, "There's one thing in Mark that has always puzzled me." He turns to face

<sup>18</sup> Written in one of my graduate workshops at the University of Alabama.

<sup>19</sup> *Bunch Grass* (University of Washington Press, 2nd edition, 1973): 183-184.

me, and I continue. “Where Jesus says, *To them that have shall be given, and from them that have not shall be taken away*. That always seemed cruel to me, but since the verb hasn’t got an object (have what? have not what?) if you supply an object, it’s really alive. Love. Money. Intelligence. Curiosity. Anything.”

In the bleached countryside of his mind, suddenly a new season washes over; common plants begin to blossom. And now, ideas fly back and forth between us, like bees, their legs thickening with pollen.

In the next hour we talk a lot and I learn that he has been reading Rufus Jones, Meister Eckhart, and *The Cloud of Unknowing*. He nearly trembles with a new joy he kept hidden. His wife writes poetry, he tells me, and adds—thrusting years recklessly aside—“I’ve worked here sixteen years, one harvest to another. I’ve seen a lot of young men come and go, and never had a decent conversation. It’s worse with the college kids. They don’t think, most of them.”

Trucks start coming in again, lunch is over. He puts his carpenter’s apron on again, but before we part he invites me home to dinner this evening, careful not to spoil it by appearing as happy as he really is.

Back inside the elevator, I’d like to lie down somewhere in a cool, dark corner, and weep. What are people doing with their lives? What are they doing?

### Kentucky, 1833<sup>20</sup>

Rita Dove

It is Sunday, day of roughhousing. We are let out in the woods. The young boys wrestle and butt their heads together like sheep—a circle forms; claps and shouts fill the air. The women, brown and glossy, gather round the banjo player, or simply lie in the sun, legs and aprons folded. The weather’s an odd monkey—any other day he’s on our backs, his cotton eye everywhere; today the light sifts down like the finest cornmeal, coating our hands and arms with a dust. God’s dust, old woman Acker says. She’s the only one who could read to us from the Bible, before Massa forbade it. On Sundays, something hangs in the air, a hallelujah, a skitter of brass, but we can’t call it by name and it disappears.

Then Massa and his gentlemen friends come to bet on the boys. They guffaw and shout, taking sides, red-faced on the edge of the boxing ring. There is more kicking, butting, and scuffling—the winner gets a dram of whiskey if he can drink it all in one swig without choking.

Jason is bucking and prancing about—Massa said his name reminded him of some sailor, a hero who crossed an ocean, looking for a golden cotton field. Jason thinks he’s been born to great things—a suit with gold threads, vest and all. Now the winner is sprawled out under a tree and the sun, that weary tambourine, hesitates at the rim of the sky’s green light. It’s a crazy feeling that carries through the night; as if the sky were an omen we could not understand, the book that, if we could read, would change our lives.

### El Dinosaurio<sup>21</sup>

Augusto Monterroso

Cuando despierto, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí.

### The Dinosaur

Upon waking, the dinosaur was still there.

### Dreamtigers<sup>22</sup>

Jorge Luis Borges

En la infancia yo ejercí con fervor la adoración del tigre: no el tigre overo de los camalotes del Paraná y de la confusión amazónica, sino el tigre rayado, asiático, real, que sólo pueden afrontar los hombres de guerra, sobre un castillo encima de un elefante. Yo solía demorarme sin fin ante una de las jaulas en el Zoológico; yo apreciaba las vastas enciclopedias y los libros de historia natural, por el esplendor de sus tigres. (Todavía me acuerdo de esas figuras: yo que no puedo recordar sin error la frente o la sonrisa de una mujer.) Pasó la infancia, caducaron los tigres y su pasión, pero todavía están en mis sueños. En esa napa sumergida o caótica siguen prevaleciendo y así: Dormido, me distrae un sueño cualquiera y de pronto sé que es un sueño. Suelo pensar entonces: Éste es un sueño, una pura diversión de mi voluntad, y ya que tengo un ilimitado poder, voy a causar un tigre.

¡Oh, incompetencial Nunca mis sueños saben engendrar la apetecida fiera. Aparece el tigre, eso sí, pero disecado o endeble, o con impuras variaciones de forma, o de un tamaño inadmisibles, o hartos fugaz, o tirando a perro o a pájaro.

<sup>20</sup> From David Lehman’s *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present* (New York: Scribner): 231.

<sup>21</sup> From <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/2741417.stm>.

<sup>22</sup> From Jorge Luis Borges’ *Selected Poems*, translated by Alistair Reid.

## Dreamtigers

When I was a child, I came to worship tigers with a passion: not the yellow tigers of the Paraná River and the tangle of the Amazon but the striped tiger, the royal tiger of Asia, which can only be hunted by armed men from a fort on the back of an elephant. I would hang about endlessly in front of one of the cages in the Zoo; and I would prize the huge encyclopedias and books of natural history for the magnificence of their tigers. (I can still recall these illustrations vividly—I, who have trouble recalling the face or the smile of a woman.) My childhood passed and my passion for tigers faded, but they still appear in my dreams. In the unconscious or chaotic dimension, their presences persist, in the following way: While I am asleep, some dream or other disturbs me, and all at once I realize I am dreaming. At these moments, I tend to think to myself: This is a dream, simply an exercise of my will; and since my powers are limitless, I am going to dream up a tiger.

Utter incompetence! My dreaming is never able to conjure up the desired creature. A tiger appears, sure enough, but an enfeebled tiger, a stuffed tiger, imperfect of form, or the wrong size, or only fleetingly present, or looking something like a dog or a bird.

### From *Names above Houses* (a novel in prose poems)<sup>23</sup>

Oliver de la Paz

#### *In the Year of the Rat*

When Fidelito's first tooth fell out, his mother threw it on the roof so that the rats would find it. They were up there searching for coins. Evenings on the tin roof, their nails clicked like hail—they were always up to something: gambling, counting money. The change in his mother's jar once filled the glass to the mouth. Now she swore she had seen rats with silver disks between their teeth. Still, the old women in the village who muttered about refusing dark fruits and curing tetanus with the ends of a cephalopod, the plastic part of cuttlefish bone, said rats were lucky. They told her to throw her son's first lost tooth on the roof for them to find. When the new tooth grew in, it would be strong like the rat's.

The macaws found the tooth first. It could have been worse. His tooth might have been found by ants. Fidelito would have grown antennae and that would have presented the problem of appearances. At least you could hide wings under a shirt.

Fidelito's mother found a pair of nubs bordering his spine. They were drawn up like hands wringing their own skin from themselves, two clenched fists. Translated, it was the odd grace. A boy has no discernible nimbus, though she found him at one year to be an accomplished craftsman. All day he would gather twine from his mother's frayed skirts and braid them into wreaths of darker hues.

## APPENDIX 1: Introduction to *Great American Prose Poems*<sup>24</sup>

David Lehman

In December 1978, two members of a three-person committee voted to give the year's Pulitzer Prize in poetry to Mark Strand for his book *The Monument*. It was a bold move. *The Monument* was anything but a conventional book of verse. It comprised short prose musings on the subject of death, with the author's sentences presented in counterpoint to quotations from Shakespeare, Unamuno, Sir Thomas Browne, Nietzsche, Wallace Stevens, and other experts on mortality. In the end, however, Strand didn't win the prize, because the third judge—the committee chair, Louis Simpson—adamantly opposed the choice. Simpson objected to *The Monument* on the grounds that it is predominantly in prose. He argued that the prestigious award is designed expressly to honor verse, and the argument prevailed with the Pulitzer higher-ups who act on the committee's recommendations. To an admirer of *The Monument* it was as if the very qualities that distinguished this quirky, unfamiliar, hard-to-classify sequence worked against it when it came time to distribute accolades. It was clear then that prose had not yet gained acceptance as a medium for writing poetry. The poets who had been doing it were still working in advance of official recognition and in some cases (the Ashbery of *Three Poems*, the Merwin of *The Miner's Pale Children*) despite their own misgivings about the terms "prose poem" and "prose poetry." Such terms implied a link to a modern French tradition with which the American poets were familiar but from which they meant to keep a respectful distance. "The prose poem has the unusual distinction of being regarded with suspicion not only by the usual haters of

<sup>23</sup> *Names above Houses*, Southern Illinois University Press (March 2001): 3-5. (Separate poems for each page in sequence.)

<sup>24</sup> Excerpted from David Lehman's *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present* (New York: Scribner): 11-26.

poetry, but also by many poets themselves,” Charles Simic observed.

So when Simic won the Pulitzer for *The World Doesn't End* in 1991 it seemed doubly significant, marking an event not only in Simic's reputation but in the place of the prose poem itself. Its validity as a form or genre with a specific appeal to American poets could no longer be denied. For Simic's Pulitzer volume, like Strand's jinxed volume thirteen years earlier, consisted mainly of prose poems, and it was defiantly as prose poems that they succeeded. In neither case was the prose tarted up to ape the supposed prettiness of verse. The writing was not self-consciously “poetic.” On the contrary, the prose of these poems—one might say their “prosaic” nature if a pejorative valence did not hang over that word—was a crucial dimension of their being.

