Event title: The Against Tradition Tradition: Contradiction & The Prose Poem

Description:

Originating in 19th century France as a subversive form “supple . . . and rugged enough to adapt . . . to the lyrical impulses of the soul,” prose poems are now taught in writing classrooms across the globe. Has their popularity changed their capacity for surprise, radicalism, and (non)sense? How are contemporary poets troubling the contradictions inherent in the form’s name? This diverse panel of poets will consider these questions and trace their relationships to the indefinable prose poem.

Biographies:

Leslie Sainz (Moderator) is the author of Have You Been Long Enough at Table (Tin House, 2023). The recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, CantoMundo, and The Stadler Center for Poetry & Literary Arts at Bucknell University, she is the managing editor of the New England Review.

Sophie Klahr is the author of the poetry collections Two Open Doors in a Field (University of Nebraska Press, 2023), Meet Me Here at Dawn (YesYes Books, 2016), and the collaborative prose work There Is Only One Ghost in the World (Fiction Collective Two, 2023), written alongside Corey Zeller, which won the Ronald Suckenick Award for Innovative Fiction. She has been a Kenan Visiting Writer at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and a Philip Roth Resident at the Stadler Center for Poetry & Literary Arts. She currently lives in Los Angeles.

Dana Levin is the author of five books of poetry. Her latest is Now Do You Know Where You Are (Copper Canyon Press), a 2022 New York Times Notable Book and NPR “Book We Love.” She is a grateful recipient of many honors, including those from the NEA, PEN, and the Library of Congress, as well as from the Rona Jaffe, Whiting, and Guggenheim Foundations. Currently she serves as Distinguished Writer in Residence at Maryville University in St. Louis, and teaches for the Bennington Writing Seminars’ MFA program. With Adele Elise Williams, she is the co-editor of Bert Meyers: On the Life and Work of an American Master (2023) for the Unsung Masters Series.


Originally from the West Side of Chicago, Olatunde Osinaike is a Nigerian-American poet, essayist, and software developer. He is the author of Tender Headed (Akashic Books), selected
by Camille Rankine as winner of the 2022 National Poetry Series. His work has received fellowships and support from Poets & Writers, Hurston/Wright Foundation, Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, and the Institute for the Study of Global Racial Justice at Rutgers University.

Remarks:

Leslie Sainz: The idea for this panel came about after I finished reading Andrea Rexilius’s New Organism: Essais, a collection of activated prose poems and portal-like essays that create their own agency by inhabiting the unsayable. I was left dumbfounded by Rexilius’s ability to trouble multiplicity, to build a critical theory of form, interruption, and becoming. Spending time with this collection felt like a manic invitation to revisit the prose poem—not just in my own writing, but in the contemporary pantheon. The panelists here today: Jose Hernandez Diaz, Sophie Klahr, Dana Levin, and Olatunde Osinaike are not just fluent in the form, they take residence in it. Residence, like residue, Rexilius writes, “leaves a stain or an echo of itself.” Though our panelists are in different stages of their writing lives and careers, their work not only creates lasting echoes, but builds a form around these echoes. They conceptualize the prose poem as jarring, rigorous, and dream-like. They model and keep alive its slippery spirit, its ability to adapt to what Baudelaire called “the somersaults of consciousness.” I hope our conversation today presents to you, the audience, yet another manic invitation—to approach the prose poem with wild abandon, to test the limits of this indefinable, inexhaustible form.

Dana Levin: I want to, in part, talk about Haibun and Basho’s innovations. Also, the prose poem as a teaching form for *verse* (see answer to question 1). And also, I am seeing, as I answer these questions, that I always think of the prose poem in juxtaposition with verse—they always walk together, even if verse is in shadow (maybe this relates to question 3)

Sophie Klahr: I’d be happy to talk about my experience of collaborative prose poetry – maybe this has something to do with answering question 3 RE: “frivolity,” subversion, and relationship to gender

Questions:

1. When did you first encounter the prose poem in an academic setting, and how were you taught to consider it? Do you still view the form through this lens?

JHD: I discovered prose poetry as I was taking a semester off of graduate school. I don’t recall studying it too much in an academic setting, more independently. My strategy for learning about prose poetry was simply to read as many prose poems as I could get my hands on and then write some.

DL: I don’t recall ever being taught prose poems in an academic setting: in undergrad (1983-1987) or grad (1990-1992). They very much felt like rebel creatures that thrived outside
the classroom. This is one reason, I think, why Simic’s 1990 Pulitzer for his book of prose poems, *The World Doesn’t End*—the first Pulitzer for a book of prose poems—was considered remarkable. There were still plenty of people in this era who didn’t think “prose poems” were poems, and that was the basis of cocktail party and dorm room and office hour arguments: were they poems or not? So, sneaky creatures that they are, prose poems made us have to consider what a lyric poem *is*—

**OO:** Like JHD & DL, I came upon prose poems outside of the traditional academic setting. It was in the time when I was altogether new to poetic devices that I came welcome by accessibility prose poetry granted. You didn’t have to come with a set schema, only your own uncontrolled, and at times natural, breath.

