

The Prose Poem

Rebel with a Clause

MICHAEL MORSE

“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?”

— Charles Baudelaire

I’ve been a birder ever since I was a kid—and it’s a love that’s informed just about everything else I do. I’m a sucker for wings, for song, for colors, and variety. Birders, with varying degrees of obsession, tabulate each new species they encounter in the field by dutifully checking it off on a lifelist. Even with the hard and fast delineation of species—that’s a Redstart, that’s a Pied-billed Grebe—there are incidentals out in the bird world that I’ve always found fascinating: Hybrids. Backcrosses. Rule Breakers. Baltimore Orioles are in the east and Bullock’s Orioles are westerners. That said, the twain, in the Great Plains, meet. Similarly, the ranges and romantic overtures of Golden-Winged Warblers and Blue-Winged Warblers frequently overlap. When boundaries blur, so does nomenclature. The emergence of hybrids led Linnaeus, the botanist and physician who laid the foundations for modern taxonomy, to see that species are not fixed and invariable entities. The same could be said for poetic forms. Later in my life, when my love of song and image drifted towards language, I fell in love with a literary hybrid, the prose poem.

What is a prose poem? Well, first, let me discuss what it’s like. And I’m not completely off base here—ask a poet for a definition and you’ll likely receive a simile in its stead. True to form, when poets talk about prose poems, they tend to wax figurative. In his introduction to Peter Johnson’s book *Pretty Happy*, Charles Simic labels the prose poem a “veritable literary hybrid,” an “impossible amalgamation of lyric poetry, anecdote, fairy tale, allegory, joke, [and] journal entry. . . .” The epigraph for Simic’s prize-winning collection, *The World Doesn’t End*, playfully sets up the blurring to come with a Fats Waller quote: “Let’s waltz the rumba.”¹ Ed Hirsh remarks that these “compulsively modern creatures may look like prose, but they think metaphorically, like poetry.”²

¹ Simic, Charles. *The World Doesn’t End: Prose Poems*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985.

² Hirsch, Edward. “Poet’s Choice” column in the *Washington Post*, May 4th, 2003.

David Lehman (in an essay from *The American Poetry Review* that also serves as an introduction to his terrific anthology *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*), notes James Richardson's idea of the prose poem's kinship with the tomato: It might be a fruit in botany class but more likely a vegetable if you're making fruit salad.³ Prose poems haunt. They excite. Often eschewing closure, their ambiguity tantalizes and invites the reader to linger. Much like Wallace Stevens' blackbird, they employ both song and the equally powerful silence of "just after." Intent on breaking away from inherited norms, the prose poem resists categorization. What are we to do, ribs poet and editor David Young, if poets can't control themselves and stick to their lines? Prose poetry relishes its outsider status and yet, much like a rebel faction that suddenly finds itself with seats in Parliament, it has to learn to how to play well with others, to recognize its history.

The birth of the form tracks back to Frenchman Aloysius Bertrand, whose collection *Gaspard de la nuit* was published in 1842 after his death. Featuring singing masons, tulip merchants, a village flaming like a comet, dwarves, lepers, a thumb likened to a fat Flemish innkeeper with a bad temper, and a prophesizing cricket, Bertrand's clipped, imagery-laden paragraphs influenced the form's first bad-boy rock star, Charles Baudelaire. His posthumously published *Petits Poèmes en prose* (*Little Poems in Prose*) swam against the tide of French verse. Accomplished with alexandrines, the dominant twelve-syllable line in French poetry, Baudelaire nonetheless challenged formal expectations. His irreverence has delighted jokers and literary malfeasants everywhere with its thuggish counsel, whether giving us imperatives to get drunk ("on wine, on poetry, or on virtue, if you wish") or offering portraits of bizarre characters who, among other things, might bow to a donkey and wish it a happy new year. Baudelaire, in turn, inspired Rimbaud and Mallarmé, whose work then influenced a range of twentieth century poets—from symbolists to surrealists—like Léon-Paul Fargue, Benjamin Péret, Robert Desnos, and Max Jacob. Gertrude Stein might be our first American prose poet of note; William Carlos Williams, one of our more famous linear architects, also experimented with the form (despite Pound's labeling the work "incoherent"). The form finds itself alive and well today, with a number of anthologies offering readers a range of contemporary practitioners including John Ashbery, James Tate, Margaret Atwood, Jayne Anne Phillips, Thylia Moss, Peter Johnson, Lydia Davis, Anne Carson, Campbell McGrath, Harryette Mullen, Tom Andrews, and Lisa Jarnot.

