

*Writing Prose Like a Poet:*

An Exploration of Poetic Technique in Very Short Prose

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**Abstract**

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*Writing Prose Like a Poet* explores poetic technique in writing, from the origin of human language to the contemporary prose poem that explodes with meaning, and argues for the power of poetry and concision in modern prose. Looking closely at the poetic techniques used in three modern short-shorts, and following the author's journey away from plot and toward the storytelling power of short, lyrical writing, this thesis traces how language's history of harnessing sound and music informs the future of modern, concise prose: writing that subverts and builds upon elements of both poetry and prose and responds to the call for brevity in our modern world.

## WRITING PROSE LIKE A POET

### An Exploration of Poetic Technique in Very Short Prose

I read a first draft of a prose poem I wrote into the “Voice Memos” app on my iPhone, watching the spectrogram tick up and down across the screen like a volatile stock market graph. I played it back and listened to the sound of the piece, taking notes about sentences that had too many syllables, places where I could add alliteration by swapping in a synonym. I marked rhymes that were a bit too on the nose beside each other; I split sentences into two when they went on so long the rhythm sputtered out. I made the most important phrase of the story a spondee, two stressed words right next to each other after a sentence of flowing meter, to force the reader to stop and really read them. I rerecorded; I played it back; I played it as I walked to meet a friend for a concert, jotting down notes in my phone as I waited in the rain for the red light to turn green; I played it again the next morning, listening for lines that didn’t sound right, and making changes on the sentence level until each word seemed like it was exactly where it had to be.

My prose tends to be short and lyrical, with more focus on sound and image than plot and scene. While some define the “prose poem” as simply poetry with the line breaks taken out and set into a paragraph, my broader definition of the prose poem includes any short, poetically influenced prose, usually no longer than

a few pages, often devoid of scenes, with a focus on word choice and sound: “a work in prose that has some of the technical or literary qualities of a poem (such as regular rhythm, definitely patterned structure, or emotional or imaginative heightening), though it is set on a page as prose” (Kuiper 57). Some may call this flash fiction, sudden fiction, or short-shorts; whatever its name, there is a long history and continuing tradition of writing lyrical, compact prose—“The name short-short story may be relatively new, but its forms are as old as parable and fable, myth and exemplum” (Shapard xiv). And these short works have captivated me with the question: How can so much be said in such a small space?

The very short stories that draw me often use sound and poetic techniques to create pleasing echoes, sentences that sound musical, an emotional pull. They rely on every word in their short length to hold its weight; traditional novels have the time to craft characters and create plot arcs over many chapters. A prose poem has only a few hundred words to work with, so each word, every repetition, the structure of the piece itself, has to be carefully chosen to make that impact in the least amount of space. In some of the very short fiction I’ve consumed and admired, I can finish reading two pages of text and feel the same deep emotional resonance and pleasure I feel at finishing a great novel. Authors have evoked the complex feelings of bliss and longing at a summer almost over in 347 words (Amy Hempel’s “Weekend”), described the Caribbean and its complicated mores and sexualization of women in 685 words (Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”), and captured the complexity of a romantic relationship in 199 words (Molly Giles’s, “The Poet’s Husband”).

Leonard Michaels writes: “A short story has value insofar as it comes close, in one or another way, to being a poem” (Shapard 233).

Russell Edson: A prose poem is “a poetry freed from the definition of poetry, and a prose free of the necessities of fiction” (Lehman 23).

Charles Johnson: “The short-short . . . it’s a powerful fix, like poetry which it resembles because the short-short requires compression and economy” (Shapard 233).

Alvin Greenberg: The short-short is “brevity. Brevity in the face of mortality” (Shapard 230).

Many great novelists use poetic techniques—metaphor and rhythm and concrete imagery. But prose poems, compact examples of the powerful effects of poetry used well in prose, resonate with our biological imperative for poetic language as well as our human desire for storytelling, and allow writers to break the rules of both forms—poetry and prose—to create something new, something that responds to the brevity of modern life.