The prose poems in *The World Doesn't End* are brief, spare, sometimes chilling, dark. Many evoke Simic's childhood in Belgrade during World War II. A strange whimsy makes a grim memory of smoke and fog no less grim but perhaps more haunting. One untitled prose poem begins:

I was stolen by the gypsies. My parents stole me right back. Then the gypsies stole me again. This went on for some time.

This succession of sentences, not lines, moves at a speed faster than verse. Then comes the formulaic last sentence to slow down the action. The effect is to make the extraordinary seem somehow routine, and it has everything to do with the rhythms of narrative prose. In another poem the opening sentence introduces a metaphor, and the rest of the piece elaborates it in an effort to sustain the epiphany:

We were so poor I had to take the place of the bait in the mousetrap.

As it happens, the opening part of the sentence scans perfectly as blank verse. But it owes its force to the tension between the flatness of the delivery and the macabre twist in the plot. By putting his understated prose style at the service of the fantastic and surreal, Simic had found a way to capture the foreignness of his boyhood experience in war-torn Yugoslavia. His use of simple, declarative sentences, sometimes at a staccato pace, recalls the prose style of his fellow Oak Park High School alumnus, Ernest Hemingway, himself a prose poem pioneer.

It is possible to read Simic's prose poems as dream narratives that end abruptly, enigmatically. You might almost treat them as prose fiction, except for their extreme brevity, the ambiguous ways they achieve resolution, and their author's unmistakably poetic intent. Simic told an interviewer that his book originated as “quick notations,” “ideas for poems,” written haphazardly and on the run. They came, he said, from a place where “the impulses for prose and those for poetry collide.” What made them poems? “What makes them poems is that they are self-contained, and once you read one you have to go back and start reading it again. That's what a poem does.”

What is a prose poem? The best short definition is almost tautological. The prose poem is a poem written in prose rather than verse. On the page it can look like a paragraph or fragmented short story, but it acts like a poem. It works in sentences rather than lines. With the one exception of the line break, it can make use of all the strategies and tactics of poetry. Just as free verse did away with meter and rhyme, the prose poem does away with the line as the unit of composition. It uses the means of prose toward the ends of poetry.

The prose poem is, you might say, poetry that disguises its true nature. In the prose poem the poet can appropriate such unlikely models as the newspaper article, the memo, the list, the parable, the speech, the dialogue. It is a form that sets store by its use of the demotic, its willingness to locate the sources of poetry defiantly far from the spring on Mount Helicon sacred to the muses. It is an insistently modern form. Some would argue further that it is, or was, an inherently subversive one. Marguerite Murphy's *A Tradition of Subversion* (1992) contends that an adversarial streak characterizes the genre. Others are drawn to the allegorical formula that would align the prose poem with “working-class discourse” undermining the lyric structures of the upper bourgeoisie. Many examples and precedents elude or combat this facile notion, and commentators have begun to stress the inclusiveness of the genre and not its putatively subversive properties. While it sometimes seems that the only generalization you can safely make about the prose poem is that it resists generalization, certain terms recur in essays and critical discussions. The prose poem is a *hybrid* form, an *anomaly* if not a *paradox* or *oxymoron*. It offers the enchantment of *escape* whether from the invisible chains of the superego, or from the oppressive reign of the alexandrine line, from which Charles Baudelaire broke vehemently in his *Petits Poemes en Prose* (1862), which inaugurated the genre in France. Sooner or later in the discussion it will be said that the prose poem, born in rebellion against *tradition*, has itself become a tradition. It will be noted approvingly that the prose poem *blurs boundaries*. “My own formal literary education had not accorded much regard to what in English are referred to as ‘prose poems,’ and I am not at all sure what the genre is supposed to entail,” W. S. Merwin wrote in a 1994 reprinting of *The Miner's Pale Children* (1970). “I recalled what I thought were precedents—fragments, essays, journal entries, instructions and lists, oral tales, fables. What I was hoping for as I went was akin to what made a poem seem complete. But it was prose that I was writing, and I was pleased when the pieces raised questions about the boundary between prose and poetry, and where we think it runs.”

The words *poetry* and *prose* seem to be natural antagonists. The French Renaissance poet Pierre Ronsard said they

were “mortal enemies.” Matthew Arnold, thinking to damn the poets Dryden and Pope, called them “classics of our prose.” Oscar Wilde subtly refined the insult: “Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose.” In these examples, it is *prose* that has the negative charge, but the opposite can sometimes be true. Not every poet accused of writing *poetic prose* today will feel complimented, though to Baudelaire in Paris in 1862 it represented an ideal. No doubt *poetry* and *prose* will continue to exist in an antithetical relationship if only because they, and *poetry* in particular, are not neutrally descriptive but have an evaluative meaning. This complicates any discussion of the prose poem and assures that it will probably always retain its oxymoronic status. Nevertheless, there is a way to cut to the quick. As soon as you admit the possibility that verse is an adjunct of poetry and not an indispensable quality, the prose poem ceases to be a contradiction in terms. *Verses* and *prose* are the real antonyms, and the salient difference between them is that verse occurs in lines of a certain length determined by the poet whereas prose continues to the end of the page. In Richard Howard’s formulation, verse reverses—the reader turns at the end of the line—while prose proceeds. The form of a prose poem is not an absence of form. It is just that the sentence and the paragraph must act the part of the line and the stanza, and there are fewer rules and governing traditions to observe, or different ones, because the prose poem has a relatively short history and has enjoyed outsider status for most of that time. Writing a prose poem can therefore seem like accepting a dare to be unconventional. It is a form that invites the practitioner to reinvent it.

In an aphorism contest, the winning definition would come from Charles Simic. “The prose poem is the result of two contradictory impulses, prose and poetry, and therefore cannot exist, but it does,” he writes. “This is the sole instance we have of squaring the circle.” Elsewhere Simic proposes a gastronomic analogy for this “veritable literary hybrid,” this “impossible amalgamation of lyric poetry, anecdote, fairy tale, allegory, joke, journal entry, and many other kinds of prose.” Prose poems “are the culinary equivalent of peasant dishes, like paella and gumbo, which bring together a great variety of ingredients and flavors, and which in the end, thanks to the art of the cook, somehow blend. Except, the parallel is not exact. Prose poetry does not follow a recipe. The dishes it concocts are unpredictable and often vary from poem to poem.” Sticking with kitchen metaphors, James Richardson comments that the prose poem’s shifty position is akin to that of the tomato, which may be a fruit in botany class but is a vegetable if you’re making fruit salad.

The problem of nomenclature is—as Marianne Moore observed of attempts to differentiate poetry from prose—“a wart on so much happiness.” Amy Hempel summed up some of the options in her title for a lecture she and I planned to give together at Bennington College: “Prose poem, short short, or couldn’t finish?” There will always be exceptions, prose pieces that defy category or fit into more than one, but a practical way of proceeding is to make a division between work that the writer conceives as fiction and work that is conceived as poetry. Writers are under no obligation to classify their writing for us. But their intentions, if articulated, could be thought decisive. For the fiction writer, the prose poem (or “short short”) may be exhilarating because it allows an escape from the exigencies of the novel, novella, and short story. But that writer may nevertheless conceive the result to be not poetry but fiction. For the poet, writing in prose gains one entry into a world of formal possibility—the poem as anecdote, as letter, as meditation, as plot summary—but what is produced is still conceptually a poem. (Editorial intervention can complicate matters. The late Kenneth Koch, pleased that three pieces from his book *Hotel Lambosa* were chosen for this anthology, asked me nevertheless to note that he regards them not as prose poems but as stories in the manner of Yasunari Kawabata’s *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories*). Of terms now in use, “short short” sounds like an undergarment, “flash fiction” evokes the image of an unshaved character in a soiled raincoat, and “poem in prose” sounds a bit tweedy. That leaves the poet with “prose poem,” which has at least the virtues of simplicity and directness. Perhaps the prose poem’s ironic motto could come from the moment in *Citizen Kane* when the newspaper magnate, played by Orson Welles, receives a telegram from a reporter in the field: “Girls delightful in Cuba STOP Could send you prose poems about scenery but don’t feel right spending your money STOP There is no war in Cuba.”

Baudelaire wasn’t the first to write prose poems in French. Aloysius Bertrand beat him to the punch with his remarkable and still underrated *Gaspard de la nuit* in 1842. But it was Baudelaire who launched the genre, giving it a local habitation and a name. He gave his book alternate titles. One was *Spleen de Paris*, the other *Petits Poemes en Prose (Little Prose Poems)*. In a letter to a friend, Baudelaire wrote a sentence that scholars have quoted ever since: “Who among us has not, in his ambitious moments, dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without meter or rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of the psyche, the jolts of consciousness?” Liberated from the implacable requirements of formal French verse, Baudelaire wrote with a sort of infernal energy that the prose medium helped to release. He employed a cruel irony that joined suffering to laughter. Paris is the setting and sometimes the subject, and man is not a wonder but a creature of vanity, lust, disgust, and gratuitous nastiness.