And yet the prose poem never strays far from controversy. In his introduction to my favorite anthology of prose poems, *Models of the Universe*, David Young remarks that the prose poem "upsets the makers of categories and the givers and second-guessers of prizes."⁴ Sure enough, back when Charles Simic's *The World Doesn't End* won the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for poetry, poet Louis Simpson protested that Simic's work wasn't "verse"—it was prose. Simpson's protests invoked judicial precedent from an earlier case of verse vs. non-verse—his vote put the kibosh on Mark Strand's near-1978 Pulitzer for *The Monument*.⁵ The debate highlights the confusion and brow-torquing that surrounds

³ Lehman, David. essay in *American Poetry Review*, March/April 2003, adapted from the introduction to *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*, from Scribner, 2003.

⁴ Friebert, Stuart and David Young, eds. *Models of the Universe*. Oberlin: Oberlin College Press, 1985.

⁵ Lehman, David.

the prose poem.

Now back to our definition: A prose poem is, simply put, a poem in prose—a poem with lyric DNA (imagery, figurative language, music) that does not privilege the line as the primary unit of construction. In the prose poem, sentences and paragraphs inherit the lead roles from lines and stanzas. In turn, the music that tends to emerge in the prose poem relies more on non-metrical forms of music-making (e.g., repetition, often in the form of catalogues or lists of objects/images) and leans on various syntactical patterns and rhetorical structures. Charles Simic's *The World Doesn't End* is a good place to explore the form's machinations.

These poems are terse, spare, and darkly humorous: trick-or-treat vignettes with a Halloween flair, a touch of Hollywood's Tim Burton. Strong images, such as Simic's striking, incidental scenes, often juxtaposed with each other, are a key component, as are comparisons—similes and metaphors and their figurative cousins. As opposed to celluloid or digital images, however, prose poems offer vivid tableaux made of language that plays with syntax and pacing. Fragments and simple declarative sentences can generate a clipped, staccato pace; more elaborate clauses can coordinate and subordinate time and perspective. Tonally, the voice in Simic's prose poems tends to paint the fantastic as ordinary; a disinterested, often neutral surface belies a cool, emotional undertow.

I was stolen by the gypsies. My parents stole me right back. Then the gypsies stole me again. This went on for some time. One minute I was in the caravan suckling the dark teat of my new mother, the next I sat at the long dining room table eating my breakfast with a silver spoon.

It was the first day of spring. One of my fathers was singing in the bathtub; the other one was painting a live sparrow the colors of a tropical bird.⁶

In the last paragraph of this poem a mere semicolon swiftly connects—with verve—two clauses. The prose poem, I'd argue, often works in this stylistic realm (defined as parataxis), juxtaposing statements with minimal indication of their connection or relation. Narrative prose, in contrast, commonly uses connectives (because, when, then) that clearly outline and define the relationships among sentences and clauses. The startling juxtapositions that result when such connectives are left out fuel wonder in a prose poem.

The lineage of the contemporary short story—the verisimilitude of portraiture and the wildness of the fairy tale—is at work in prose poems, even as they tend, like lyric poems, to privilege the episodic and associational. In one vivid scene, a Simic prose poem can simultaneously balance the fantastical with the dark hues of a war-torn Yugoslavian childhood:

⁶ "I was stolen" from *The World Doesn't End: Prose Poems*, copyright ©1987 by Charles Simic, reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Inc.