And in closely looking at how the authors of some of these short pieces have composed their stories, and listening to my own work for sound and poetry, I’ve come a little closer to being able to say something myself—in just a few pages.

## Part I: Sound

I was in Fiction Workshop, presenting on the prose poem chapter of *Life is Short, Art is Shorter* last fall. I'd spent the weekend reading, and rereading, the first two pieces in the chapter, color-coding my highlighting to track the alliteration, the internal rhyme, the assonance, the way the repetitions worked. I'd spent the summer before in Rome writing daily poetry prompts in the hottest hours of the afternoon, with a sleepy, sensory-filled mind after a morning wandering ruins and a nap on white sheets in the little light-filled room where the beds were lined up in a row like cots in convent. I'd stumble out to the cobblestone staircase next to my apartment, past a row of dusty Vespas and a wall of Italian graffiti, and sit on the steps and run words through my head until they'd assembled themselves in a pleasing enough way to write down in my notebook. Every night, in a classroom overlooking the Campo di Fiore as the sun sunk behind the horizon line of rooftops, I'd read my poetry-infused prose aloud to my classmates, for the first time becoming conscious of the way my writing *sounded*. So I was primed to be attuned to the sound of these prose poems that fall, Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" and Molly Giles's "The Poet's Husband," and fumbled excitedly through my presentation, saying, "Look, look at this poetry, so obviously hiding in these paragraphs."

Poetic technique was rarely, if ever, brought up in any prose workshops I've been in. But as I started paying attention to poetry of the prose poems I was reading—the rhyme, alliteration, repetition, assonance, consonance, connotation-

rich word choice, concision, and lyrical images—I began to suspect that the strongest very short fiction relies heavily on poetry, poetry that hides under the compelling narrative guise of prose.

When I started highlighting<sup>1</sup> the sonic effects in Giles’s and Kincaid’s stories, I was surprised at how many instances I found per line, even though their simple, un-flowery language reads like prose. Giles’s story is full of repetition and alliteration. The male character “sits in the front row, **large**, a **large** man with **large** hands and **large** ears.” The female character, “**s**he **sways** on the **s**tage in a **s**hort black dress,” “**s**he **slit** her **wrists**,” she writes about a man she “**s**till **s**ees.” Note the assonance, too, in sway/stage and slit/wrist. And separated by a line, unnoticeable except for the sonic echo, is the rhyme, “and all the **way**,”/“and he will **say**.” Kincaid uses these poetic techniques in “Girl” as well, including alliteration: “the slut you are so **b**ent on **b**ecoming; don’t sing **b**enna”; repetition that emphasizes routine, order, and the repetition of life itself: “**this is how you sweep** a corner; **this is how you sweep** a **whole house**; **this is how you sweep** a yard”; and subtle assonance that creates slant rhymes: “clothes **line dry**” and “after you take them **off**”/“after a **wash**.”

It’s obvious that prose poets, like poets, “care about the sounds and length of words, their suggestions, the rhythm when put together” (Long 123). They’re just better at hiding it.

Baudelaire, often cited as one of the first writers of the prose poem, describes the form as “poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the

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<sup>1</sup> Note that repetition is highlighted in yellow, alliteration in blue, and assonance/rhyme in pink.

undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience. . .” (Baxter 145–146). But I disagree with his claim that rhythm and rhyme aren’t present in prose poems; they just aren’t noticeable. Priscilla Long, in *The Writer’s Portable Mentor*, explains that, in prose written by poets, “the music in their prose functions as a magnet to draw readers into their thoughts, memories, reflections, reports. The music vibrates in the lines . . . it’s a subtext, a whisper that runs along under the text, inaudible to readers with no need to concern themselves with the technical aspects of writing they love” (21–22). Justine Chan, discussing poet’s novels, agrees that in lyrical writing, “inherent and integral is the sense of performance, of music, the vestigial lute strum humming beneath the language” (7). While subtle, the music of rhyme and rhythm, alliteration and assonance, is often present in successful prose poems, hidden but echoing throughout the piece, creating sentences that just *sound* good, a piece that feels complete.

