

**SENTENCE:**  
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No. 1



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of Prose Poetics, No. 1*

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# Foreword

*No, mortal, that size is beyond your conception  
Smoke. Don't describe yourself.*

—Gunslinger, Ed Dorn

The prose poem “has developed almost as many trends as there are poets practicing it, so that any attempt at a single, monolithic definition of the genre would be doomed to failure.” So says Michel Delville, sounding the rallying cry of recent commentators on the prose poem, in his important study, *The American Prose Poem*. But this doom arises not only from the genre’s variety; there is another simple factor—a prose poem is a poem written in prose. Why should we expect prose poetry to be any easier to define than poetry, for which the best definition to date may be Wittgenstein’s amorphous “language that does not participate in the communication game”?

Even prose is not so easily defined, when there are so many prose practitioners who musicate or fracture the language as much as or more than many poets. It turns out that verse, regardless of how arcane its vocabulary and how torturous its prosody, is far easier to define than either prose or poetry.

The difference between verse and the prose poem is that verse (free or otherwise) generates tension in the play between the line ending and the sentence. The prose poem has only the sentence and must find its tension in either the sentence's content or in the sentence's structure.

Beyond that, you won't find any prescriptions here about what the prose poem is or isn't. Is Jeff Davis's "The Source" a prose poem or a lyric essay or something else? Is Denise Duhamel's *Mille et un sentiments* a prose poem or just a list or something else? Does "something else" mean the work goes about clouding the line that circumscribes "the prose poem"? Yes? Then you might find it here.

Our hope is that in the pages of *Sentence* you will find a wide-ranging demonstration of what the prose poem has been, what it can be, and what it is becoming before our eyes.

And the prose poem *is* before our eyes more than ever: in *Double Room*, *CUE* (premiering about the same time as this issue), *Quarter After Eight*, *untitled*, *Paragraph*, *Quick Fiction*, all dedicated to publishing prose poems and work bordering the prose poem. There are also numerous other publications especially open to the prose poem, including *Fence*, *American Poetry Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Agni*, *Luna* (whose editor, Ray Gonzalez, is planning a special issue on the prose poem), *Jubilat*, *Skanky Possum*, and *88*, among many others too numerous to list here.

One might ask why, given so many outlets for the prose poem, there is a need for *Sentence*. We intend to be a full-service forum for readers, writers, critics, and scholars of the prose poem tradition. In addition to the poems, you will find here critical and scholarly essays, translations, occasional interviews, a

bibliography of recent criticism on the prose poem and related topics, and our *Views and Reviews* section where you can vent your most dearly held opinions on topics of interest to *Sentence* readers (see David James's "Rant" in this issue) and read reviews of recent books. Some of those other journals are doing some of those things (see *Double Room*'s wonderful Q&A section); *Sentence* will have the widest scope.

One thing *Sentence* will not do is publish work that we consider clearly to be short short stories. Obviously, the line between the prose poem and the short short is as cloudy as those borders mentioned above. If it is impossible to definitively describe the prose poem, then is it possible to distinguish the line where prose poems leave off and sudden fiction picks up? We feel that *Quick Fiction*, *Quarter After Eight*, and *Paragraph* are doing quite well, thank you, at covering that blur. This is not to say that we won't consider narrative prose poems, nor that some of the work in this issue does not have a strong narrative component, but that our editorial bias leans a bit toward the other tendencies of the prose poem. If you find that the work in *Sentence* is not narrative enough for your taste, then I encourage you to check out those other excellent publications.

We would be unable to do all this without the assistance of our board of Contributing Editors. The efforts of Peter Johnson and Michel Delville were absolutely central to the development of this issue, and we will be forever grateful for their assistance in getting us off on the right foot. Indeed, we probably would not have thought to start *Sentence* if not for the example of Peter Johnson's dormant *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* (which, rumor has it, will reawaken in a few years). Our gratitude also goes to Russell Edson and Maxine Chernoff for their generous contributions.

Thanks also to the hundreds of prose poets whose work we were unable to use in this issue; we received more top-notch work than we dared hope for. We hope you all will send again.

Finally, thanks must go to my Firewheel partners—Gregg Thompson, who planted the seed and harvested the crop, and Mike Carris, whose handiwork is working in your hands. Their assistance was invaluable in all the hard decisions.

We've put together this inaugural issue of *Sentence* with you in mind. Please let us know what you think of it.

—*Brian Clements*