We were so poor I had to take the place of the bait in the mousetrap. All alone in the cellar, I could hear them pacing upstairs, tossing and turning in their beds. "These are dark and evil days," the mouse told me as he nibbled my ear. Years passed. My mother wore a cat-fur collar which she stroked until its sparks lit up the cellar.⁷

Various tones are at work here, too. The first sentence echoes a comedian's introductory "I-just-flew-in-from-_____-and-boy-are-my-arms-tired!" shtick. But it is dark humor, silly yet chilly, evocative yet matter-of-fact in its deadpan delivery.

Key to Simic's poems is vivid imagery and musical composition via syntax and rhetoric. Antitheton (a proof or composition composed of contraries) and its cousin antithesis (a juxtaposition of contrary words or ideas) are often at work in these poems. In the prose poem that begins "Dear Friedrich," a laundryman who can't read flips through a book at midnight with the light on; his daughter, who brings him dinner, wears a short skirt and takes long strides; and outside, with their webs, spiders join street lights and dark trees. Such parallel constructions are common, and they complement a frequent tendency in prose poems to generate catalogues and lists of images.

Another method of music-making combines structure with tonality. Sometimes we make music by asking questions or making statements. Notice how the following poem, by David Joel Friedman, works musically by combining the inquisitive with the imperative.

The Welcome

Do you wish to immigrate to my heart? Where are your papers? What are your purposes?

Are you lost? Are you broken? Come to the chamber of my heart for safety. Remember the old country. I was not there. I was waiting for you here.

Do you wish to be naturalized in my arms? Let me instruct you in the new tongue. Tread softly; Death too first makes inquiry, then shows the way.

Come, pledge allegiance to my tattered proud flag. Here, and here only, the streets are paved with gold.⁸

Finally, I'll reiterate that juxtaposition is a huge force at work in the prose poem. Things that don't seem to go together thrive in prose poems. Kids often describe them as "dreamlike." With their quirky and surreal juxtapositions, Russell Edson's prose poems show him to be a master of the form:

⁷ "We were so poor" from *The World Doesn't End: Prose Poems*, copyright ©1988 by Charles Simic, reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Inc.

⁸ "The Welcome" from *The Welcome*. Copyright 2006 by David Friedman. Used with permission of the poet and the University of Illinois Press.

The Canoeing

We went upstairs in a canoe. I kept catching my paddle in the banisters.

We met several salmon passing us, flipping step by step; no doubt to find the remembered bedroom. And they were like the slipped feet of someone falling down the stairs, played backward as in a movie.

And then we were passing over the downstairs closet under the stairs, and could feel the weight of dark overcoats and galoshes in a cave of umbrellas and fedoras; water dripping there, deep in the earth, like an endless meditation. . . .

. . . Finally the quiet waters of the upstairs hall. We dip our paddles with gentle care not to injure the quiet dark, and seem to glide for days by family bedrooms under a stillness of trees. . . .⁹

Hinting of Mother Goose, Grimm's Tales, and your favorite feline on catnip, Edson's poems offer up terrific models. Their simple sentence construction, accessible yet eerie narrative exposition (content to allow for episodic lingering without formal closure), and a deft eye for figuration are defining prose poem characteristics. They march into the territory of imagination and avoid the "it was just a dream" grenade that can often go off in creative writing assignments. The prose poem, via imagistic and musical and syntactical juxtaposition, knows that imagination needs no excuse to get quirky or evocative. Both Simic and Edson offer model dreamscapes without worrying about legitimizing or rationalizing alibis.

That said, I find that many of my students are utterly perplexed by the genre. Many respond the way lots of us respond to what's new and different: they immediately don't "like it." With time, care, and exposure—a little like talking to houseplants—however, many kids find the form delightfully quirky and liberating, and they're eager to break down the hard-and-fast genre categories that they learn in English classes. Here's a prose poem from a student in one of my classes:

I know not how to write prose poetry because prose poetry needs to make no sense. Example: the cracked hardwood floor is a dark abyss of obscurity that has a slurpee-red clown bicycle pasted to it. This is prose poetry at its worst. There is no meaning, it makes no sense, and the only thing I need is some "red is the color of anger" imagery. Then a million snowmen who don't understand it will say it's a work of art.

