

THE PROSE POEM:

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Volume 1

WARNING TO THE READER

Sometimes farm granaries become especially beautiful when all the oats or wheat are gone, and wind has swept the rough floor clean. Standing inside, we see around us, coming in through the cracks between shrunken wall boards, bands or strips of sunlight. So in a poem about imprisonment, one sees a little light.

But how many birds have died trapped in these granaries. The bird, seeing freedom in the light, flutters up the walls and falls back again and again. The way out is where the rats enter and leave; but the rat's hole is low to the floor. Writers, be careful then by showing the sunlight on the walls not to promise the anxious and panicky blackbirds a way out!

I say to the reader, beware. Readers who love poems of light may sit hunched in the corner with nothing in their gizzards for four days, light failing, the eyes glazed...

They may end as a mound of feathers and a skull on the open boardwood floor...

-- Robert Bly

David Foster Wallace: THE BEST OF THE PROSE POEM

This review was first published as “The Best of The Prose Poem:
An International Journal, ed. Peter Johnson” in *Rain Taxi*, 2001

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- Physical dimensions of *The Best of The Prose Poem: An International Journal* anthology in cm: 15 x 22.5 x 2.
- Weight of anthology in grams: 419.
- Total # of words in anthology: 85,667.
- Total # of words devoted to actual prose poems: 69,986.
- *Rain Taxi*'s length-limit for review of *Best of The P.P.*: 1,000 words.
- Form of review: indexical/statistical/schematic.
- Official name of this new, transgeneric critical form: the Indexical Book Review.
- Tactical reason for review form: The words preceding each item's colon technically constitute neither subjective complement nor appositive nor really any recognized grammatical unit at all; hence none of these antecolonial words should count against *R.T.*'s rigid 1,000-word limit.
- Other, better-known and/or currently fashionable transgeneric literary forms: the Nonfiction Novel, the Prose Poem, the Lyric Essay, etc.
- Basic aesthetic/ideological *raison d'être* of the above forms: to comment on, complicate, subvert, defamiliarize, transgress against, or otherwise fuck with received ideas of genre, category, and (especially) formal conventions/constraints. (See by analogy the historical progression *rhymed accentual-syllabic verse* → *blank verse* → *vers libre*, etc.)
- Big paradox/oxymoron behind this *raison* and the current trendiness of transgeneric forms: In fact, these putatively "transgressive" forms depend heavily on received ideas of genre, category, and formal conventions, since without such an established context there's nothing much to transgress against. Transgeneric forms are therefore most viable — most interesting, least fatuous — during eras when literary genres themselves are relatively stable and their conventions well-established and -codified and no one seems much disposed to fuck with them. And ours is not such an era.
- From eminent prose poet Russell Edson's definition of "Prose Poem" in a famous essay on the form called "Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man: Some Subjective Ideas or Notions on the Care and Feeding of Prose Poems": "A poetry freed from the definition of poetry, and a prose free of the necessities of fiction; a personal form disciplined not by other literature but by unhappiness; thus a way to be happy."
- From C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature, Sixth Edition*'s definition of "Prose Poem": "A poem printed as prose, with both margins justified."