**SK:** I know that I had Baudelaire’s poem “Be Drunk” taped to a wall in an apartment in my teens, though I’m not sure how I happened upon it. Despite my wildly poor memory, I can remember my first exposure to prose poems in Academia with strange specificity—I was in a poetry class with Peter Shippy during my first semester at Emerson College, and he gave us excerpts from Joe Wenderoth’s “Letters to Wendy’s” as well as Jennifer Knox’s poem “Hot Ass Poem.” I don’t remember any instruction or guidance we got around approaching those works, only the gleam in Peter’s eye as we read those pieces in class. I think I’ve taken that gleam forward into my own approach when writing and teaching prose poems—Dana used the word ‘sneaky’—that feels like part of the gleam.

2. In your approach to the form, which elements of craft are non-negotiable? Which do you assuage? Does subject matter affect these decisions, or are the demands of the prose poem ever-dominant?

**JHD:** I try to stick to block or paragraph form. Recently, with my forthcoming book, my editor introduced me to a different style of indentation for the prose poem which I’ve grown to like/adopt. I tend to write in the surreal, absurdist and/or autobiographical styles as well.

**DL:** I like what JHD said above and also sprezzatura—I don’t have hard and fast rules when it comes to writing prose poems, but I notice I write them when I want to *talk* more than *sing* (in the lyric way), when I want to tell a story or relay an experience where narrative is primary and shoving the narrative into verse feels over-labored, where the lyric poem’s tendency toward economy and compression won’t allow me to do that narrative work in a more conversational way. I find the prose poem most helpful when working with dream material: the juxtaposition between the complete weirdness of dreams and the straight-ahead movement of prose seems to capture, for me, that odd mix of strangeness and matter-of-factness that often characterize dreams.

**OO:** Foremost for me is the inherited tension; the breathless nature of the form elicits for me a lack of time and/or space. At my most impatient, prose poems promise me an arrival where I put story into its container (block text almost always) and I am somewhere else. Maybe I’ve relied on the prose poem’s allowance to be a raft while my language makes up ground to my heart. As
it is tied to my identity which is in large part measured, I am drawn to prose poems for their care to be impartial, to not judge the times I’d like to detach.

SK: For me, only the margins are non-negotiable—my prose poems are always in block form, whether that means a manipulated margin on the page, or what Microsoft Word is programmed to offer. Sometimes my prose poems have white space within the lines here and there—sometimes not. Those differences do seem related to subject matter—I was writing a series of prose poems about addiction, and there seemed to be a lot of white space in those prose poems because of the nature of fracture and hesitation and spill in an experience of addiction, and memories of addiction. Outside of that subject, I haven’t found myself deviating from the simple frame of boxed collection, and letting the sentence murmur on without those big wafts of air, which are sort of like hiccups or briefly caught breath, or like the brief sting of an ice cream headache.

3. Prose poems have often been described as a precarious form with one foot in two genres, a product of hybridity. I like to think of the prose poem not as a blending but a recasting of multiple constituents. With this image in mind and the growing popularity of hybrid literature, how might we continue to retain and reshape rebellion into the prose poem?

JHD: My focus is on discovery, exploration and associative leaps. I think so long as I’m interested in discovery as I write it will keep it subversive and fresh. I am particularly drawn to duende as inspiration and sprezzatura as Simic advocates for an effect of nonchalance in prose poetry.

DL: I think the prose poem will always carry a whiff of subversion and play, as it always has traditions in poetic form eyeing it suspiciously. I’d love to see more haibun in the world, haibuns that use the “travelogue” intention of the prose in classic haibun to journey into imagined lands, especially of the interior psyche; that understand the rigor and surprise aspect of haiku, which is a juxtapositional form, as is haibun itself. I think of the film term and technique of kino fist (Eisenstein): “the smashing of two conflicting elements in a jarring, conscious way to provoke a very reactive response. It turns the film into a far more active, aware experience than most seamlessly stitched together movies, and its ability to allow thematic elements into play rather than a clear logical chain of progression.” (https://filmpravda.com/tag/kino-fist/)

OO: I’m thinking about readers of my work ahead of even my own who have told me that my prose poems seem to occur when I would much rather “be” than “do”. And so as I’ve returned to the form, I find my space on the page and space from the memory are more often inverse to each other. When I started in prose poems, I was much more interested in widening or choice than I am now. The form taught me about my own obsessions with the conceit of definition and stability. How does the poem unfold with all of this (un)attained freedom? How do I?

SK: I think drawing the broad concept of found poetry into the prose poem is a mode of subtle rebellion. There is so much in the news that I feel drawn to write about, but crafting events into
verse sometimes feels unmanageable, and taking a break from thinking about line breaks, sometimes allows me to find that right sentence and image about things like genocide or ecological grief. Maybe immersion into that poetic space is more gentle; with a prose poem, I’m holding only the power tools of punctuation, and letting rest that scythe of lineation.

4. Recently, I’ve started to think of the prose poem as a campish form, especially by Mark Booth’s definition of the style: “to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits.” My mind goes to the prose poem’s mutability, popularity, classification as a traditional form despite its subversive origins, its relationship to gender (both historically and in their shared resistance of the binary), and how its paradoxical boundaries and boundlessness mirror consumption itself. What can “artifice, frivolity, and shocking excess” (Susan Sontag) teach us about the prose poem?

DL: Something here about how the prose poem often thumbs its nose at the self-serious aspects of the classic lyric poem. It can function like the trickster, the court jester, in the poetic pantheon.

OO: As with any potent art, it is inherently political and thereby artificial conventions. I think of prose poems in this way—acknowledgments of resistance in the face of these performances and curated tragedies.