

**Excerpts from *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry:
Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice*
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From Gary L. McDowell and F. Daniel Rzicznek's introduction:

“Richard Howard writes that “verse reverses—the reader turns at the end of the line—while prose proceeds.” If prose proceeds, then what is a reader to do when presented with prose that, in its sentence structure and music, turns? The prose poem’s form isn’t a negative space, rather it’s a positive one, a space populated with the elements of poetry—imagery, music, lyricism, metaphor, simile, alliteration, assonance, and so on—and dependent, though not wholly, on them. The sentence acts the part of the line, and there are fewer traditional rules and governances, but otherwise, the prose poem is, like its lineated cousins, simply a form of poetry.

One of the main arguments one may posit against the “tradition” of the prose poem is its relatively short history. Yet we, as editors, think this comparatively brief lifespan is an important part of defining, defending, and explicating the form. What is recognizable as the prose poem today originated in France in 1842 with the publication of Aloysius Bertrand’s *Gaspard de la Nuit*, a collection that borrows the elements of character and scenario from fiction, but eschews plot in favor of descriptions and comparisons that embody the richness and directness of poetry. Traces of the contemporary tradition can be found in Bertrand’s sentence fragments and imagistic leaps, as in this passage from Gian Lombardo’s 2000 translation: “And, flapping their wings, storks circle the town clock, stretch their necks straight into the wind and catch raindrops in their beaks.” When Bertrand describes a set of money scales “creeping out like a spider that doubled its long legs so it could shelter in a tulip tinted with a thousand different hues,” the finely wrought and imagistically explosive sentences (not lines!) of contemporary prose poems by Killarney Clary, Campbell McGrath, Tony Tost, and a wide array of others, come to mind.”

From Gary Young’s “The Unbroken Line”:

“The prose poem’s democratic itinerary, its horizontal rather than vertical trajectory, engenders a resistance to hierarchy and to inflation. Its fundamental nakedness may offer solace, but within a block of prose there’s no place to hide. Karl Shapiro put it well in a poem from *The Bourgeois Poet*: “This is a paragraph. A paragraph is a sonnet in prose. A paragraph begins where it ends. A paragraph may contain a single word or cruise for pages.” It is this suppleness combined with a certain brazenness that keeps me working in the form. I have found it more difficult to lie in prose, either through omission or amplification, and the moral pressure the form exerts is well worth whatever I may have lost by abandoning stanza and line.”

From Amy Newman’s “The Poem in the Gray Flannel Suit”:

“There are distinctions between poetry and prose, and there are similarities. Poetry’s history is a history of the lyric voice, and prose’s a story of the rational voice, less burdened by the soppy “distortions” of emotional song. Yet both are in language, the itchy tool we like to imagine may express both full sun and twilight. If I were a cartoonist I might draw poetry as a twisting, vivid heart inside active flesh, and prose as a series of ruled lines in a notebook, and then a puzzled face: How does one put that flesh onto that lined paper, and then, how does one sing it? And I’d call the cartoon “A History of Writing.”

The problem is that I am trying to locate a language art form that can unify the preconceived distinction between poetry and prose. While poetry is a distillation of idea through our sense of the world, it is not a private experience; as well, while prose is a tool to communicate information with clarity to others, such a distinction is limiting to what words can do. So we have something of a partition between poetry as song of the self and prose as the language we use to communicate.”

From Tung-Hui Hu’s “It’s Not in Cleveland, but I’m Getting Closer”:

“Also, a prose poem must convince you that it’s a poem. Without obvious indicators, such as white space, a reader must decide for him or herself what the poetic qualities are. Although a prose poem seems formless—seems like it discards rules altogether—I think

a prose poem is as much a product of constraint as a villanelle or a sonnet. A series of
withouts: without line breaks, without interruption.”