In his lecture for Writers on Writing, Professor David Bosworth discussed the development of language as a biological imperative: language evolved to secure humanity’s “cultural (and so, too, often physical) survival.” Without language, the stories and mores of a culture could not be passed along to future generations, to other groups of people; without language, people could not warn others of unseen dangers or easily pass along information necessary for survival; without language, it would be difficult to stay alive. Bosworth continued to explain that “prior to the invention of writing and the subsequent technological refinements required to make literacy widespread, memorization of spoken language was the *only* means

that could guarantee a relatively accurate conservation of vital cultural knowledge.” And the best way to communicate this knowledge? Rhyme, alliteration, a steady meter, mnemonic devices that makes memorization easy. From Genghis Khan passing rhymed messages along his troop lines to win a war, to traveling Roman storytellers memorizing the *Iliad* to spread their culture’s stories, to political and product slogans that secure loyalty, poetic language is the best way to ensure the message will be remembered and communicated to others. In fact, at the origins of language development, Bosworth said, the necessity for passing messages between different groups of people led to “the evolution of what we now call poetic technique: the manipulation of rhythm, rhyme and refrain, the musical patterning of words.” And, like sugar and salt and sex, poetic language was necessary to sustain life and allow the species to propagate, and is still tied to the pleasure centers in our brains: “An appreciation of patterned sound appears to be a near universal feature of our species,” Bosworth said, “most people seem to find musical expression highly pleasurable.”

Justine Chan writes, “The roots of language and music are the same. I believe it has to do with, in musical cognition terms, cadenced interjections, the pre-musical and pre-linguistic communicative and expressive auditory gestures that are tied to our emotions, our instincts—our basic caveman reaction to the world” (13).

So perhaps it is *natural* that I am drawn to sound in my writing—evolutionarily predetermined, in fact. And I find that as I follow the sound of a piece I’m writing, it can often guide how I write the plot, how I establish the

themes. While writing in Rome, I continually circled back to the pairing of words, “Rome, alone,” drawn to the sound—the assonance, the long vowel sound that makes you linger on the *O*s, the slant rhyme. So in my story, “Nine Days in Rome,” I repeat those two words close to each other in variations throughout the piece, the repetition making it inevitable that my character must leave Rome, alone, in the last scene.

These sonic effects are arguably pleasing to the ear. In fact, even reading silently, we are still often subvocalizing, or “imagining a voice speaking the words” in our heads, which “means that reading silently is producing ‘cross-talk’ between different sensory systems, with written words producing an auditory experience for the reader” (Scicurious). When reading silently, this internal voice also tricks our brains into thinking we are speaking, and the muscles in the throat used while reading aloud are moving imperceptibly (Choi). So while reading, out loud or quietly, our minds are attuned to the musicality of a work, the alliteration and consonance, the rhyme and rhythm, reverberating in the silent space around us.

The main character of my Rome story, too, appreciates the way words sound aloud. One of my favorite sentences of the piece—one that elicited a few validating “mmm”s from the audience when I read the story for the MFA reading series, Castalia—is a line with some alliteration, some repeated vowel sounds, a certain rhythm. My character’s favorite thing: “climbing the Palatine Hill past ruins and reading the rocks aloud just for the way the Latin sounded in her mouth.”

## Part II: Image and the Repetition Frame

While some very short fiction isn't bursting with internal rhymes and alliteration, my favorite pieces still have poetic tendencies. Amy Hempel's "Weekend" captures the blissful but heavy weight of a summer about to end—children playing, oblivious, the men about to return to work, and the women preemptively missing them—a tone that many novels spend four hundred pages describing. So how does Amy Hempel do it in one page?

