

SENTENCE:
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PROSE POETICS

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Foreword

The final issue of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, in the form of the 2000 retrospective anthology *Best of The Prose Poem*, marked the end of a rekindling phase of interest in the prose poem that began with Michael Benedikt's 1976 anthology *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology* and the beginning of what Peter Johnson has decried as the mainstream acceptance of the prose poem and its subsequent near-ubiquity. While some resistance, in fact, to the idea of a poem in prose survives, Johnson is right that the prose poem is now as much a part of the literary landscape as free verse, received form, experimental poetics, and hybrid writing. Much of the absorption of the prose poem, for better or worse, into the current literary landscape is due in large part to Johnson's championing of the prose poem by simply providing a space for it in *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* and to his subsequent contributions and advice not only to *Sentence* but also to the flurry of other publications devoted to the prose poem and its siblings.

All of the poems in this issue were selected by Peter Johnson. I hope readers will see the issue as a recognition and appreciation of Peter's editorial work, as a celebration of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, and as an expression of thanks for his generous support of *Sentence*, which would not exist if not for his example.

* * *

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all of the reviewers from the first four issues of *Sentence*. Your close attention and deep engagement

with the work at hand have enriched our experiences of not only those books but also many of the books we've read after your reviews. I am proud of your association with the journal.

And to our subscribers: much thanks for your much needed support.

—Brian Clements

Introduction

Thirteen years ago, I couldn't give away a copy of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, and very few books of prose poetry were being published. Those of us who were writing those unpublished books used to share rejection letters, rating them according to levels of stupidity. But things have changed. Last year two first books of prose poems received, respectively, the Walt Whitman Award and the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize; and three out of the last five James Laughlin Award winners were books that consisted mostly, or exclusively, of prose poems. Nowadays, it's hard to find a book of poetry that doesn't include a prose poem or two. The recent rise of the prose poem is the best and worst thing that has happened to American poetry. The best because poets now feel comfortable moving between prose and verse, the worst because prose poems are multiplying faster than cockroaches, and, in this respect, quantity doesn't equal quality. Maybe this proliferation of prose poetry accounts for why so many poets are disassociating themselves from the genre by inventing more names for what they're writing than my *Book of Slang* has for "penis" and "vagina": microfictions, poetic prose, short-shorts, narratologies, and so on.

This avoidance is not new. W. S. Merwin, in his forward to *Houses and Travelers*, confessed that he didn't know what a prose poem was. He was more interested in "raising some questions about accepted boundaries and definitions." Naomi Shihab Nye, in her chapbook *Mint*, maintained that she wrote "paragraphs," not prose poems; and Robert Hass, concerning the prose in *Human Wishes*, argued that he "never particularly loved the *idea* of

the prose poem,” with its ties to surrealism, but instead wanted to create a “larger form that might mix verse and prose.” More recently, in an interview with *Rain Taxi*, James Tate seems ambivalent about the prose poem, insisting that he “was keeping line breaks” in the poems from *Memoir of the Hawk*—poems reviewed as prose poems, most notably by Charles Simic and Marjorie Perloff. He adds that he “wasn’t upset in the least” when I published these poems as prose poems, not explaining why he would submit poems with line breaks to a prose-poem journal, which is like sending your son to an all-girl high school.

Why don’t poets want to be associated with the prose poem? For one thing, what decent poet would want to be handcuffed by something as artificial as genre? All poets strive to be original. As Merwin writes, “I realized that I did not want these writings, if they ever came to comprise a substantial group, to qualify for membership in some recognizable genre.” But he later admits that “fragments, essays, journal entries, instructions and lists, oral tales and fables” were all precedents for his short prose. Ironically, all of these genres are scattered throughout Michael Benedikt’s *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*. Another reason poets have been in denial about prose poetry is because most poets take pride in being subversive, and it’s no fun shooting dad the finger if everyone else in the neighborhood is doing it. A poet’s worst nightmare is to be fashionable, and the prose poem has certainly become fashionable.

In spite of these denials, the term prose poem works for me, and the current need to escape from it seems doomed. For better or worse, from the moment we began to read fables, fairy tales, parables, fragments, and, even, alas, prose poems, we were somehow contaminated and subject to influences. Actually, the more we try to escape from a genre the more we are entrapped by it,

like the child who becomes a carbon copy of the parent by trying too hard not to be. During the first prose-poem renaissance, Michael Benedikt gave his now-famous “working definition” of the prose poem: “It is a genre of poetry, self-consciously written in prose, and characterized by the intense use of virtually all the devices of poetry, which includes the intense use of devices of verse.” This description is broad enough to include the surrealist prose poem, the “new sentence,” the Emersonian riff, you name it. Certainly, it’s worthwhile to explore the gray areas around the prose poem, yet we can sympathize with Tate when, concerning his so-called prose poems, he says, “I’d just as soon not talk about it.”

Fortunately, there’s nothing too scary about the “sentence,” which happens to be the name of this journal. For me, it’s a fortuitous name because I am not expected to unravel all the complexities of the prose-poem-as-genre. That’s Brian Clements’ job, and I gladly leave it to him. But, in spite of this editorial get-out-of-jail-free card, for the record, and without further comment, I hereby maintain that the following works are indeed prose poems, except for one which is technically a poetic-prose parable, and another which is a fragment disguised as a memoir which itself is based on a famous fairy tale . . .

—Peter Johnson