Writing prose poems may have been cathartic for Baudelaire. They were the agency by which he could transform ennui and daydreams into symbolic action. The imp of the perverse, on loan from Edgar Allan Poe, makes its way out of the shadows like an unrepentant id. The impulse results variously in an argumentative prose poem counseling that it’s better to beat up a beggar than to give him alms; a sort of drinking song in prose advising the reader to “be always drunk” [“Toujours titre ivre”] whether “on wine, on poetry, or on virtue”; and a prankish narrative [“Le Mauvais vitrier,” or “The Bad Glazier”], in which the narrator yields to the spontaneous urge to abuse a seller of window glass who has done him no

harm. From a high window he drops a pot of flowers on the glazier's head, and shouts: "Make life beautiful! Make life beautiful!" The narrator acknowledges that such antics may exact a price. But he won't let that stand in the way. He summons the amoral didacticism of a fallen angel when he concludes: "But what is an eternity of damnation compared to an infinity of pleasure in a single second?"

"The Stranger," the first poem in Baudelaire's sequence, establishes the poet and artist as an outsider, almost an alien: a disillusioned city dweller, who feels his aloneness most acutely in a crowd, and who might, under different circumstances, pack a gun and set himself up as a hard-boiled gumshoe. "The Stranger" takes the form of a brief dialogue, and so we learn nothing about the man other than what he says in reply to a friendly if persistent interlocutor, perhaps in a railway car or cafe, a neutral place where strangers meet and feel obliged to converse. He reveals that he is indifferent to the claims of family, the pleasures of friendship, the duty demanded by God or country, the perquisites of money. What does he, the "enigmatic stranger," love? And here he bursts into a lyric exclamation: "The clouds passing by . . . over there . . . over there . . . the marvelous clouds!" Why are they marvelous? Presumably it's because they constantly change shape, are perpetually in motion, and are far from the sphere of human sorrow. Baudelaire gave an English title to another of his prose poems, "Anywhere Out of This World," which embodies the romantic wish to escape. It begins with a characteristic assertion: "Life is a hospital and all the patients keep wanting to change beds." Equally romantic, equally epigrammatic, is the conclusion of "The Confeitor of the Artist": "The study of Beauty is a duel in which the artist cries out in fright before being vanquished."

If Baudelaire set the prose poem in motion with his anecdotes, parables, short essays, and aphorisms, Arthur Rimbaud provides the great counterexample in *Illuminations* and *Une Saison en Enfer* [*A Season in Hell*]. The precocious Rimbaud—"You're not too serious when you're seventeen years old," he wrote when he was fifteen—renounced poetry and headed to Africa for a more "serious" career in the munitions trade. But before he was twenty, he had created the "visionary" prose poem or, in Martha Kinney's phrase, "the prose poem as a lantern, an illuminated container, casting images and phrases needed but barely understood." The prose poems in *Illuminations* are like dream landscapes and journeys, visionary fragments, brilliant but discontinuous. They represent a considerable advance in abstraction and compression, and they are revolutionary, too, in recommending a breakdown in order, "a willful derangement of the senses," as a necessary regimen.

Rimbaud, the poet as youthfully debauched seer, will take a romantic theme and render it in idiosyncratic and abstract terms. Consider his prose poem "Guerre" ["War"] from *Illuminations*:

When *I* was a child, certain skies sharpened my vision: all their characters were reflected in my face. The Phenomena were aroused.—At present the eternal inflection of moments and the infinity of mathematics drive me through this world where *I* meet with every public honor, adored by children with their prodigious affections.—I dream of a War, of might and of right, of unanticipated logic.

It is as simple as a musical phrase.

At its heart, this is a reworking of a familiar Wordsworthian trajectory (There was a time "when like a roe I bounded o'er the mountains. . . That time is past, and all its aching joys are now no more. . . Other gifts have followed. . . Therefore am I still a lover of the meadows and the woods"). The structure is the same in Rimbaud: a movement from childhood to the present, great loss and a new compensatory resolution. In Rimbaud, however, to get from one clause to the next requires a long leap. The clauses themselves are like free-floating fragments, and the conclusion has an air of revolutionary menace very far from the consolation Wordsworth found in nature.

In France, the prose poem quickly became a genre. Prose represented freedom from the alexandrine, the tyrannical twelve-syllable line that ruled over French poetry with an inflexibility that made English blank verse seem positively libertine in comparison. For Stéphane Mallarmé, the prose poem afforded a pretext to digress or pursue a detour; "La Pipe" ["The Pipe"] is a fine pre-Proustian exploration of the involuntary memory. Max Jacob, in *The Dice Cup* (1917), crafted fables that unfold with an absurd logic, with a comic edge sometimes and a non sequitur where we expected to find an epiphany. There is beauty in the inconclusive anecdote terminating in ellipses—as when we're told, in "The Beggar Woman of Naples," that the person thus described, to whom the narrator had tossed some coins every day, was "a wooden case painted green which contained some red earth and a few half-rotten bananas. ." Henri Michaux made a cunning use of personae ("I like to beat people up") and ironic protagonists (the hapless Plume, who is arrested in a restaurant for eating an item not on the menu). Francis Ponge "took the side of objects" in poems that spurned the self-conscious ego and discovered themselves as studies of things. The achievement of these poets and others (Pierre Reverdy, René Char) made Paris the indisputable capital of the prose poem.

In the English-speaking world, the prose poem never quite graduated to the status of a genre. But then it didn't really have to. The opportunity to write prose poetry, by whatever name, had long existed. The King James Bible, as Shelley observes, was a triumph of prose as a vehicle for "astonishing" poetry. Coleridge singles out "the writings of Plato, and Bishop Taylor, and the *Theoria Sacra* of Burnet" as furnishing "undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre, and even without the contra-distinguishing objects of a poem." No list of English precursors of modern prose poetry would be complete without Shakespeare's prose (in *Hamlet*, for example, the "quintessence of dust" speech, and "the readiness is all"), John Donne's sermons, Thomas Traherne's *Centuries of Medi-*



tation, James MacPherson's hoax translation of the Scottish bard Ossian, and the "Proverbs of Hell" and "memorable fancies" of Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell": a list so diverse that it resists any effort at codification.

The American prose poem owes much to the French but veers off decisively to accommodate the sui generis work that transcends category. In 1959, the French scholar Suzanne Bernard could stipulate that there were four requirements that every prose poem had to fulfill. It had to embody the poet's intention, it had to have an organic unity, it had to be its own best excuse for being, and it had to be brief. In other words, a prose poem was a short poem that happened to be written in prose. There may be something in the Gallic temperament that gravitates toward systematic classification, but it seems anathema to poets who identify prose with the wish to escape from strictures and injunctions. Brevity is not a requirement for an American poet [. . .]

Some prose poem enthusiasts approach the subject in a self-deprecatory manner. Simic depicts the poet in mad pursuit of a fly in a dark room: "The prose poem is a burst of language following a collision with a large piece of furniture." Russell Edson, a master of the comic surreal fable, likens the prose poem to the offspring of a giraffe and an elephant that may look grotesque but is hailed nonetheless as a "beautiful animal." Or perhaps the prose poem is "a cast-iron aeroplane that can actually fly, mainly because its pilot doesn't seem to care if it does or not." When Louis Jenkins compares the writing of a prose poem to throwing a crumpled piece of paper into a wastebasket ("a skill that, though it may improve hand-eye coordination, does not lead necessarily to an ability to play basketball"), it's as if failure were a premise of the enterprise. Perhaps it is, or perhaps the fellows are being impish as much as diffident. Jenkins would rather chuck paper into basket than listen to the teacher "drone on about the poetry of Tennyson." Edson jovially stresses the capaciousness of the genre. "You could call the pieces in *Tender Buttons* prose poems," he tells an interviewer who has asked about Gertrude Stein. "Heck, one can call most anything a prose poem. That's what's great about them; anything that's not something else is probably a prose poem." The interviewer persists. How about "the '70's when you, Bly, Tate, and others were writing prose poems"? And Edson, sensing the hunger for a myth, obligingly concocts one. There was a time when "prose poems were illegal" and he, Jim [Tate], and the Captain [Bly, after the stern Captain Bligh in *Mutiny on the Bounty*] began their clandestine activities. "After long evenings of talking prose poems we'd relax by trying to guess who was ghostwriting all the stuff that was appearing in all the poetry magazines. It looked like the work of a single hack."

In the 1970s, the prose poem afforded a means to depart or dissent from what that "single hack" was producing. The prose poem as surreal fable, in the manner of Edson or Maxine Chernoff, seemed a compelling option. "There is a shorter distance from the unconscious to the Prose Poem than from the unconscious to most poems in verse," Michael Benedikt said. There was never any danger of a new orthodoxy, but someone quipped that if you said *prose poem* in a word association game the next word to come to everyone's mind would be *surrealist* or *surreal*. Certainly the prose poem in the United States today is not as predictably unpredictable, in part because it has loosened its ties to the French tradition. There is a renewed sense that the homemade American prose poem is a thing that could not exist without the idea of America preceding it. This is not entirely a new story. In a 1957 prologue to his early *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*, William Carlos Williams took pains to distinguish the book from "the typically French prose poem," whose "pace was not my own"—despite the debt, evident in the title, to Rimbaud's *Season in Hell*. The question "what is American about the American prose poem" remains second to "what is American about American poetry" as a topic that can be debated and discussed endlessly without any prospect of a resolution [. . .]