Hempel's careful use of summary and imagery condense months into a moment; in "Weekend" she uses a few lines of dialogue, then switches to plural subjects for the next few paragraphs to capture the entire tone of the summer:

*. . . Then the children went to bed, or at least went upstairs, and the men joined the women for a cigarette on the porch, absently picking ticks engorged like grapes off the sleeping dogs. And when the men kissed the women good night, and their weekend whiskers scratched the women's cheeks, the women did not think shave, they thought: stay.*

The singular simile in the story—"the ice cubes in his gin and tonic, clacking like dog tags in the glass"—not only evokes the weight of men who have gone to war knowing they might not come back, and wives familiar with that heavy waiting, but connects the loaded image back to the dogs running around the summer baseball game, saying: It's still here, this weight, running among our children. And when readers get to the final line, the women thinking "stay," they're primed by this metaphor to feel the impact more emotionally. In a book review for the *New York Times*, Elizabeth Gleick says that, "In fact, Hempel's

fiction has much in common with poetry. Using only a few phrases, she succeeds in evoking a mood.” Hempel’s stories, she continues, “written as if assembled from fragments of conversations or snatches of melody,” build on each other to gain a momentum that “gives these images suggestions of completeness.”

Kincaid’s “Girl” also takes the loose, melodic form of a list poem, connecting fragmented images in a mother’s series of commands to her daughter:

*. . . this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming . . .*

The anaphora emerges in the middle of the piece to form a stabilizing structure, creating a rhythm that informs the reader the images may wander off in disperse directions, but they are all part of the same list: this is how you be a girl.

The form—a one-sentence laundry list, instructions separated by semi-colons—imitates the droning repetitions of over-controlling, all-wise mother, a pedantic diatribe instead of an exchange. The list is only broken in two italicized moments, a daughter trying to get a word in to protect her innocence as the mother speaks over her—“*but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*”—before the list continues with its same relentless rhythm and repetition, insisting: *this is how* you be a girl.

After teaching my Writers on Writing students the term “anaphora,” I noticed how I’d unknowingly used anaphora in many of my pieces, having been drawn to

the sound of a repeated phrase at the beginning of a line and how the repetition highlights the complexity of a topic. In one short piece, I list the stresses of motherhood, alternating between simple and serious contributors:

*Her mother got cancer because of her. It was the stress, she said, that metastasized that lump in her breast . . . It was returning library books a few days late. It was library fines. It was salting snails in the garden and watching their skin foam, killing them so her lemon trees could grow. It was burning her fingers on hot rollers before bed. It was wondering when her husband would get home. It was after dark, one night, when everyone was asleep, sitting in the bay window too tired to read, and watching the moon lilt through the leaves of the tree she was paying someone to cut down the next day . . . It was that day she'd turned the bathwater pink, another miscarriage, and it was the certainty with which she knew she was going to die.*

Professor Pimone Triplett, in a lecture about list poems and anaphora for Writers on Writing, explained how a repeated phrase works as a stabilizer in a poem, a constant, while the rest of the line is not only “free to wander but must.” “Anaphora,” (from the Latin *ana* “back” and *pheirein* “to bear/to carry”) allows the writer to wander as far as they need to before the repetition pulls the reader back to the start, back to the unifying theme of the piece. The repetition can take a divergent list or group of images and organize them to build on a common theme—in “Girl”’s case, the repetition of “this is how” works as a catchall for the differing images in the story—from slut to Sunday School—which, together, capture the many facets of a girl growing up in the Caribbean and its expectations of women. Triplett writes in her prompt for the class, “List poems have a layering,

cumulative effect, often creating a chant-like quality in its repetitions, like a magic spell for the ordinary life.”

Charles Dickens’s famous opening lines in *A Tale of Two Cities* illustrate how anaphora allows the author to present conflicting images right next to each other, the anaphora supporting pairs of opposites: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity . . .” The anaphora, the stabilizer, eliminates the jarring effect of so many different images and ideas in a short space, allowing the author to present the complexity and duality of a subject quickly. But, while powerful in short works, I imagine that anaphora used insistently throughout a longer piece of fiction would lose its power, the repetition getting tiring after a while, beginning to feel like a conceit, the reader unable to hold the comparisons in their head. Michel Deville claims in his book, *The American Prose Poem*, that when a prose poem extends longer than a few pages, “the tensions and impact are forfeited” (2). Unsurprisingly, after a paragraph, Dickens’s anaphora falls away.