YOOWON PARK

Yoowon's poem is actually quite savvy. Not only does it present a cogent speaking voice, one in touch with the frustrations of composition, but its ridicule coalesces into a palette

⁹"The Canoeing" from *The Tunnel: Selected Poems*, Russell Edson, Oberlin College Press, ©1994 by Russell Edson. Reprinted by permission of Oberlin College Press.

of darks, reds, and whites. Voice and image generate an entertaining piece that undermines invective with a lingering, vivid visual. The piece has a sense of humor. Comedy, which often hinges on contradictions or tensions that result from insightful juxtapositions, is a staple of the prose poem. Part of the form's pleasure lies in its embrace of opposites, of paradox. Peter Johnson remarks that "just as black humor straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy, so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels."¹⁰ Take, for example, Timothy Kelly's "Babe Ruth Pointing":

When Babe Ruth points, the whole table stops eating. What is it, Babe. Mustard? Salt? Mrs. Ruth says Pass Babe the salt.
 No. Not salt. Babe Ruth, the Sultan of Swat, stands up in his retired Yankee pinstripes, and points. Mrs. Ruth is on her feet, Please Babe, what. The window? The street? There's nothing in the street.
 George Herman Ruth, Bambino Babe, ignores her; he lifts his frenchbread at arm's length and points. His cap sits low on his bulldog head; his cleats dig automatically into the linoleum.
 Nova Scotia says Babe. It was always Nova Scotia, always.
 Eventually the Babe slumps back to his chair, embarrassed silence around the table. A nice place, pipes Mrs. Ruth, Nova Scotia. Mountains, rivers, the ocean, I'm sure it's just delightful, Babe —
 The Babe leans over to me. Nova Scotia, he says, is the cat's ass.¹¹

Kelly's poem takes a bit of sports mythology and, via shifts in context, makes worlds collide with clever effects.

For younger students, the prose poem offers a place to flex one's imagination without fear of reprisal, a safe space to work out what's quirky or foreboding or dark, the very boundaries they're often attempting to negotiate developmentally. For older students, it's a way to enter into more provocative political arenas, finding visually evocative ways in which to stage celebration or protest:

Tea Time with Phyllis Schlafly


Phyllis Schlafly gave me a goldfish. She named it ERA and when I wasn't looking, she flushed it down the toilet. She asks why I don't cry. I tell her it is because fish have enough salt water already: they don't need mine. What I don't tell her is that the one time I went snorkeling I kept my eyes shut the entire time. We drink tea at her house and she gives me a string of pearls made with the broken souls of Betty Friedan and Alice Paul. I say thanks and keep eating my biscotti.
 Phyllis tells me she can read minds. I don't believe her. She tells me about a dream I once had. She says "ash snow" and "fairies" and

¹⁰From "Poetic Form: The Prose Poem" on The Academy of American Poets website: www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5787.

¹¹"Babe Ruth Pointing" reprinted by permission of Timothy Kelly.

“Panama.” I am impressed. But clairvoyance is not hers alone. I tell her about her nightmares; about her son in a Betsey Johnson dress, her daughter as a sergeant in the military, unisex bathrooms. She tells me ladies don’t tell other ladies thing they would rather not hear. She sends me out into the ash snow. I get to keep the pearls.

REMY NELSON

The form of the prose poem, consummate outsider, allows this student poet creative access to issues that strike her as important. She’s flexing her muscles, simultaneously exploring formal restrictions and freedoms in style and subject matter. Witness, in the wet-paint stage of processing and drafting, that she’s thinking through writing—the kind of muscle memory that we’d like to develop in our student-citizens. 