Experimental writers have invested much energy in prose as a poetic medium while at the same time often repudiating or resisting the narrative impulse. In 1980 the Language poet Ron Silliman wrote a manifesto under the heading "the New Sentence." He argued that the sentence—the liberated sentence in prose that works like poetry—is not a unit of logic but an independent entity that relates to the sentences before and after it in multiple, complex, and ambiguous ways. As Marjorie Perloff remarks about works by Silliman (*Tjanting*), Lyn Hejinian (*My Life*), and Rosmarie Waldrop (*The Reproduction of Profiles*), "In these prose compositions, a given sentence, far from following its predecessor or preparing the way for the sentence that follows, remains relatively autonomous, continuity being provided by word and sound repetition as well as by semantic transfer, in what the Russian Formalists called the 'orientation toward the neighboring word.'" If poems resemble paintings, the prose poem could as easily correspond to a Mondrian abstraction as to a Flemish street scene.

That this argument can be derived from a reading of Gertrude Stein is but one reason for considering her the mother of the American prose poem (as Poe, through his influence on Baudelaire, was an uncle of the French prose poem). The prose poems that constitute Stein's *Tender Buttons* initiate a tradition of experimentation. Stein had a revolutionary poetic intent, and *Tender Buttons* is a sustained effort at treating words as objects in their own right rather than as symbolic representations of things. To this day no one has better captured the abstract music of sentences and paragraphs. Nor has anyone departed so radically from the conventions of making sense while making such richly evocative poetry. Consider "A Dog" from *Tender Buttons*. Here it is in its entirety:

A little monkey goes like a donkey that means to say that means to say that more sighs last goes. Leave with it. A little monkey goes like a donkey.

At first this seems a sort of riddle, as if the writer's task were to suggest a thing without naming it (except in the

title). It has charm, its rhymes are spirited, but it has something else as well. There is drama in the sentences and between them, the stock phrase (“that means to say”) repeated to lend urgency, then the four accented monosyllables in a row (“more sighs last goes”), and finally the appearance of a resolution (“Leave with it”), with closure achieved by recapitulation of the initial theme. In a sense this prose poem has, in Walter Pater’s famous formulation, aspired to the condition of music. It has achieved abstractness. But what “A Dog” also shows us is the abstract structure of syntax that precedes content and helps create meaning, charging common words like “sighs” and “goes” with a power of signification we didn’t know they had.

In verse, the tension between the line and the sentence can be fruitful. The canonical example is the opening of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton isolates the word *fruit* at the end of line one, and the word acquires triple or even quadruple meanings. In prose the poet gives up the meaning-making powers of the line break. The poet in prose must use the structure of the sentence itself, or the way one sentence modifies the next, to generate the surplus meaning that helps separate poetry in prose from ordinary writing. W. H. Auden, who habitually subdivided people into classes and types, favored antithesis as a syntactical principle in “Vespers” where he presents himself, a partisan of Eden, squaring off against an advocate of utopian socialism:

In my Eden a person who dislikes Bellini has the good manners not to get born: In his New Jerusalem a person who dislikes work will be very sorry he was born.

The antithesis creates balance but also invites the reader to weigh the scales. The repetition of clauses allows for significant variation, so when we’re told that the shirker in the New Jerusalem “will be very sorry he was born,” the locution itself exemplifies the sort of “good manners” that make Auden’s Eden a more attractive place.

John Ashbery seems to incorporate self-contradiction as an operating principle in his prose poem “A Nice Presentation.” He enacts within the sentence a mazy motion:

Most things don’t matter but an old woman of my acquaintance is always predicting gloom and doom and her prophecies matter though they may never be fulfilled. That’s one reason I don’t worry too much but I like to tell her she is right but also wrong because what she says won’t happen.

The sentences embody reversal and hesitation; they suggest a kind of logic but mostly they reveal that logic is an illusion. They enact a paradox: that one can be in perpetual motion while remaining stationary, as the mind of a perennial fence-sitter may race from one thought to the next.

Writing in prose you give up much, but you gain in relaxation, in the possibilities of humor and incongruity, in narrative compression, and in the feeling of escape or release from tradition or expectation. The prose poem can feel like a holiday from the rigors of verse, as is sometimes the case in Shakespeare’s plays. In *Hamlet*, for example, prose can serve the purposes of the “antic disposition” the prince affects to make people think he is mad. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, on the other hand, prose stands for plain sense, verse for hyperbole, ornament; Benedick is an inept rhymester, but his love for Beatrice and hers for him has a chance to endure because it is founded not on the fantastical language of romantic courtship but on the sallies and scorn of prose wit. The prose poem can have this antipoetical, down-to-earth quality, can stand as a corrective to the excesses to which verse is susceptible.

Russell Edson is attracted to the idea of “a poetry freed from the definition of poetry, and a prose free of the necessities of fiction.” Robert Bly associates prose with “the natural speech of a democratic language.” For James Tate, the prose poem is an effective “means of seduction. For one thing, the deceptively simple packaging: the paragraph. People generally do not run for cover when they are confronted with a paragraph or two. The paragraph says to them: I won’t take much of your time, and, if you don’t mind my saying so, I am not known to be arcane, obtuse, precious, or highfalutin’. Come on in.” Robert Hass explains that he was happy with one of his efforts because it “was exactly what the prose poem wasn’t supposed to be. It was too much like the sound of expository prose.” At the time of writing it seemed to Hass that he was exploring unknown territory. And in retrospect? “It seems a sort of long escape.” [. . .]

The prose poem has achieved an unprecedented level of popularity among American poets. The evidence is abundant to one who closely monitors literary magazines. There are excellent journals devoted exclusively to prose poems, [including] *Key Satchel* and *Untitled* [. . .] So did a quartet of magazines that seem to have sectioned off parts of the territory. *Quarterly West* specializes in the prose poem as short fiction. *The Seneca Review* favors the prose poem as lyric essay. *Quarter After Eight* announces that its editorial mission is to “provide a space for work that fits neither genre: a space that demonstrates the tension between poetry and prose,” while the Rhode Island-based magazine whose title is the diacritical sign for a paragraph considers the single block of text to be the prose poem’s ideal shape or default structure. There are magazines whose whole existence is based on advocacy. Brian Clements has just started *Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics*. Founded in 1992 by Peter Johnson, *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* recently went under but not before proclaiming a prose poem renaissance and articulating a strong case for the form. Fascinating adventures in

the prose poem have turned up in many other magazines as well [including] *The Hat* and *The Germ* and *Shiny*, in *New American Writing* and *Conjunctions* and *Another Chicago Magazine*, *American Poetry Review* and *Conduit* and *Verse*, *Hambone* and *Ploughshares* and *American Letters and Commentary*, and this is not an exhaustive list.

Seven of the poets who have served as guest editors of *The Best American Poetry*—Simic, Strand, Ashbery, Robert Bly, Robert Hass, John Hollander, and James Tate—have championed the prose poem or done some of their best work in that form (if it is a form) or genre (if that's what it is). As many prose poems as sonnets—more probably—have been chosen for *The Best American Poetry* since the inception of the annual anthology in 1988. And certainly signs of the prose poem's belated respectability abound. Several "international" anthologies were published in the 1990s, the first since Michael Benedikt's in 1976. One was the culminating issue of *The Prose Poem* (2000), the other Stuart Friebert and David Young's valuable *Models of the Universe* (1995). Recent academic studies, such as Steven Monte's *Invisible Fences* (2000) and Michel Delville's *The American Prose Poem* (1998), overlap surprisingly little, so fertile and various is the field. The issue of *TriQuarterly* that is current as I write, with Campbell McGrath as guest editor, includes a section called "Prose Poetics." I've just read provocative articles on the subject in *Rain Taxi* and the *Antioch Review*. Undoubtedly the conference on the prose poem, replete with "craft lectures," that was held in Walpole, New Hampshire, in August 2001, was the first of many to come. This is all a far cry from the situation in 1978 when *The Monument* was denied the Pulitzer, excellent prose poems were being written but it still seemed a secret, and the editor of this volume, then a thesis candidate at Columbia University, defended his dissertation on the prose poem in English, choosing Oscar Wilde, Gertrude Stein, W. H. Auden, and John Ashbery as four exemplars.

## APPENDIX 2: The Prose Poem and the Ideology of Genre

### Introduction<sup>25</sup>

Verse is everywhere in language where there is rhythm, everywhere, except on posters and page four of the newspapers. In the genre which we call prose there is verse of every conceivable rhythm, some of it admirable. But in reality there is no prose: there is the alphabet, and then there are verse forms, more or less rigid, more or less diffuse. In every attempt at style there is versification.