So if anaphora is often a frame for images and ideas, it is the image in the piece that is meant to stand out, to be admired. Molly Giles’s short piece, “The Poet’s Husband,” only contains one concrete image. After describing an event, where a seemingly supportive husband watches his wife read poetry, the story ends, “but later that night when she is asleep, he will lie in their bed and stare at the moon through a spot on the glass that she missed,” the husband’s first concrete expression of discontentment. This shift, captured so vividly in the image of the

blurred moon, has the effect of pushing the reader back into the story, asking them to reread it, to discover what was missed earlier, to wonder how they didn't see this coming; and, in under two hundred words, it's possible to reread the entire story immediately. You can't hold an entire novel in your head, or reread it quickly, but a successful prose poem almost insists that you do. Pamelyn Casto describes the story as "a model of controlled ambiguity . . . Giles uses a single significant detail at the end of the story, which turns what came before on its head . . . Everything that came before leads to and contributes to the final revelation but it's written so well that a reader is kept off track until the final detail is revealed. Then readers realize the nature of the poet's husband. A flash of a disturbing truth is revealed." In a short piece, a singular image has the power to upset, redefine, call question to, add complexity, and twist the narrative. In fact, the short-short is an extremely powerful vessel for unexpected, shocking, or subversive images. Casto continues, "employing the art of brevity, suggestion, image, and implication sometimes produces quite horrific effects without sustained length."

In Kincaid's "Girl," the final lines also redefine the story. Following the previous items in the list, the instruction "always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh" works as a metaphor for men's attention toward young women, and the entire list of advice for the daughter is finally put into context: *this is how* you be a girl, in the face of your inevitable sexualization in this male-driven society. The image transforms the list of motherly advice into a statement on a Big Concept.

C. Michael Curtis says: "The shorter the story, the more both writer and

reader have to depend on hard moments of discovery, flashes of illumination that provide, in their suggestiveness and aptness, what other writers struggle for pages to make clear” (Shapard 250).

### **Part III: Concision**

In my first Fiction Workshop of grad school, I was hit with the requirement of turning in three fifteen-page stories in less than three months, a length and turnaround time I’d never been comfortable with. Not only did I *not* have an excess of longer stories lying around—my proclivity had always been toward few-page stories that experimented with language and form—I’d also tasked myself with bringing only freshly written work to that workshop. But I asked myself: How can I write even one 4,500-word story? When I went to the bookstore for inspiration, the answer seemed to be: plot. The creative writing section was filled with books like *Plot Perfect*, *20 Master Plots*, *The Plot Whisperer*, *The Plot Machine*, *No Plot? No Problem!* So I attempted it; I labored over a girl-meets-boy story in a lonely big city, throwing in some subtle magic realism that I didn’t quite keep consistent, getting noticeably bored with the story by page three, but continuing on anyway. The result will not be included in my creative thesis. In fact, my plot was so confusing and untenable that my professor told me during workshop, pleased as if he’d solved a complex riddle, that he’d figured it out: my story was an allegory for human innocence being corrupted by the Devil, the male character a personification of the Devil walking among us.

Note: It wasn't.

As an intern for Writers on Writing that winter, I listened to lectures presented by the creative writing faculty members, all different, perking up at Professor Maya Sonenberg's talk, which reminded me that not all fiction writers are good at plot, not all writers need to write plot, and this is OK. By the end of that quarter, reading two plot-less novel-length collage books a week for Professor David Shields's seminar class, I finally expelled my anxiety over plot and allowed myself to let it go and focus on what really interested me. And, for me, this was allowing myself to discard plot and turn toward collage; I started treating every paragraph like a prose poem, and whether two hundred words or part of a longer collage, my work suddenly felt more exciting, more full of possibility. Charles Baxter, speaking on short-shorts, says, "as a form, they are open, and exist in a state of potential." For the first time, I felt this potential in my own writing.