- Obvious but crucial distinction: between a prose poem as an individual artwork and the Prose Poem as an actual literary genre.
- Signs that some person/persons are trying to elevate a certain transgressive literary form or hybrid into an actual genre: Literary journals start having special issues devoted to the form, then whole new journals exclusively devoted to the form spring up (often with the form's name somewhere in their titles), and various "Best of" anthologies from these new journals begin hitting the market. A critical literature starts to assemble itself around the form, much of that criticism consisting in apologiae, encomiums, and (paradoxically) definitions, codifications, and lists of formal characteristics (→ conventions). Some writers start identifying themselves professionally as practitioners of the form. Finally, the form begins to get treated as a separate/special category for the purposes of book publishing, prizes and awards, academic appointments, etc.
- Within pages of *Best of The P.P.*, total number of ads for, references to, and lists of other journals/collections/articles/anthologies/presses devoted to the Prose Poem: 78.
- Bio-note on anthology's editor: "Peter Johnson is founder and editor of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*. His latest books of prose poems are *Pretty Happy!* (White Pine Press, 1997) and *Love Poems for the Millennium* (Quale Press, 1998). He received an NEA for Creative Writing in 1999."
- From bio-notes on random *Best of The P.P.* contributors: "Ellen McGrath Smith is a Ph.D. candidate in literature at Duquesne University, where she is completing a doctoral dissertation that deals with the American prose poem"; "Mark Vinz is the author of... a book of prose poems, *Late Night Calls*. He is also co-editor of *The Party Train: A Collection of North American Prose Poetry*, published by New Rivers Press."
- First sentence of Peter Johnson's Introduction to anthology: "In editing *The Best of The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, I feel humble and defensive at the same time."
- Total # of pages in anthology, including editor's Intro, prenominate p.p. ads and lists, and bio-notes on contributors: 288.
- Total # of pages devoted to actual prose poems: 227.
- Total # of prose poems in anthology: 204.
- Arrangement of constituent p.p.'s: alphabetical by author.

- Average number of words in a constituent p.p.: 342.3 (mean), 309 (median).
- Longest p.p. in anthology: John Yau's "The Newly Renovated Opera House on Gilligan's Island," 1,049 words.
- Shortest p.p. in anthology: G. Chambers & R. Federman's "Little Request," 53 words.
- Constituent p.p.'s that, like "The Newly Renovated Opera House on Gilligan's Island," have titles that turn out to be way more interesting than the poems themselves: "T. S. Eliot Was a Negro," "That UFO That Picked on Us," "The Big Deep Voice of God," "The Prodigal Son Is Spotted on the Grassy Knoll," "Lullaby for the Elderly," "The Leopard's Mouth Is Dry and Cold Inside."
- Some random relevant questions: Are the pieces in, e.g., Lydia Davis's *Break It Down* or Diane Williams's *Excitability* prose poems? Is Eliot's "Hysteria" a prose poem? What about the three long prose pieces in Ashbery's *Three Poems*? Are the little italicized entr'actes in Hemingway's *In Our Time* prose poems? Are Kawabata's "Palm-of-the-Hand Stories"? Is Kafka's "A Little Fable"? What about Cormac McCarthy's dreamy, anapestic prologue to *Suttree*? What about the innumerable ■Is in Faulkner that scan perfectly as iambic-pentameter sonnets? Why are so many tiny and self-consciously lyrical stories published these days as "shortshorts" or "flash fictions" and not as prose poems?
- Approximate % of *Best of The P.P.*'s 9-page Introduction that Peter Johnson spends talking about how fiendishly difficult he finds it to define "Prose Poem": 75+.
- Representative excerpts from this discussion: "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"; "When I first began writing prose poems and consciously considering prose poetry as a distinct genre, I thought of the platypus, that lovable yet homely Tasmanian hybrid, but then came to see the weakness of that comparison. The platypus's genetic code is predetermined. It can't all of a sudden grow an elephant's trunk out of its backside."
- From Holman and Harmon's *Handbook to Literature*'s definition of "Prose Poem": "The point seems to be that a writing in prose, even the most prosaic,¹ is a poem if the author says so."