Stephan Mallarmé, "Réponses à des enquêtes"

All that is not prose is verse,  
and all that is not verse is prose.  
Molière, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*

Since its first official appearance in nineteenth-century France with Charles Baudelaire's celebrated *Paris Spleen* (begun in 1855 and first published in full in 1869), the prose poem, "the literary genre with an oxymoron for a name" (M. Riffaterre 117), has not ceased to puzzle readers and critics alike. In his famous preface to the collection, Baudelaire himself nevertheless sought to put forward a first definition of the genre as "the miracle of a poetic prose, musical though rhythmless and rhymeless, flexible yet rugged enough to identify with the lyrical impulses of the soul, the ebbs and flows of reverie, the pangs of conscience" (*Poems* 25). Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen* was one of the first significant attempts by a major representative of the Western canon to question the then widely accepted formal and phonic premises of poetry, namely the presence of rhyme and meter. In the English-speaking world, the prose poem and other forms of "poetic prose" were later cherished by the British Decadents as an ideal form in which to fulfill their craving for syntactic intricacies and stylistic mannerisms. Since then, the prose poem in English has veered off in various directions as antipodal as Gertrude Stein's Cubist vignettes in *Tender Buttons*, Sherwood Anderson's Whitmanesque hymns in *Mid-American Chants*, and more recently Robert Bly's "Deep Image" poems or the postgeneric experiments of the new American avant-garde known as the "Language poetry" group. Baudelaire's generic *enfant terrible* now seems to have developed almost as many trends as there are poets practicing it, so that any attempt at a single, monolithic definition of the genre would be doomed to failure.<sup>1</sup> [Footnote sources not listed in this handout. L.W.]

As suggested by the diversity of stylistic, modal, and methodological approaches to the genre represented in this study, the history of the contemporary prose poem in English is, to a large extent, the history of the successive attempts by poets to redefine the parameters governing our expectations of what a poem (or a prose poem) should look or sound like. If we turn to specialized reference works, such as the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, we find the following detailed description of what a prose poem should and should not be:

PROSE POEM (poem in prose). A composition able to have any or all the features of the lyric, except that it is put on the page—though not conceived of—as prose. It differs from poetic prose in that it is short and compact, from free verse in that it has no line breaks, from a short prose passage in that it has, usually, more pronounced rhythms, sonorous effects, imagery, and density of expression. It may contain even inner rhyme and metrical runs. Its length, generally, is from half a page (one or two paragraphs) to three or four pages, i.e., that of the average lyrical poem. If it

<sup>25</sup> Excerpted from Michel Delville's *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre* (University Press of Florida, 1998): 1-18.

is any longer, the tensions and impact are forfeited, and it becomes—more or less poetic—prose. The term “prose poem” has been applied irresponsibly to anything from the Bible to a novel by Faulkner, but should be used only to designate a highly conscious (sometimes even self-conscious) art form.

Other definitions in the same vein include Martin Gray’s description of the genre as a “short work of poetic prose, resembling a poem because of its ornate language and imagery, and because it stands on its own, and lacks narrative: like a lyric poem but not subjected to the patterning of metre.” For M. H. Abrams, Baudelaire’s *Paris Spleen*, Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, and a number of “excerptible passages” from Pater’s prose essays “approximate the form that in the nineteenth century was called the prose poem: densely compact, pronouncedly rhythmic, and highly sonorous compositions which are written as a continuous sequence of sentences without line breaks.”

The common denominator of these various definitions is a conception of the prose poem defined from the perspective of poetry, one which brings forward two distinct but interrelated assumptions concerning the nature of “the poetic.” The first of these assumptions . . . relies on an all-too-common equation of poetic language with the lyric; it postulates that a poem should be a relatively short piece of writing concerned primarily with the expression of feelings. The second hypothesis posits that the degree of stylistic and imagistic “density” of poetry allegedly distinguishes it from the dull, commonplace, matter-of-fact language of prose. Since poetry, as Ursula K. Le Guin memorably put it, is “the beautiful dumb blonde, all words,” and prose the “smart brunette with glasses, all ideas” (109), the first task of a prose poet should be to reproduce the rhythmic, sonorous, and stylistic richness commonly associated with poetic language through the medium of prose.

According to such a view, poetic language is primarily characterized by a more “vehement” usage of the same stylistic devices present in literary prose. As Roland Barthes argues in *Writing Degree Zero*, these strictly stylistic considerations still rely on the classical conception of poetry as “merely an ornamental variation of prose,” a mode which is felt to be “a minimal form of speech, the most economical vehicle for thought.” In the following double equation, Barthes uses the letters *a*, *b*, and *c* for “certain attributes of language, which are useless but decorative, such as meter, rhyme or the ritual of images”:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Poetry} &= \text{Prose} + a + b + c \\ \text{Prose} &= \text{Poetry} - a - b - c \end{aligned}$$

In the classical period, Barthes comments, the difference is clearly not one of essence but one of quantity, as poetry and prose are “neither more nor less separated than two different numbers, contiguous like them, but dissimilar because of the very difference in their magnitudes” (*Reader* 53). This conception of poetry as a measurable degree of stylistic and imagistic “decorativeness” always already present in any literary work—whether written in prose or in verse—has remained, until recently, a basic tenet in contemporary literary criticism. As Jean Cohen claims in *Structure du langage poétique*, “prose is only a moderate kind of poetry.” Poetry, by contrast, is seen as “the most passionate form of literature, the paroxysmic degree of style. Style is one. It comprises a finite number of figures, always the same. From prose to poetry and from one state of poetry to another, the difference is only in the audacity with which language employs the processes virtually inscribed within its structure” (149).

As we will see, Cohen’s notion of poetic language, a relativistic variant of Coleridge’s “homely definitions of prose and poetry” (“prose = words in their best order; poetry = the best words in their best order”), cannot do justice to the history of the contemporary prose poem, the subversive potential of which is certainly not based exclusively on an attempt to emulate the stylistic fertility of traditional “poetic” language. However, the most problematic aspect shared by Cohen’s theory and the foregoing definitions of the prose poem as a piece of “poeticized” prose is that traditional categories associated with the “poetic”—including metaphorical density, stylistic sophistication, and lyric intimacy—have long ceased to be the convenient hallmarks that, at the time of Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater, enabled one to separate the wheat from the chaff by making the difference between “poetic prose” and the undecorative, utilitarian matter-of-factness of “prosaic” prose. Now that ordinary language and diction have gained acceptance into the canon of American poetry, one is entitled to wonder about the possible survival of formal, phonic, or thematic standards of poeticity in view of the progressive narrowing of the contemporary poetry reader’s “horizon of expectations,” to use Hans Robert Jauss’ famous expression.

How are we to approach a prose text labeled as poetry at a time when traditional notions of poetic language have become so problematic? Despite the advent of free verse and the subsequent obsolescence of metric and stylistic criteria for distinguishing poetry from prose, the prose poem has paradoxically continued to be regarded by many as a rather disturbing, if not downright illegitimate mode of literary expression. Though it would no longer seem necessary to refute essentialist notions of genre, the relatively unexpected commotion caused in the poetic and critical establishment by Charles Simic’s 1990 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of prose poems, *The World Doesn’t End*,<sup>2</sup> suggests that a number of prescriptive norms about the formal premises of poetry continue to prevail, even in a country which was among the first to free poetic expression from both stylistic sophistication and prosodic convention. At a time when verse and poetry are no longer necessarily synonymous, the survival of a certain number of formal expectations and prescriptive boundaries between literary genres nonetheless remains the uncertain ground from which the prose poem still manages to draw a significant part of its subversive and, some would argue, political potential. What is more, the recent renewal of interest by both writers and critics in the prose poem, a “formless” genre par excellence, has greatly contributed to relegitimizing debates concerning

the specific attributes of poeticity resisted or transgressed by prose poets. As the following chapters show, the allegedly “genreless” or “postgeneric” space of the prose poem has given a new significance and a new relevance to the notion of genre itself.

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The prose poem was first introduced to the English-speaking public by Stuart Merrill’s *Pastels in Prose*, a collection of French prose poems in English translation published in New York in 1890. In the years that followed the appearance of Merrill’s anthology, the prose poem began to arouse the interest of a whole generation of British Decadent writers. The main representatives of the British prose poem in the final years of the nineteenth century included Ernest Dowson, the Scottish author William Sharp (a.k.a. Fiona Macleod), and Oscar Wilde, whose parable-like *Poems in Prose* (1894) are the first instance of a consciously cultivated tradition of the prose poem in English. In the general climate of self-conscious Aestheticism that characterized the work of these writers in the 1880s and 1890s, the prose poem—which was then viewed as barely distinguishable from other experiments with “poetic prose,” such as the “artistic” prose of Walter Pater’s essays on Renaissance art—almost naturally became a preferred form for the kind of painstaking artifice and stylistic sophistication favored by the fin-de-siècle generation. The typical Decadent prose poem combines a colorful, heavily stylized vocabulary with a deceptively simple, self-consciously archaic diction often inspired by the King James Bible. Like many prose poems written at the heyday of British Aestheticism, William Sharp’s “Orchil” also makes use of a number of formal features, such as the use of repetitions and alliterations, which were meant to approximate the musical quality of traditional verse:<sup>3</sup>

I dreamed of Orchil, the dim goddess who is under the brown earth, in a vast cavern, where she weaves at two looms. With one hand she weaves life upward through the grass; with the other she weaves death downward through the mould; and the sound of the weaving is Eternity, and the name of it in the green world is Time. And, through all, Orchil weaves the weft of Eternal Beauty, that passeth not, though her soul is Change.

