Introduction to Prose Poetry Syllabus

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Quarter: Summer 2022
Start – end date: Jun 23rd – Aug 11th
Session day/time: Thursday, 1:30pm – 4:00pm
Course Code and Section: WRIT12404 22U1

Course Overview

“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

The prose poem is a poem in disguise. Born from a conflict of impulses, it reads like prose (in sentences instead of lines, paragraphs instead of stanzas) but is essentially poetic in its intent and in the effect it has upon its readers. And what, you might ask, would make a thing “essentially poetic”? You’re in the right place. Let’s discuss.

This course will focus on the craft of prose poetry. Taking inspiration from writing prompts and the work of other poets—among them Charles Baudelaire, Gertrude Stein, Frank O’Hara, Russell Edson, Rosemarie Waldrop, Lyn Hejinian, James Tate, Yusef Komunyakaa, Carolyn Forché, and Claudia Rankine—participants will present their work in a constructive environment where experimentation is encouraged.

The Writing Prompts

Each week you’ll be given a writing prompt. Prompts can be useful, but they shouldn’t be confining. The prompt is a suggestion, not a set of rules.

I encourage you to try writing a prose poem, but poems don’t always work that way, and perhaps the poem you write this week will demand a different form. The idea is to listen to your own instincts and inclinations as a writer and not to force the work into a preconceived mold.

Weekly writing prompts will be posted in the Assignments section of our course. A collection of past prompts (subject to change by whim, class discussion, etc.) can be found at the end of this syllabus.

Sharing Your Work
Each week, you'll share your work with your colleagues for discussion.

It's never a good idea to write a poem with rules in mind. I would like it if the poem you post to our workshop discussion board is a prose poem in response to the week's writing prompt, but I'm thrilled by deviations.

Out of respect for the work we're doing here, though, I ask that you observe the following rules religiously:

- Post a new or newly revised poem – no oldies, no greatest hits.
- Post your work by 11:59 p.m. on the night before our workshop.
- Take time between Sunday night and Tuesday night to read your colleagues' work. Don't rush things, it'll take a while to settle.

To learn more about the expectations for our weekly workshops, visit the Discussions section of our course.

**Required texts**

The required textbook for our class is:


An optional handbook is:


Please have a copy of Lehman’s Great American Prose Poems in your possession by our second meeting. You don't have to buy Padgett's Handbook of Poetic Forms if you don't want to, but it is a lovely book and will certainly be useful.

Books can be purchased online through the [University of Chicago Bookstore](https://www.chicagobooks.com).

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**Course Schedule**

- **Readings.** All readings not listed as appearing in Prose Poems (i.e., Lehman’s Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present) or Handbook (i.e., Padgett’s Handbook of Poetic Forms) have been uploaded to the Readings folder of our Canvas page.
- **Writing Prompts.** Each week you'll be given a writing prompt. Prompts can be useful, but they shouldn't be confining – the prompt is a suggestion, not a set of rules. I encourage you to try writing a prose poem, but poems don't always work that way, and perhaps the poem you write this week will demand a different form. The idea is to listen to your own instincts and inclinations as a writer and not to force the work into a preconceived mold.