- From anthology's bio-notes on contributors: (1) "Aloysius Bertrand (1807–1841) has sometimes been called 'The Father of the Modern Prose Poem,' though he never used the term to describe his own work"; (2) "Barry Silesky is the author of *One Thing That Can Save Us*, prose poems (called short-short fiction by Coffee House Press)."
- Of the 144 contributors to *Best of The P.P.*, total # who are, like M. Aloysius Bertrand, now dead: 14.
- Total # of contributors who have also published work in literary organ called *Flash Fiction*: 6.
- Total # of contributors who do/did edit literary journals, anthologies, and/or small presses: 21.
- Titles of published books listed in bio-note for anthology contributor Nin Andrews: *The Book of Orgasms* and *Spontaneous Breasts*.
- Average # of prose poems from each *Best of The P.P.* contributor: 1.42 (mean), 1.58 (median).
- Examples of particularly well-known or eminent contributors, with # of included p.p.'s from each: Russell Edson, 7; David Ignatow, 4; Charles Simic, 4; James Tate, 4; Robert Bly, 2; Maxine Chernoff, 2; Larry Leis, 2; Henri Michaux, 2; Stuart Dybek, 1; Bill Knott, 1; Gabriela Mistral, 1; Pablo Neruda, 1.
- Total # of above p.p.'s that seem like they're anywhere even remotely close to their eminent contributors' best work: 3.
- Total # of times Peter Johnson quotes or refers to Russell Edson in his Introduction: 13.
- Another typical sentence from Peter Johnson's Intro: "To me, literary theory, like philosophy, provides few answers; instead, and most importantly, it creates an endless internal and external dialogue which forces us to constantly reevaluate our standards."
- Highest conceivable grade that anthology's Introduction would receive in an average university Lit./Composition class: B-.
- Total # of anthology's 204 prose poems that are good/alive/powerful/interesting enough to persist in reader's mind more than 60 seconds after completion: 31.
- Of these 31, # that are so great you end up not even caring what genre they're supposed to be part of: 9.
- Of these 9, # that are by one Jon Davis, a poet whom this reviewer'd never heard of before but whose pieces in this anthology are so

off-the-charts terrific that the reviewer has actually gone out and bought the one Jon Davis book mentioned in his bio-note and may very well decide to try to advertise it in this magazine, at reviewer's own expense if necessary—that's how good this guy is: 5.

- Of the remaining 4 great pieces here, # that are by the late David Ignatow and concern his impending death and are so totally beautiful and merciless that you can't forget them even if you want to: 2.
- Other contributors, previously unknown to reviewer, who have good/alive/powerful/interesting pieces in anthology: Gary Fincke ("The History of Passion Will Tumble This Week"), Jennifer L. Holley ("The Rubbing"), Jay Meek ("Leaving the Roadside Motel"), Fred Muratori ("From *Nothing in the Dark*"), J. David Stevens ("The Sign"), Helen Tzagoloff ("Mail-Order Bride").
- Some of the common features of the 31 g/a/p/i pieces in anthology:
 - (1) Even without line breaks or standard prosodic constraints, the p.p.'s seem tightly controlled; they possess both a metrical and a narrative logic.
 - (2) Their sentences tend to be short, almost terse.
 - (3) Many of the p.p.'s are subtly iambic; what meter and alliteration there is unheavy and tends to make the piece read faster rather than slower.
 - (4a) The pieces' realistic imagery is concrete, its descriptions compact and associations tautly drawn.
 - (4b) The pieces' surreal imagery/associations never seem gratuitously weird; i.e., they end up making psychological or emotional sense given what the p.p.'s about.
 - (5) Any puns, entendres, metapoetic allusions, or other forms of *jeu d'esprit* come off as relevant/serious and never seem like their main purpose is to make the writer appear clever.
 - (6) The pieces' tone tends to be intimate rather than formal (meaning, in other words, that the p.p.'s exploit one of the big advantages of much good prose, which is the reader's impression of a human being actually sitting right there talking to him).
 - (7) They all have actual narratives and/or Dramatic Situations.
 - (8) If there's an argument, the argument is tight, comprehensible, and if not persuasive then at least interesting.
 - (9) The good 31 are all, without exception, moving.
- Examples of opening lines of constituent p.p.'s that have some or all of the above qualities: "Only a picture window stands between us and the full force of gusts that lift the branches of the red pine" (Thomas R. Smith's "Windy Day at Kabekona"); "It's of no consequence to the grass that it withers, secure in its identity" (David Ignatow's "Proud

of Myself”); “This is not an elegy because the world is full of elegies and I am tired of consoling and being consoled” (Jon Davis’s “The Bait”).