The first successful story I wrote in grad school happened later that winter, a collage of prose poems. I ruthlessly cut segments from many of the longer narratives I'd written before, cherry-picking the paragraphs I liked because of their sound, their one strong image, their few sentences that flowed well. I put them in a Word document, moved them around, edited them down, wrote some more, inserted some recurring images—a child reaching up to pick a lemon from a tree, and later, a slice of lemon bobbing then smashed against the bottom of a cocktail glass—and tried to figure out how to create movement without the "what happens next?" forward momentum of a traditional narrative. This, I admit, is something I'm still working on, learning how to create tension without a plot to

rely on. And, often, the poetic forces that do to some extent drive my pieces forward—repetition; anaphora; singular, strong images—often work more powerfully in a short length: long enough to let the tone establish itself, but short enough that the story ends before the effect of the technique has petered out.

This idea of conciseness is certainly popular in American fiction—Elmord Leonard advises writers to “Leave out the parts that readers tend to skip,” which Steven King colloquializes: “leave out the boring parts.” Joe David Bellamy says, “compression and concision have always been part of the aesthetic of the American short story form” (Shapard 238). But in very short fiction, this conciseness must be taken a step further; in a few hundred words, not only must each line be interesting, but there cannot be any unnecessary words. In poetry, William Faulkner says, “You have less room to be slovenly and careless. There’s less room in it for trash.” The same is true with prose poetry.

Molly Giles’s story “The Poet’s Husband” describes a relationship and hints at its history and tensions in 199 words. “In Giles’ little gem,” Pamelyn Casto argues, “there’s not a single word that doesn’t contribute to what had to have been a pre-established design.”

Amy Hempel makes a play for most compact story with “Housewife,” only 43 words, printed below in its entirety:

*She would always sleep with her husband and with another man in the course of the same day, and then the rest of the day, for whatever was left to her of that day, she would exploit by incanting, “French film, French film.”*

And Ernest Hemingway, of course, wins:

*For sale, baby shoes, never worn.*

#### **Part IV: Word Choice**

This necessity for concision has drawn me to look closely at words on an individual level; without much context, much backstory, how can singular words add to the complexity of a story? Hemingway's six-word short story relies on careful word choice to make the piece seem complete, personal, heartbreaking. The assonance in "for" and "worn" create parallel bookends. The alliteration of "sale" and "shoes" creates an echo, and the long vowel sounds in both words, along with the final word, "worn," slows the line down to a lament. The poetry of this story accentuates the narrative centered in the sentence—the deep heartbreak of losing an infant implied in six words. Compare Hemingway's piece to the less pleasing but synonymous sentence I just wrote, which is felt less emotionally: *To purchase, infant sandals, not used.*

In "Housewife," Hempel's simple words—"sleep," "husband," "man," "day"—most of which come from Old English, are punctuated by two Latinate words at the end—"exploit" and "incanting"—adding a harshness that contrasts the rest of the story and infuses the piece with a sharper tone. Imagine, for instance, how the story would lose that sharpness if it ended with Old English words: "she would *deed* by saying, 'French film, French film.'" It would also lose the connotation of witchcraft brought in with the term "incant"—the *Merriam-Webster* definition of "incantation" being "a series of words used to make

something magic happen.” With that one word, which stands out because of its sharper Latinate origin, the author implies that the woman’s entire life is an act of spell-like repetition, trying futilely to make something magic happen.

Incidentally, every word in Hemingway’s six-word story comes from the Old or Middle English as well. And my feeble rewrite, from Latin.

Kate Gardoqui’s recent TED talk, “How did English evolve?”, explains how words are so full of connotation that specific word choice has the power to shape the entire tone of a piece, especially when taking etymologies under consideration. Many poets I know find pleasure in tracking down a word’s etymology, its origin, and harnessing the connotations of roots or dead metaphors in their work. In very short prose, this attention to the full meaning of individual words and the effects of word choice are equally essential, allowing the author to create tone quickly and invisibly in a compact space.