- **Workshop.** It's never a good idea to write a poem with too many rules in mind. I would like it if the poem you post to our workshop discussion board is a prose poem in response to the week's writing prompt, but I'm thrilled by deviations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Readings for the following week</th>
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| Week 1 | Emerson, “Woods, A Prose Sonnet” | Prose Poems p. 27  
Poe, “Shadow, A Parable” | Prose Poems p. 28-30  
Lazarus, “The Exodus (August 3, 1492)” | Prose Poems p. 31-32  
Baudelaire, “Dedication: to Arsène Houssaye”  
Baudelaire, "The Stranger," "A Jester," "Every Man His Chimaera"  
Zapruider, "True Symbols"  
***optional |
| Week 2 | Stein, “Poetry and Grammar”  
Stein, “22 Objects from Tender Buttons” | Prose Poems pp. 34-38  
Eliot, “Hysteria” | Prose Poems p. 46  
Toomer, “Calling Jesus” | Prose Poems p. 49  
Crane, “Havana Rose” | Prose Poems p. 52  
Auden, “Vespers” | Prose Poems pp. 57-59  
Bishop, “12 O’Clock News” | Prose Poems pp. 60-61  
***optional |
| Week 3 | Bly, “Warning to the Reader” | Prose Poems p. 83  
Simic, “Three Poems from The World Doesn’t End,” “Contributor’s Note” | Prose Poems pp. 125-127  
Tate, “The List of Famous Hats,” “Distance from Loved Ones,” “Rapture” | Prose Poems pp. 160-163  
Komunyakaa, “Nude Interrogation,” “The Hanoi Market,” “A Summer Night in Hanoi” | Prose Poems p. 197  
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<td>Ruefle, “Monument”</td>
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<td>Martinez, “Avant-Dernières Pensées”</td>
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<td>Dinh, “Fish Eyes,” “The Most Beautiful Word”</td>
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<td>“Go Where You Don’t Belong: An Interview with Author Linh Dinh”</td>
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<td>Simic, “Essay on the Prose Poem”</td>
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<td>Ginsberg, “A Supermarket in California”</td>
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<td>Ginsberg, ”The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour,” 1953 version and 1961 version</td>
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<td>O’Hara, “Meditations in an Emergency”</td>
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<td>Padgett, “Light as Air,” “Album”</td>
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<td>Mayer, “Visions or Desolation”</td>
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<td>Notley, “Untitled”</td>
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<td>Waldman, “Stereo”</td>
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<td>Davis, “The Thirteenth Woman,” “In the Garment District,” “Agreement”</td>
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<td>Rankine, “Intermission in Four Acts”</td>
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<td><strong>Week 5</strong></td>
<td>Waldrop, “Five Poems from The Reproduction of Profiles”</td>
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<td>Howe, “Everything’s a Fake,” “Doubt”</td>
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<td>Hejinian, “Three Sections from My Life”</td>
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<td>Violi, “Triptych,” “Acknowledgements”</td>
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<td>Scalapino, “That They Were at the Beach,”</td>
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<td>Bernstein, “Comraderie turns to rivalry...”</td>
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<td>Blanco, “Mango, Number 61”</td>
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|      | Mullen, “Imagining the Unimagined Reader: Writing to the Unborn and Including the Excluded”  
Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure”  
***“Word Play,” Handbook p. 212 ***optional |
Yau, “Predella,” “Summer Rental” | Prose Poems pp. 223-225  
Brown, “Commencement Address” | Prose Poems p. 275  
Wenderoth, “Twelve Epistles from Letters to Wendy’s” | Prose Poems pp. 291-29  
Knox, "Hot Ass Poem" | Prose Poems p. 301  
Berrigan, "The Page Torn Out" | Prose Poems p. 304  
Bouly, “He appeared then...” | Prose Poems pp. 311-312  
| Week 7 | Naomi Shihab Nye, "Gate A-4"  
Sawako Nakayasu, "Girl Soup"  
Lauren Russell, "Dream-Clung, Gone" with an introduction by Terrance Hayes  
Anna Moschovakis, "Thought Experiment: Mary in the Black-and-White Room"  
Eileen Myles, "Anna's poem"  
Matthea Harvey, "Setting the Table, (Links to an external site.)" "Word Park", "The Crowds Cheered as Gloom Galloped Away"  
Arda Collins, "Parts of an Argument"  
Heather Christle, selections from “The Trees the Trees”  
Srikanth (Chiku) Reddy, selections from Underworld Lit |
| Week 8 | Last Meeting |

**Sample Writing Prompts**
A Setting Lively Enough

“This I would ask of you, o sacred Woods, when ye shall next give me somewhat to say, give me also the tune wherein to say it.” — Emerson, "Woods, a Prose Sonnet"

Coming of age in the shadow of revolution (the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, the Revolutionary War) the prose poets of the mid-nineteenth century struggled to define an identity against the strict meter and rhyme imposed by traditional poetic forms. They turned away from the classical halls of their predecessors and went out — to the wilderness, to the streets, to the gutter — in search of a setting lively enough for their modern sensibilities.

What do you think would be a good setting for a poem in 2021? What woods would you visit, what streets would you walk? Go there and write a poem this week in your own distinctly modern style.

Do I Contradict Myself?

One of Walt Whitman’s most quoted passages, from Song of Myself, goes like this:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

How true. We are, all of us, total contradictions! And one reason why these words stick so clearly in my mind is because they remind me of poetry’s greatest power — rather than attempting to resolve or ignore contradictions, poems revel in the impossible.

This week, write a poem that tells a story. Lay some groundwork — Where are we? Who’s there? What’s happening? Why does it matter?

Then, contradict everything you’ve said completely.
Stop Making Sense

You might notice an unusual set of rhythms in the readings this week. Many of them appear almost as a stream of consciousness, the words flowing and churning like thoughts inside the writer’s mind.

How would you write if you let go of the idea of making sense? How would you write if you followed your associations, no matter how unrelated they may seem? Find a comfortable space this week and do whatever you like to do to relax there for a while. The idea is to drift off – you’re floating away from yourself, or turning so far inward that you forget where you began. Have a timer with you at the outset of the process and, if it’s possible, preset the timer to twenty minutes. Also, have some writing tools in easy reach.*

Once you feel sufficiently dissociated, start the timer and write. Choose the tools that feel right in the moment, and try to write quickly and without having to think too much about what you’re doing. Write without stopping, without worrying, without trying to control, until the timer goes off.