- Total # of anthology contributors who are employed as Poet in Residence at a children’s hospital: 1.
- # who are described in bio-note as “the *enfant terrible* of Greek Surrealism”: 1.
- # who have the last names Johnson or Smith: 6.
- Total % of anthology prose poems that are primarily about death/loss/life’s transience: 57.1.
- % about sex: 16.6.
- % about love: 0.2.
- % about cooking: 0.2.
- Square root of book’s ISBN: 43,520.065.
- Of *Best of The P.P.’s* 173 unmemorable or otherwise ungreat prose poems, total % that deploy as topoi or include as important characteristics (1) bitter or unhappy childhood memories: 21.3; (2) an object, scene, or tableau that is described, analogized, troped, associated, and ruminated over until the establishment of its status as a metaphor seems to be the p.p.’s only real aim: 50.6; (3) references to or discussions of Poetry itself: 12.1; (4) ultrararefied allusions to, e.g., Theophile Gautier, Paul Quere, Sibelius’s “Swan of Tuonela,” etc.: 13.8; (5) heavy-handed use of anaphora, plocé, repetend, and/or alliteration: 20.7; (6) assorted jeux d’esprit whose main purpose seems to be to make the poet appear clever: 15.5; (7a) surreal/fabulist conceits and descriptions whose obvious point is the psychoaffective disorder of the modern world: 21.8; (7b) surreal/fabulist conceits and descriptions whose point or even relation to anything else in the p.p. is indiscernible: 48.3; (8a) surreal or free-associative transitions between sentences or ¶s: 51.7... (8b) which transitions themselves have no discernible point or resonance and make the whole p.p. seem at once pretentious and arbitrary: 46.6; and (9) just plain bad, clunky writing, no matter what genre or era it is: 51.7.
- Examples of above feature (9) from randomly selected anthology p.p.’s: “I don’t know how you feel about it, but for years and years, from the point of view of a person practicing my own, would-be benignly optimistic profession—that of a struggling manufacturer of colorful and sometimes even relatively amusing toys—I’ve felt that this constant placing of myself into bad moods by the conventional world, practically amounts

to theft!” (Michael Benedikt’s “The Toymaker Gloomy but Then Again Sometimes Happy”); “She intended to be epic with repercussions this time, so through mostly legal methods she hastened his entrapment” (Brian Swann’s “The Director”); “No good, the slow resisting of rage, the kindly cupping of each hand in prayer while facing the shot-up outskirts of the town, as though to hold water out to a thirsty sniper, and see the rifle laid down, and water taken as a final covenant” (Robert Hill Long’s “Small Clinic at Kilometer 7”).

- Total # of zeroes in anthology’s Library of Congress Control Number: 5.
- Total # of postcolonial words left before RT’s 1,000-word limit is exceeded: 267, minus this phrase’s own 5² words.
- Most common problems with the substantial % of the book’s prose poems that are mediocre/bad: (1) The p.p.’s argument/theme/point/project is either too obvious or too obscure; (2) The p.p. lacks formal control, logic; it comes off flabby, arbitrary, dull—see, e.g., “All over the world the shooting goes on. Then the doorbell rings and the pain is actually gone. With the notes buried in the counter’s daily junk pile, you had no idea you’d even entered. Now it’s another city. No paradise, but all the blood, sex, he, she, flushed away. It’s not all luck” (Barry Silesky’s “Saved”).
- How problem (2) directly above is related to what reviewer sees as the most serious, paradoxical problem for the Prose Poem per se: Like all self-consciously transgressive poetic forms, the p.p. is, by both definition and intent, antiformal. That is, it is distinguished as a form primarily by what it lacks, viz. stuff like line breaks, enjambment, formal rhyme- or metrical schemes, etc. At the same time, a prose poem very consciously calls itself a POEM, which of course sends the reader a message, namely that this is a particular kind of literary art that demands a particular kind of reading—slow, careful, with extra attention paid to certain special characteristics. Not least of these special characteristics are the compression and multivalence of the poem’s syntax and the particular rhythms and tensions of the poem’s music. These are what give a poem the weird special urgency that both justifies and rewards the extra work a reader has to put into reading it. And see that it’s nearly always FORMAL features that create and convey this poetic urgency: e.g., the tension of the line breaks against the lines’ own punctuation and meter, the use of breaks and enjambment and metrical