Consider the different connotations embedded in the English language:

*When the Normans came to England from France in 1066, the language of the natives was Old English (or Anglo-Saxon), which gave us many of the words for down-to-earth realities. French became the language of the court; words of French ancestry are redolent of courtliness, chivalry, romance. For centuries Latin was the language of the church and scholarship; words patently from the Latin can still suggest erudition or pedantry” (Western Winds 140).*

Gardoqui’s TED illustrates how these connotations still cling to words with a mental exercise: Imagine that you enter a room to a “hearty welcome.” What do you picture? Who is in the room? What are they drinking? I asked the

undergraduate writing class I teach to do this experiment, and they answered: A bearded man, in flannel, maybe, with steins of beer and bear hugs. Or a friendly family with a freshly baked pie. Next, imagine entering a room to a “cordial reception.” The visual: no beards here—more likely champagne flutes and cocktail dresses and a formality or stiffness you’d never expect from a hearty welcome. But “hearty welcome” and “cordial reception” have nearly equivalent meanings. Both “hearty” and “welcome” are from the Old English, while “cordial” and “reception” come from French (and earlier, Latin). The cultural connotations of 1066 AD still cling to the words, and writers can instantaneously create a tone of sophistication and authority, or salt-of-the-earth simplicity, with words alone.

Dead metaphors also have considerable incantatory power. I asked my students to describe for me an old woman who had “steel-gray hair” and then one with “dove-gray hair.” With only three words, they created vastly different, detailed characters—one in a dark, prim pantsuit with pristine antique furniture and a stiff, formal nature, the other with cats and floral prints and cookies for grandchildren and a penchant for gardening. And no one was in disagreement about these descriptions. *One word*, silently powered by a hidden metaphor—“steel,” hard, cold metal, and “dove,” love-associated, soft, white—had the power to set a tone and describe the entire personality and lifestyle of a character. One. Careful word choice, chosen with a poet’s penchant for etymologies, can create a mood in a piece that less lyrical narrative fiction, relying on character development and setting and conflict, may need ten times the amount of words to

create.

Poets have always understood the importance of words. W. H. Auden says, “a poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language . . . [this] is certainly the sign by which one recognizes whether a young man is potentially a poet or not. ‘Why do you want to write poetry?’ If the young man answers: ‘I have important things to say,’ then he is not a poet. If he answers, ‘I like hanging around words and listening to what they say,’ then maybe he is going to be a poet” (*Western Winds* 122). I am a prose writer, but I like hanging around words and listening to what they say; maybe I am going to be a prose poet.

## **Part V: Why Prose?**

I greatly admire poetry. In fact, the strongest pieces of short prose I’ve read rely heavily on poetic technique, using the poet’s eye for language, their manipulation of our bone-deep desire for sound, their ability to accentuate strong images.

So why do I write prose and not poetry?

Charles Baxter writes, “Poets are the nobility of the writing world. Their nobility has to do with their spiritual intelligence and mind-haunted love for language and their subtle perfectionism. Poets can trace their lineage back to Orpheus . . . Like other nobles who spend their days scouting the heavens, however, poets have little understanding of worldly occupations, except for writing poems and falling in love and having great sex, which is why half of their

poems are about writing poems or falling in love or having great sex” (140–141).

If poetry is nobility, prose is the commoner of the writing world, tracing its lineage back to oral storytelling and gossip. Prose is “plain expression,” the word “prose” coming from the Latin *prosa oration* for “straightforward or direct speech” and from the Old French *prose*, meaning, “story, narration.” “Humans have been telling stories for thousand of years . . . In one way or another, much of people’s lives are spent telling stories . . . Humans are inclined to see narratives where there are none because it can afford meaning to our lives—a form of existential problem-solving” (Delistraty). Prose is a widely consumed and accessible form that tries to capture and reflect back our lives to help us understand and process them. In his book, *The Storyteller Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall explains that “the constant firing of our neurons in response to fictional stimuli strengthens and refines the neural pathways that lead to skillful navigation of life’s problems,” (67) and that not only are avid readers more empathetic and capable at handling social situations, but ancient tribes were more successful if they shared stories—and the better the story, the more successful they were.