Later, look back at what you wrote in your trance. Can any of it be made into a prose poem?

“Remember When...”

"Thinking about this period of my life, and worrying about my ability to remember accurately many important events and understand their meaning, I realised how much more satisfying for me and the reader it would be if I made everything up."

- Charles Simic, “Essay on the Prose Poem"

I spent the Fourth of July this year with my dad, my partner, my grandmother and my cousin on a beach near Southport, North Carolina. As tends to happen with families, we passed a lot of time recalling stories about past trips, past dinners, things – embarrassing, funny, serious, etc. – we’d been holding somewhere in our minds that shaped how we thought about each other and ourselves in the world.

Invariably everyone remembers the stories differently. My dad, who sustained massive head trauma in a car accident in 1987, is especially known for adding wild details to otherwise mundane footnotes of things past.

He thinks he’s telling the truth. But just because you’re not telling the truth doesn’t mean a poem can’t still say something truthful. Write a poem this week about something from your past and lie wherever possible so as to say what’s really true about the way things were.
Odes


As you’ll find in The Handbook of Poetic Forms, the ode has changed significantly since its invention by the Greek poet Pindar around 500 BC. What was once a tightly structured metrical and stanzaic poem used to celebrate grand occasions has expanded into a multivalent form known for its intensity and range of emotion.

Write an ode this week. To begin, adjust your sights to focus on a thing – maybe your thing is an object (e.g. an orchid), an emotion (see happiness), a production technique (waterproofing), an axiological concept like hedonism, etc. etc. Maybe you find your thing through deep reflection on a problem that’s been gnawing at you. Maybe you find it randomly looking around your living room. There’s no right way to do this. The thing you’ve chosen is your ode’s title, so go ahead and write it down: On ____________.

Then, respond to this weird, marvelous thing whose name you’ve just recorded. How does it look/sound/taste/smell/feel? Does it remind you of anything? What do you want your readers to know about it?

As you write, you might want to pay attention to the ways in which writing about this thing can actually start to defamiliarize it for you and for your readers, activating it outside of its “normal” context and opening new paths for meaning and significance.

If thinking about what you’re doing as “defamiliarizing” makes you want to jump into a lake, however, don’t worry about it. Just try not to be stuffy – be humble, be honest, and have a good time with it. Surprise yourself. “No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader,” as Robert Frost says.
Language Games

Among this week’s readings you’ll find an essay called "The Rejection of Closure" by Lyn Hejinian. In it, Hejinian describes an experience of opening a dictionary and finding its entries teeming in complex networks of meaning:

“Even words in storage, in the dictionary, seem frenetic with activity, as each individual entry attracts to itself other words as definition, example, and amplification. Thus, to open the dictionary at random, mastoid attracts nippelike, temporal, bone, ear, and behind. Turning to temporal we find that the definition includes time, space, life, world, transitory, and near the temples, but, significantly, not mastoid. There is no entry for nippelike, but the definition for nipple brings over protuberance, breast, udder, the female, milk, discharge, mouthpiece, and nursing bottle, but again not mastoid, nor temporal, nor time, bone, ear, space, or word.”

For this week’s poem, follow Hejinian’s lead and see what happens when you open your writing up to cacophony of meaning—and a little bit of disorder.

Directions:

1. Choose a text. Your choice may be sentimental (like your favorite novel), found (like a newspaper in a garbage bin), or chosen by any other means you deem appropriate. You’re going to use this text as the source for some of the words in this week’s poem.

2. Circle every 7th word in the text until you’ve circled 28 words. Write your circled words down on a blank sheet of paper.

3. Spend some time looking at your paper considering the relationships you find between these words. What happens when you put one next to another? Does its meaning change? Do you see any similarities between groups of words? Differences?

4. Write a poem using at least some of the words you’ve collected. Bonus points for using all of them.

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Remote courses are taught through our Canvas platform. Approximately two weeks before your class begins, we will add you to your canvas site using the email address you provided at the time of registration. An invitation will then be sent to that email. Click the “Get Started” button in the email to begin the Canvas login process. For step-by-step instructions, please visit https://grahamschool.uchicago.edu/academic-programs/online/learning-resources/liberal-arts. Once you’ve created your Canvas account, you can access any Graham School canvas course for which you are registered at: https://canvas.uchicago.edu.

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For more information, please see this handout for students as well as the University’s Policy on Harassment, Discrimination and Sexual Misconduct and Policy on Title IX Sexual Harassment. You can also reach out directly for services and support from the Office for Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Support by emailing titleix@uchicago.edu.

If you, or another student you know, wishes to speak to a confidential resource who does not have this reporting responsibility, please contact the Sexual Assault Dean on Call through the UChicago Safe App or at 773.834-HELP.

Questions? Contact Zoë Eisenman at zme1@uchicago.edu.