scheme to control speed, emphasis, multivalence of expression, etc. *W/r/t Best of The P.P.*, the absence of formal controls seems like the major reason why so many of its constituent p.p.'s seem not just non-urgent but incoherent; most of them literally fall apart under the close, concentrated attention that poetry's supposed to demand.³

- Paradoxical consequence of above paradoxical problem for the 31 p.p.'s in the book that really are rich and alive and fine: It makes them seem even better, and not just better in comparison to the dross that surrounds them. It's more like the 173 mediocre/bad p.p.'s here help the reader appreciate the terrible, almost impossible disadvantages of the p.p. form, which then makes the pieces from Davis, Ignatow, et al. seem less like just successes than like miracles. The experience of reading a piece like Davis's "The Frogs" or Stevens's "The Sign" or Ignatow's "My Own House," of watching the p.p. somehow achieve poetry's weird blend of logic and magic with hardly any of poetry's regular assets or tools, helps us to understand the allure of transgressive forms for writers,⁴ and maybe to remember that most formal conventions themselves start out as "experiments."
- Source of metaphorical description of a prose poem as "a cast-iron aeroplane that can actually fly," which image conveys the miraculous feel of the anthology's best p.p.'s way better than the purely expository review ¶ just above does: Russell Edson, as duly quoted by Peter Johnson, whose Introduction however can't leave the perfect image alone to ramify in the reader's head but has to gloss it with "Edson's metaphor and his comment on literary definitions are attractive to poets because he champions the unconscious and the personal imagination in its attempt to escape literary and cultural contamination."
- Probability that; if this reviewer were named Peter Johnson, he would publish under either "Pete" or his first two initials: 100%.
- Indexical Book Review coda: Another famous R. Edson pronouncement, although this time one that P. Johnson, Ed.—for rather obvious professional reasons⁵—does not quote in his Introduction: "What makes us so fond of [the p.p.] is its clumsiness, its lack of expectation or ambition. Any way of writing that isolates its writer from worldly acceptance offers the greatest creative efficiency. Isolation from other writers, and isolation from easy publishing."

*

NOTES

1. N.B.: from *The American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition's* definition of "prosaic": "consisting or characteristic of prose"; "lacking in imagination and spirit, dull."
2. (Numerals don't count as words either, obviously.)
3. N.B. that this sort of problem is endemic to many of the trendy literary forms that identify/congratulate themselves as transgressive. And it's easy to see why. In regarding formal conventions primarily as "rules" to rebel against, the Professional Transgressor fails to see that conventions often BECOME conventions precisely because of their power and utility, i.e., because of the paradoxical freedoms they permit the artist who understands how to use (not merely "obey") them.
4. (Imagine offering a gymnast the chance to levitate and hang there unsupported, or an astronaut the prospect of a launch w/o rocket.)
5. Just in case these reasons [as well as the anthology's real intended audience] are not yet obvious, q.v. the following announcement, variations of which appear in regular font on *Best of The P.P.'s* editorial page, in bold at the end of Johnson's Intro, AGAIN in bold in an ad for *The P.P.* after the contributors' bio-notes, and yet AGAIN, in a bold font so big it takes up the whole page, at the very end of the anthology:

The Prose Poem: An International Journal will be reading for Volume 10 between December 1, 2001 and March 1, 2002. Unsolicited work submitted before this date will be returned unread. Please include an SASE and a two-sentence biographical note. Please send no more than 3 to 5 poems.