Narrative prose is compelling, because it imitates how we talk, gossip, and interpret the events of our lives; it’s familiar and our brains are programmed to look for and learn from story. Stories allow “humans to feel that we have control over the world” and “see patterns where there is chaos, meaning where there is randomness.” The word “story” comes from the Old French *estoire*, “story, chronicle, history,” so it doesn’t surprise me when the *Atlantic* ventures, “Perhaps the real reason we tell stories again and again . . . is because humans want to be a

part of a shared history” (Delistraty).

Poetic prose, to me, especially short-short fiction—which, by nature of its brevity, chooses the most powerful words and images—is the most exciting frontier of the written word today. It’s lyrical, narrative concision. It’s the beauty and musicality of poetry hidden under the accessibility and connectedness of narrative prose. It’s so short that every word, every image, matters immensely. Nancy Huddleston Packer notes that microfictions have the power to “push the basic elements of all short stories—compression, suggestion, and change. They combine the intensity and lyricism of a poem with the dramatic impact and movement of a short story—these stories are so compressed, they explode” (*Writing Fiction* 250).

And I want to be part of that explosion, that forward motion, continuing the lineage from poetry to lyric to fable to novel to short story to short-short. I want to tell simple stories, beautifully, briefly. I want to appeal to our human tendency to turn our lives into narratives, and incite pleasure with lyricism.

## **Conclusions**

Over the last two years, I studied with prose writers but traveled with poets, spending a month wandering and writing in Rome and a few weeks and long weekends composing poems in Friday Harbor as I watched the ferries come and go. I wrote quick—composing lines in my head as I sat on a evergreen tree stump or a marble bench in Piazza Navona. I focused on language—I couldn’t craft a

plot in two hundred words, so I stole a poet's tricks: alliteration, consonance, anaphora, internal rhyme, sensory images to describe a moment, a place. And I realized that this quick, close attention to pleasing sonic effects and language bring me more pleasure as a writer than fussing with the plot and character and climax I'd mainly been taught; I realized that I was allowed to stretch those lines of poetry into paragraphs of prose, that this has always been allowed, this lyricism, even though no one had let me in on the secret yet. I could take the best of prose and the best of poetry, while breaking away from the expectations of both forms.

The brevity of the prose poem also appealed to me, a form that requires sound and story and word choice to be used to their maximum effect in the least amount of space. And with the ubiquity of short Facebook posts and texts, with 140 character limits on Twitter and 500 character limits on Tinder, with the page-scrolling and web-surfing culture where we consume a massive amount of information in little gulps, some of our contemporary literature will undoubtedly reflect that brevity. And the prose poem gives writers a form to experiment with that maximizes emotional impact in a very short work.

Lydia Davis writes: "What is certain, in any case, is that we are more aware of the great precariousness and the possible brevity of our lives than we were in the past . . . and for this reason, perhaps, we express not only more despair but also more urgency in some of our literature now, this urgency also being expressed as brevity itself" (Shapard 230).

My goal is to contribute to that conversation, to learn to do it well, to try to

capture in my writing today's movement toward word-count limits, but with the tools of a poet. To meld our vestigial desires for music and poetry and narrative with our urgency toward brevity.

I'm not sure that our society's trend toward concision will ever fully do away with the demand for thick, developed novels, their texture and heft in your hand, the physical act of turning pages and watching the weight of the book shift from left to right like a hourglass, marking time spent in another place. Nor should it. But with our smartphones distracting us every few minutes, there's something to be said these days for stories that can make that quick emotional impact. And writing short, with a poet's eye for language—a focus on the weight of every word, the sound, the musicality, the skillful wielding of connotations and summary and image—is one powerful way to do that. Arguably, it is the quickest way to do that.

I spoke to a young poet after a reading this winter, attracted to his narrative style of poetry, which weighed story and sound equally. He explained that his poetics are very simple: write with honesty and empathy, and use others' voices in his work before his own. After two years of struggling against traditional plots, and slowly easing into writing that makes me excited, my poetics, for now, are also simple: write prose like a poet.

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