This is my comfort, O Beauty that art of Time, who am faint and hopeless in the strong sound of that other Weaving, where Orchil, the dim goddess, sits dreaming at her loom under the brown earth. (Füger 60)

One of the first critical responses to such a conception of the prose poem as a piece of stylized and “poeticized” prose (Ernest Dowson’s 1899 collection of prose poems was quite appropriately named *Decorations in Prose*) was voiced by T. S. Eliot in 1917. In an essay entitled “The Borderline of Prose,” Eliot reacted against the prose poems of Richard Aldington, which he saw as a disguised attempt to revive the stylistic preciousness and technical “charlatanism” (“Borderline” 158) of the Decadents. In contrast with the prose poems of Baudelaire’s *Paris Spleen* and the “pure prose” of Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, which he admired, Eliot condemned Aldington’s hybrid prose poems on the ground that they “seem[ed] to hesitate between two media” (159). As became clear in a second essay on the subject, published in 1921, Eliot objected less to the prose poets’ endeavors to create a hybrid genre than to the terms *prose poem* and *prose poetry* themselves, to which he preferred the more neutral expression *short prose* (“Prose and Verse” 6). That Eliot’s fierce condemnation of the formal hybridity of the prose poem did much to discourage other early modernist poets from even trying their hand at the genre is beyond any doubt—if Eliot had been the lesser poet, and Aldington one of the most respected and influential men of letters of his time, the history of the contemporary prose poem in English might have taken a totally different turn. Be that as it may, Eliot cannot be blamed for dismissing a tradition that, besides Aldington’s rather undistinguished “impressionistic” sketches, had so far produced little more than a handful of neo-Ossianic hymns and Wildean “poetic parables.” Indeed, one of the more positive implications of Eliot’s rejection of Aldington’s prose poems was that the modern prose poem needed to rid itself of the stigmata of the Decadent school and its reliance on “outward” attributes of poeticity.

As we will see, an alternative to the stylistic “charlatanism” of the Decadents can already be detected in Eliot’s one published prose poem, “Hysteria” (1915), the matter-of-fact tone and unlyrical content of which distinguish it from any previous tradition of the prose poem in English and make it an interesting precursor of the so-called fabulist trend [. . .]. However, the process of emancipation of the contemporary prose poem from its fin-de-siècle heritage was a slow and difficult one. A typical example of the ambivalent relationship of early modernist writers with the prose lyric was Amy Lowell’s “polyphonic prose,” which was based on “the long, flowing cadence of oratorical prose” (xii) and the poetic quality of which relied on “the recurrence of a dominant thought or image, coming in irregularly and in varying words, but still giving the spherical effect . . . imperative in all poetry” (xv). The circular, contrapuntal patterns of Lowell’s polyphonic prose (which first appeared in the volume *Can Grande’s Castle* in 1918 and was originally inspired by Paul Fort’s experiments with “rhythmic prose”) made it to a large extent a continuation of, rather than a departure from, the Decadent tradition of the prose poem, which amounted to a transposition of metrical and phonic constraints of verse onto the medium of prose—like its fin-de-siècle counterparts, Lowell’s polyphonic prose still aspired to the “musical” condition of the verse lyric.

Lowell’s insistence on “the absolute adequacy of the manner of a passage [of polyphonic prose] to the thought it embodies” (xi), however, also makes *Can Grande’s Castle* an early example of an American variation on the Baudelairean project to create a prose supple enough to be able to reproduce “the lyrical impulses of the soul, the ebbs and flows of reverie, the pangs of conscience” (*Spleen* 24). At a time when British and American novelists were becoming increasingly

interested in registering the full spectrum of mental life (what William James had described in his *Principles of Psychology* [1890] as “the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life” [Bradbury 197]), it is hardly surprising that the first genuinely modern experiments with the short prose lyric were carried out by two major representatives of the stream-of-consciousness novel: James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. As is shown in the prologue to this study, Joyce’s early “dream epiphanies” (1900–1904) constitute the first modern attempt to use the prose poem as a vehicle for approaching the capricious “flow” of consciousness and the process of subjective experience from the side of the lyric.

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“What is?” laments the disappearance of the poem—another catastrophe.  
By announcing that which is just as it is, a question salutes the birth of prose.  
Jacques Derrida, “Che cos’è la poesia”

If most modernist writers still regarded the prose poem as a rather marginal phenomenon and a mere curiosity for Francophiles, a recent “revival” of the genre in the United States is attested to by the publication, over the past twenty-five years, of numerous volumes of prose poems, notably by some of America’s most distinguished poets, such as Robert Bly, Rosmarie Waldrop, or Charles Simic. Still, only recently have American critics started to show an interest in the prose poem as a genre. Unfortunately, the two studies published so far on the prose poem in English, Stephen Fredman’s *Poet’s Prose* and Marguerite Murphy’s *A Tradition of Subversion*, focus on a limited number of contemporary writers whose works are by no means representative of the wide variety of items currently published and received as prose poems in countless collections and poetry magazines.<sup>4</sup> With the exception of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, William Carlos Williams’ *Improvisations*, and Robert Bly’s *The Morning Glory*, the great majority of the works dealt with in the present study—and which are nevertheless generally credited with having given the prose poem in English its *lettres de noblesse*—have been consistently neglected by literary criticism, both in Europe and in the United States, even by the few critics who have so far written on the genre.

In addition to providing an analysis of several canonical or noncanonical collections all too often ignored by critics, I offer a general survey of the contemporary prose poem in English, in the course of which the work of numerous “minor” or occasional contemporary writers of prose poems—including such established writers as Sherwood Anderson, Kenneth Patchen, and W. S. Merwin—are dealt with more briefly. My intention, however, is not to produce an exhaustive chronological account of the development of the modern prose poem in English but, rather, to describe a number of important directions taken by the genre as it has been defined and redefined by its practitioners throughout the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, I approach the notion of genre itself as a historical rather than a theoretical category—that is, by drawing inductively on an existing body of contemporary works labeled, marketed, or simply received as prose poems, rather than by establishing a prescriptive construct that would precondition my attempts to come to terms with the texts themselves.<sup>6</sup> Whenever possible, the following chapters privilege the issue of “generic intentionality” through an investigation of the various creative and theoretical approaches the prose poets themselves apply to their own work and the work of others.

With the exception of Stephen Fredman in his groundbreaking *Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, the critics who have so far attempted to account for the potential for innovation of the prose poem as a genre have done so by referring to a single, synthetic system of interpretation. Michael Riffaterre, for instance, defines the text’s relation to a selected “intertext” as the single, invariant constitutive feature of the genre; Jonathan Monroe in *A Poverty of Objects* and Marguerite Murphy in *A Tradition of Subversion* rely on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories on the novel in emphasizing the prose poem’s inherently “dialogical” and “heteroglot” nature. Both studies describe the genre as the locus of convergence or conflict of various discourses, which in turn reflect a variety of extradiscursive realities, including a number of specific social, political, and ideological agendas. Ultimately, they suggest that the prose poem exists mainly by reference to other genres, which it tends to include or exclude, subscribe to or subvert.

To some extent, this emphasis on the inherently intertextual and heteroglot dynamics of the prose poem is indispensable in the context of a form whose very name suggests its ambivalent status as a genre writing across other genres—a self-consciously deviant form, the aesthetic orientation and subversive potential of which are necessarily founded on a number of discursive and typographical violations. One way of coming to terms with the inherent duality of the prose poem therefore consists in attending to the specific generic conventions alternately introduced and negated by the genre. Instead of resorting to a single interpretive strategy, however, in the present study I consider the contemporary prose poem—approached in the light of its multiple love-hate relationships with dominant aesthetic and extra-aesthetic discourses—as representative of how individual works can subvert the very codes and narratives by which they exist and can expose them as the product of specific historical moments. Consequently, the prose poem is also addressed as emblematic of how literary genres conceal traces of their own underlying aesthetic contradictions, including the fact that such metagenres as “poetry,” “narrative,” and the “lyric” are always already contaminated by the traces of other generic categories they tend to subscribe to or exclude. Special attention is given to the various transgeneric experiments carried out by contemporary prose poets in the context of a simultaneous move in twentieth-century literature toward a hypothetical *degré zéro* of genre. In this respect, also, traditional generic categories and labels pertaining to “prosaic” as opposed to “poetic” works (including the elusive distinction between newcomers like the “short short story” or “sudden

fiction” and a certain kind of prose poem with a strong narrative line) appear as just another familiar narrative the prose poem tends to subvert and deconstruct by virtue of its own shamelessly hybrid modalities.