In the Classroom

MICHAEL MORSE

Below are some exercises that I like to try with my high school creative writing classes. They work well with undergrads and adults, too; the Borges and Calvino exercises could also be used with sharp middle-schoolers.

Alter-Ego poems using Jorge Luis Borges's "Borges and I"

This often works well as an opening-day assignment, before genre even enters the discussion. I ask students to write, down the left side of an index card, a favorite food, the best movie seen in the past two years, a beloved hobby, and a desired vacation spot. Then, down the right side, list the antitheses of the same categories: a food item they can't stand, the worst movie seen, an activity they greet with loathing, a place they'd never visit. Then, after reading the Borges, I ask the kids to contemplate what it would be like to have an alter ego out in the world walking around. What would they be doing right now, even as you're here listening to your crazy teacher up at the chalkboard? This exercise simplifies the poem's larger concerns of constructed selves, actual and authorial, but it allows the kids access to similar explorations. After reading the Borges aloud, I ask the kids to put their alter ego into action. They title their poem by substituting their last name for "Borges," and then they're off and running, using the given categories as scaffolding and often abandoning them over time as they engage with a favorite adolescent activity, exploring boundaries.

This translation comes from the aforementioned anthology, *Models of The Universe*.

Borges and I

The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. I walk through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like hour-glasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him, though I am quite aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things. Spinoza knew that

all things long to persist in their being; the stone eternally wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger. I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.

I do not know which of us has written this page.¹

Prose poems as a series of postcards

For years I've read selected entries from Joe Wenderoth's *Letters to Wendy's* for my older students (some are too racy for youngsters). Epistolatory addresses-cum-fictitious diary entries, the poems are written on postage-paid, "Tell Us About Your Visit" customer comment cards from the Wendy's fast-food chain.

July 18, 1996

Today I felt like a cup of soda that had been sitting—full—for too long. Watery, sides melting, barely able to be handled—but there, so very very there, and simply demanding proper disposal. It is my suspicion that, however persuasive that demand, there can be no such thing.²

July 31, 1996

Your employees are beautiful—they do not have authority. Even the manager has no authority—if pushed, he will just call someone, who also has no ultimate authority. It's extremely pleasing to recognize this fact—one feels so fairly situated in the teeming absence of authors. At Wendy's, one writes not from an author, but to an author, a sleeping owner who will never wake.

Their subject matter ranges from hamburgers and glee at the prospect of free refills to meditations on value, loneliness, and jarring consumerism. By turns sexual and scatological (these poems aren't for everybody), the combination of glib irony and disarmingly poignant direct-address make for funny and thoughtful poems that simultaneously satirize lustful materialism and celebrate the simple joys of plastic seats and chocolate shakes. Teens get it. They have fun inserting their own local eateries, and the varied voices in Wenderoth's prose poems nicely model shifts in mood and tone.

¹ "Borges and I" by Jorge Luis Borges, Translated by James E. Irby, from *Labyrinths*, copyright ©1962, 1964 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

² "July 18, 1996" and "July 31, 1996" from *Letters to Wendy's* by Joe Wenderoth. ©2000 by Joe Wenderoth. Used by permission of Wave Books.

Prose poems inspired by Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is a delight to work with—any number of poems can captivate imaginative city planners in class.³ Think of these poems—narrated by Marco Polo as he attempts to inform Kubla Kahn about his holdings, his vast empire—as a collection of virtual metropoli, a pre-cyber version of SimCity. A city built out of spider webs? Cities on stilts that rise up into cloud cover? A city where perfect telescopes and violins are made, dreamed of by young men who, by the time they arrive, are old—their desires already memories? A city where the shortest distance between two points is a zigzag, where inhabitants are spared the boredom of following the same streets every day? I recommend reading through Calvino's grand tour and finding models that seem appropriate for your particular students. And hit the anthologies that I mention above, as well as the prose poem section in Teachers & Writers Collaborative's *Handbook of Poetic Forms*; there's a trove of good material out there; these models and exercises just touch the surface.

³ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.