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In a recent study entitled *The Power of Genre*, the critic Adena Rosmarin claims that “a genre is chosen or defined to fit neither a historical nor a theoretical reality but to serve a pragmatic end” (49-50). Rosmarin’s subsequent call for a revised theory of genre as a critical instrument and a tool for the interpretation of individual texts is symptomatic of the current crisis of legitimization undergone by genre theory and criticism. At a time when the notion of “generic instability” has become an accomplished fact in both postmodern aesthetics and poststructuralist theory, the taxonomic logic often associated with genre studies indeed appears still to be caught in the throes of its former existence as a prescriptive discourse. The retrieval and revaluation of forgotten, minor and marginal genres, the preoccupation with intertextuality and pastiche, and the desire for cross-cultural and cross-discursive forms all testify to a new network of complications, contradictions, and paradoxes not easily containable within the symmetrical hierarchies and paradigms of traditional genre theories.

In the midst of this postgeneric chaos, the prose poem remains a relatively young genre still in the process of self-definition, a formal abstraction whose changing methods and ambitions are exceptionally difficult to define and formulate. By testing the validity of our assumptions concerning the nature and function of both poetic and prosaic language, the prose poem inevitably leads us to investigate a number of specific postulates underlying the act of defining genres and, above all, of tracing boundaries between them. In the absence of any transhistorical definition of the prose poem, descriptive—and essentially modal—orientations will be preferred to the prescriptive generic taxonomies of mainstream genre theory, which, more often than not, still stubbornly perpetuates the sacrosanct poetry/verse/lyric triad. More generally, I here consider the notion of genre itself as necessarily founded on a semi-arbitrary link between a label and its “content.” As Tzvetan Todorov reminds us, there is no “pure” (or even purely “lyric,” “epic,” or “dramatic”) genre, and even a “new” genre automatically exists by reference to one or several previously existing ones (*Genres* 15). Since a particular genre does not exist exclusively by virtue of its own constitutive features but also—and above all—in terms of its relationship with other norms, labels, or discursive conventions, a literary work always possesses a given generic value both within and without each of the genres, subgenres, and modes of representation it belongs to, “straddles,” or subverts.

Whoever acknowledges the necessity to recognize the specific norms transgressed or eluded by the prose poem will easily identify the underlying contradiction of a number of recent theories proclaiming the alleged “post-” or “nongeneric” nature of the genre. In this respect, neither Michael Davidson’s “nongeneric” prose (“After Sentence” 3) nor Stephen Fredman’s description of the prose poem as “a kind of ‘last genre,’” purporting to effect what Octavio Paz calls “the mixture and ultimate abolition of genres” in Western literature (Fredman 5), can adequately account for the subversive potential of the works discussed here, which can be regarded as so many creative transactions at work both within and against a specific set of generic and discursive conventions.

As suggested, an alternative to both traditional generic systems and Fredman’s theory concerning the postgeneric status of the prose poem consists in seeing beyond the existence of generic boundaries as such in order to look for similarities and differences between individual works. As Paul Hernadi writes, arguing for a radical reconsideration of the basic axioms of genre theory, “things may be similar in *different respects*” (4). This relativistic concept of similarity, which Hernadi himself inherited from Karl R. Popper’s *Logic of Scientific Discovery*, provides a useful methodological starting point for a descriptive study of generic *features* present, to a certain extent, in any literary work. Heeding Popper’s advice, critics confronted with such an elusive genre as the prose poem will cease to rely on the claims to universal validity of traditional generic distinctions. Instead, they will seek to account for the rhetorical gesture(s) involved in the act of composing and labeling a piece of prose as a prose poem, as well as for the complex interplay between its synchronic and diachronic positions in the history of modern literature.

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Jonathan Monroe defines the literary and historical significance of the prose poem as “above all that of a critical, self-critical, utopian genre, a genre that tests the limits of genre” (16). The prose poem, he adds, “aspires to be poetic/literary language’s own coming to self-consciousness, the place where poet and reader alike become critically aware of the writer’s language” (35-36). By putting the accent on the genre’s status as a self-consciously deviant form, Monroe raises the issue of the possibility of a *mise en abyme* of genericness by an individual literary work. The question, according to Jacques Derrida, becomes whether a writer is actually practicing a genre, so to speak, “from within” or “from without”:

What are we doing when, to practice a “genre,” we quote a genre, represent it, stage it, expose its generic law, analyze it practically? Are we still practicing the genre? Does the work still belong to the genre it recites? But inversely, how could we make a genre work without referring to it [quasi-]quotationally, indicating at some point, “See, this is a work of such-and-such a genre”? Such an indication does not belong to the genre and makes the statement of belonging an ironical exercise. It interrupts the belonging of which it is a necessary condition. (*Reader* 259)

Seen from that angle, the act of writing and labeling a literary work is necessarily inscribed in a network of differential relationships between signifiers that are constantly quoting and re quoting themselves and each other, sometimes—but not always—in a subversive or parodic fashion. Since a particular genre always exceeds the very formal, thematic, and presentational restrictions that generate it, the supplemental quality of generic labels themselves necessarily makes them subject to an ironical treatment within the individual work. With the interplay of such ironical citations as its object, genre

theory, once it has been redefined into a differential practice, can derive new heuristic strategies from the ashes of its now obsoleted prescriptive foundations. In the context of the present work, what Derrida calls the “law of genre”—a “principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (*Acts* 227) denying the self-contained integrity of any discourse—seems an adequate model for a descriptive approach to the prose poem, a genre which, more than any other genre, constantly gestures to its own constructedness and, more broadly, to what poststructuralism generally diagnoses as the arbitrariness and undecidability of boundaries.

As we will see, however, a full investigation of the genre-testing potential of the prose poem cannot be limited to describing its intertextual and interdiscursive strategies without accounting for the exact circumstances of its composition and reception. Among my major aims here indeed is to demonstrate that one method of coming to terms with such hybrid “boundary works” (Morson 48) as the prose poem consists in speaking of genre not as a given “thing” but as the expression of a relationship between a reader and a text. Only in such a way can one hope to redefine the taxonomic categories of traditional genre theory into a genuine instrument of exegesis, one which remains justified and valuable if it facilitates continuing insight into the art itself.

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[T]he various intergeneric transactions at work in the contemporary prose poem in English often involve the reclamation of a number of nonlyric and nonliterary modes and discourses. Jonathan Holden has provided a convincing analysis of the possibility of reclaiming for poetry the right to explore the syntactic and semantic possibilities of public, utilitarian prose from the point of view of verse. His thought-provoking *The Fate of American Poetry* examines the different ways in which verse forms can or cannot investigate a number of functions, modes, and subject matters that seem to be monopolized by prose genres. After exploring the didactic and storytelling orientations of American poetry, as well as how these specific orientations distinguish themselves from their equivalents in didactic prose and prose narratives, Holden proceeds to discuss the potential for discursiveness of verse poetry as opposed to that of “nonfiction prose.” Comparing a passage of expository prose with a verse adaptation of it, Holden contrasts the self-contained isolatedness of the linedated version with the contextual discursiveness of the prose original. “The rhetorical markers and the diction of prose,” he concludes, “have the effect of subtly qualifying each proposition by placing it in a larger context than would be implied by the verse version”:

The urbanity and sense of wisdom that the best prose affords derives, in large part, from its unhurried and generous admission into discourse of other possible contexts. That is the opposite of lyric poetry. When Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria*, argues that in poetry “every passion has its proper pulse,” he is assuming that the subject matter of poetry deals, in large part, with “passion.” But “passion,” it would seem self-evident, is a state of mind in which the subject rules out all possible actions except one, in which mental activity proceeds in a drastically limited context. It becomes obsessive. The speaker of an impassioned lyric does not pause to put things into perspective. In fact, a condition for the success of lyric, and of song, is that it convince the audience, during the interval of the song’s duration, to forget any other perspectives. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith put it memorably, in *Poetic Closure*: “A poem must carry its own context on its back.” (117)

Holden’s approach—which is strictly limited to verse and does not acknowledge the existence of generic hybrids as such—is based on a formal and comparative analysis of the structural and rhetorical potential of linedated poetry as opposed to that of prose. His examination of functional negotiations between verse and prose forms, however, can profitably be extended to the question of whether generic, functional or modal (as opposed to merely structural) categories like “poetry” or the “lyric” can reterritorialize other genres, functions and modes which have come to be associated more or less exclusively with prose literature. As the works of Russell Edson, Michael Benedikt, and other neo-Surrealist prose poets demonstrate, the admission of narrative development or abstract discursiveness into a lyric format is still typical of many prose poems written in the United States today. These prose poems, which question a number of basic assumptions concerning the self-contained “presence” of the lyric mode, also tend to develop affinities with short discursive or narrative forms, whether literary or nonliterary, such as the fable, the parable, the dream narrative, the aphorism, the journal entry, the *pensée*, the dictionary definition, or even the stand-up comedy joke—at the end of these various intergeneric negotiations, what may have resulted in a sort of “anti-genre,” or a shapeless polymodal jumble, generally emerges as a self-conscious and creative compromise between two or among several conflicting sets of linguistic codes and conventions.

The notion of a unified and self-present lyric discourse—impervious to its social, political, psychological context or simply to its very textual or linguistic premises—is also challenged, in various ways, by most of the prose poets discussed in the present study. As Jonathan Monroe has argued, referring to the potential of the genre for dialogizing what Bakhtin called the “monological” tendency of the lyric, the prose poem “stands in direct opposition to the notion of a pure, self-contained ‘poetic’ speech that would betray no sense of historicity or of the social determinations of its own language” (Monroe 35). The range of methods used by prose poets in order to achieve this reintegration of the lyric into a larger constellation of literary and extraliterary contexts is as diverse as that of the various skills and ambitions displayed by the literary periods, movements, writers, and individual prose poems discussed here. Despite an enormous diversity of styles and approaches to the genre, a number of major methodological trajectories nevertheless emerge from the polymorphous and often rather sporadic history of the contemporary prose poem in English. Besides a general tendency to destabilize traditional generic boundaries, these recurrent features include a taste for (self-)parody, an awareness of the necessity to reinscribe the lyric self into a network of personal or public narratives, and a desire to turn the act of writing and the



workings of consciousness itself into objects of investigation.

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Even though they were published posthumously and therefore cannot be granted a historically central or founding place within the genre, James Joyce's "lyrical" epiphanies (1900–1904) . . . emerge as an early attempt to move the prose lyric away from the stylistic intricacies of the British Decadents and to carry out Baudelaire's project to reproduce the complex and discontinuous rhythms of consciousness. Considered in the light of Stephen Daedalus' theory of genres in *A Portrait* and of Barthes' notion of the *romanesque*, Joyce's posthumous *Giacomo Joyce* also enacts the formal struggle between lyric (self-)presence and narrative continuity that was to characterize the genre throughout the twentieth century. By withholding the pressures of both narrative linearity and poetic closure, Joyce's prose fragments eventually result in a "writerly" variant of the traditional lyric, one which attends to nothing less than the movement of desire itself.

[. . .] In this respect, also, Joyce's interest in the dialectics of the conscious and unconscious mind makes his "dream epiphanies" an interesting forerunner of the Surrealist "dreamscapes" favored by the *transition* poets[. . .]. In the absence of a powerful alternative to the epigonic *exercices de style* of the neo-Decadents, the only hope of revitalizing the prose poem had to come from outside the English-speaking world. Indeed, it was not until the advent of a real international avant-garde, influenced by the aesthetics of French Surrealism, that the prose poem in English started to win its credentials. In particular, the birth of the Paris-based English-language magazine *transition* (1927–38), which published all of the major French Surrealists in translation, coincided with a renewal of interest by American writers in the prose poem. Since the Surrealist movement attracted little attention in Anglo-Saxon literary circles before the late 1930s, *transition* also became a unique interface between the French Surrealist movement and a number of expatriate writers then part of literary Paris.<sup>7</sup> At a time when the individual consciousness itself began to be perceived as increasingly fragmented and self-divided, Eugene Jolas' "Proclamation" of the "Revolution of the Word" (1929) favored an approach to the lyric characterized by discontinuity and associational transitions such as were used, in the realm of fiction, in the so-called stream-of-consciousness novel. Long after *écriture automatique* had become somewhat old-fashioned even within the circles of French Surrealist pioneers, the work of a number of writers published in *transition* continued to retain some of the original impulses of *Les Champs magnétiques* (1920), which included, besides a renewed attention to the workings of the subconscious mind, a sense of "writing as process" insisting not so much on the content or subject matter of the poem as on what Andre Breton called "the actual functioning of thought" (*Manifestos* 26).

More than fifteen years before Jolas' manifesto of the Revolution of the Word, Gertrude Stein, another member of the American community in Paris, had already perceived that another, perhaps even more radical way of renewing the strength of poetry lay in a discovery of the "poetic" potential of descriptive and argumentative syntax. Her early portraits and still lifes laid the foundations of a self-conscious critique of the claims to transparency of mimetic and utilitarian prose, which paved the way for the postlyric mode recently developed by the so-called Language poets. A precursor of a certain form of postmodern poetry rather than a typical representative of the modernist avant-garde, Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) argues both for a total reexamination of the use-value of prose and a radical questioning of the aspirations to figurativeness of poetic language.

My discussion of Sherwood Anderson's *Mid-American Chants* (1918) [. . .] provides the terms for an analysis of the development of a popular (or "low modernist") tradition of the prose poem represented by a number of texts largely written out of the canon of American literature. Whereas Anderson's prose "chants" seek to accommodate a vision of the collective self and the expression of subjective feelings, Kenneth Patchen's dissonant stylistic medleys in *The Famous Boating Party* (1954) prefigure the playful intergeneric fantasies that were to become the hallmarks of the absurdist "narratives of consciousness" of Russell Edson and Michael Benedikt. Patchen's first experiments with the prose poem in the late 1940s can also be seen as a kind of "missing link" in the history of the contemporary prose poem, which vanishes almost completely from the Anglo-American literary scene after the heyday of Jolas' *transition*, only to reappear in the United States in the 1960s.

[. . . T]he best-known representatives of th[e] so-called "American prose poem revival," includ[e] pioneers such as Russell Edson, Robert Bly, and Michael Benedikt, as well as a number of newcomers such as Charles Simic and Canadian writer Margaret Atwood and [. . .] The fabulist (or Jacobean) trend of the prose poem made famous by Russell Edson. [This study includes] a theoretical examination of the relationship between the narrative prose poem and recent generic neologisms such as sudden fiction and the short short story. I then proceed to consider to what extent the metapoetic foregrounding of discourse and writing-as-process that characterizes the fabulist prose poem is linked with an understanding of poetic language as a deviant use of the language of rational logic and a number of specific conventions underlying discursive or narrative genres. In this perspective, special attention will be given to how the didactic aims and moral certainties traditionally attached to the fable and the parable become engulfed in the turmoil of Edson's poetics of metafictional fabulation and "paradox." Margaret Atwood's prose poems and "short shorts" use a number of other parodic and metapoetic strategies in order to debunk the various sociolinguistic assumptions underlying diverse literary and nonliterary narratives. Her more specifically feminist concern with the textual and existential constraints imposed upon the feminine self argues for an approach to both genre and gender as cultural formulae lodged at the intersection of literary and ideological discourses.

Bly's "thing poems" [. . .] are emblematic of the preoccupation with objects that characterizes the work of a number of

major representatives of the contemporary prose poem, such as Gertrude Stein and Francis Ponge. Unlike the majority of the works discussed in this study, however, the work of Robert Bly displays a strong distrust of abstraction and discursiveness. The assumptions of artlessness and immediacy that constitute the premises of Bly's poetics of the "Deep Image" also distinguish his work from the fabulist trend of the American prose poem, which on the whole tends toward the foregrounding of artifice and of the text's self-consciousness.

Charles Simic's 1990 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The World Doesn't End* [. . .] is one of the most recent, and also one of the most accomplished, avatars of the American neo-Surrealist prose poem. Even though Simic's prose poems share some of the defining features of the fabulist prose poem (including a taste for black humor and tragicomical absurdities), their most important feature is an ability to create a successful blending of lyric, philosophical, and critical material. In *Dime-Store Alchemy*, a double homage to the art of Joseph Cornell and to the city of New York, Simic regards the modern city as a new spatial model for a redefinition of the poetic, which becomes a means of "making strange" objects or events we tend to perceive as trivial or prosaic.

Throughout the twentieth century, the prose poem has often been used as a means of questioning and redefining the methods, aims, and ideological significance habitually attributed to both poetry and prose. Nowhere in recent years has this tendency been more apparent than in the experiments of the so-called Language poetry movement. The language-centered dynamics of Ron Silliman's "New Prose Poem," examined in part III, are directly inspired by the work of Gertrude Stein. Like many other Language poets, Silliman indeed shares Stein's skepticism about the implicit relationship of language to reference and the transparent "naturalness" of descriptive and argumentative syntax. In the larger context of the development of postwar American poetry, Silliman's "New Prose Poem" also seeks to deconstruct Charles Olson's speech-based "open field" and to redefine it into a primarily scriptural medium. More generally, the Language poets' creative and theoretical project as a whole—which echoes Derrida's critique of Western logocentrism and the poststructuralist deconstruction of literary subjectivity—rejects any conception of poetry as a spontaneous, "natural" utterance and provides the terms for a lyric mode "with a difference," one which puts the accent on the inherent textuality of the lyric self. In the course of my analysis of the rejection of mimesis and referentiality advocated by the Language poets, I also look upon their deconstructive practices as an ambitious (if not altogether successful) reorientation of poetic practice toward social and political analysis. Finally, I consider the emphasis the Language movement lays on theoretical discussion and how it eventually leads to the erasure of traditional divisions between creative and utilitarian forms of writing. By deconstructing the very notion of genre as just another dominant "narrative" and by calling into question the naturalness of accepted boundaries between prose and poetry, the lyric and the narrative, or the literal and the figurative, the New Prose Poem emerges as the methodological culmination of [several contemporary] transgeneric experiments.