

Robert Bly, C.K. Williams & Michael Klein: Corporate Intimacy in Prose Poetry

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An Advanced Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the MA English,

The College at Brockport, State University of New York

Master of Arts

May 15, 2015

Abstract

This advanced project explores the genre of the prose poetry form taking specific note of its shape, sound, and structure. It considers the juxtaposition of intimacy and inclusivity within the form in the prose poetry work of three poets, Robert Bly, C.K. Williams, and Michael Klein. Reader-response theory is also addressed to theoretically ground the conversation and infuse the concept of community and connection in and through this poetic form. Drawing on the accessible and personal nature that prose poetry can invite, this project examines how each poet exemplifies the idea of “created corporate intimacy” as it is applied to all three poets’ work as a means to further discuss the relationship of the reader and writer—and what these writers allow—and that is a sense of intimacy between the speaker of their poems and the readers, and the relational connection of readers.

Key Words: prose poetry, line-break, poetic genre, intimacy, reader-response theory

Dedication

This Advanced Project is lovingly and gratefully dedicated to all those

who believed in me, prayed for me, encouraged me,

who loved me and pushed me to finish well,

you are the poetry of my life.

Ron, my beloved partner in everything . . .

Rob, poet-warrior, who called home from war-torn countries to talk poetry and the pursuit of a dream . . .

Chird, steady and sure, who proofread and edited, always available to Mom with a hug and a smile . . .

Casey, little “mama,” who assured me when I wavered and loves me unconditionally . . .

Katie, whose dimpled smile challenged me to follow in her masterful GPA footsteps . . .

Melanie, who cheered me on and kept me laughing . . .

Jimmy, who inspired me to passionately pursue the prize . . .

Alexander and Elijah, whose baby boy smooches kept “Mama” going . . .

Dad and Mom, who taught me to be “all in” and hugged me through two years of graduate study . . .

Sarah, Sher, and Sue, my dearest friends, who prayed unceasingly . . .

Karen, Laura, David, and Nadine, who calmed, encouraged, listened, and pushed me . . .

The Hope Choir, my musical family, who embraced me and lovingly let me go . . .

Kim and Kandie, who offered listening ears and amazing hugs . . .

Jamie, who graciously demanded excellence . . .

Ralph, Steve, Janie, Greg, Jennifer, Kristen, Alicia, and Carter, my dear English Department family . . .

And finally, to Barbi, Christina, Erin, Nikki, Shannon B, and Shannon P, my loving lit sisters . . . we did it!

In Him, all things are possible.

*“Because your love is better than life, my
lips will glorify You. I will praise You as
long as I live, and in Your name I will lift up
my hands.” (Psalm 63:3-4, NIV)*

In a prose poem we often feel a man or woman talking not before a crowd but in a low voice to someone he is sure is listening.

-- Robert Bly

Poetic forms abound. If we say that a sonnet is made of three quatrains and a couplet, iambic pentameter, and a particular rhyme scheme, we describe its shape, sound and structure. Prose poetry, argued by many as formless and without standard conventions does by its very nature of formlessness have a standardization of form and, as Robert Bly would suggest, though it may be formless it is still “elegant.” Ron Silliman notes it’s the work of prose poems’ experimentation that “demonstrated a paragraph-centered poetry, informed but not limited by the French tradition, [which] offered possibilities that went beyond a speech-based poetic” (163). In an examination of several prose poets of note, a list which includes Baudelaire, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Simic, David Lehman notes how artists craft a prose poem’s anatomy in markedly different ways. The idea of varying approaches to the form is affirmed by Lehman who posits the idea that it is not prose and *poetry* that are antithetical but prose and *verse*. He describes the prose poem “not [as] the absence of form,” but by the explanation that the prose poem, while certainly different from verse poetry, is yet poetic in nature because “the sentence and paragraph . . . act the part of the line and stanza” (“The Prose Poem: An Alternative” 45) . Lehman defines the often undefined construct as “a poem written in prose rather than verse . . . [adding it] looks like a paragraph or short story but acts like a poem [that] works in sentences rather than lines . . . and just as free verse does away with meter and rhyme, the prose poem does away with the line as a unit of composition” (45). Ron Silliman points out a significant challenge for prose poets, that “genres form a kind of prior restraint . . . [yet] in the same moment . . . yield the identifiability [which] relieve[s] authors of certain decisions and responsibilities” (158). In Silliman’s argument, the same poetic form that identifies something as haiku, villanelle, sonnet

or rondo, frees the writer from an experiment in boundary-less space with no constraints while at the same time hemming in the writer as it dictates the creative structure or identified genre within which they must write.

Though loathe to attach his name to anything with so little formal structure, Robert Frost, in his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes,” has managed to unwittingly describe prose poetry or at the very least the freedom of creation that modern prose poetry enables; “Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting . . . Its most precious quality will remain in its having run itself and carried away the poet with it” (985). This idea of content dictating the form is not a new one and certainly has been applied to many new forms of poetic writing. Our purposes here are not to simply note a bullet list of the prose form structure, although we will discuss some features therein, but to look deeper than structure to the interiority and the possibility of intimate connection through the prose, particularly in the work of three poets—Robert Bly, C. K. Williams, and Michael Klein. In a consideration of prose poetry, its shape, sound, and structure, we turn to these men who work in both verse and prose poetry, looking at each poet’s iteration of the prose form, how each writer uses its unique and ever-evolving construction. Drawing on the accessible and personal nature that the prose poetry form can invite, I will discuss how each poet exemplifies the idea of intimacy albeit in uniquely different ways. It is through Bly’s capacity to illuminate the objects around him to see the world, and his place in it, in new ways; Williams’ conversational yet intellectual line as he discusses subjects as diverse as personal identity, a roofer’s visit or a trip to the museum; and Klein’s adoption of a profoundly confessional style of prose, which engages the reader on a deeply intimate level—not examining what the genre *is* but what prose poetry as a writing convention in the hands of these three poets *does*, what these writers allow, and that is a sense of intimacy between the speaker of

their poems and the readers, and the readers as a community, put simply—the creation of corporate intimacy.

Hybridity of Form?

*The prose poem allows for the
recuperation of the poetic amid the prose
of existence.*

-- Brooke Horvath

The freedom of this poetic form and allowance for the content's autonomy to dictate shape, sound, and structure is exactly what Brooke Horvath discusses when he suggests a way of understanding the prose form. He posits an idea about the relationship between the two halves of its given name. In his succinct definition of the prose poetry genre, Horvath contends that prose poetry is:

like a child whose mother is for obvious reasons known, but whose father is not, the prose is so manifestly an off-spring of prose (just look at it) that its poetic parentage is liable to be questioned or forgotten. As for the form's inheritance from its poetic father, one might simply say, "just listen to it!" Because, really, don't we know poetry when we hear it, read it, experience it? Isn't it like grace or jazz: something perhaps beyond definition or description but clearly felt, known, when in its presence, something at the core that has little to do with outward form or trappings? (11)

Horvath is arguing for not just an ocular reaction to the printed page as we acknowledge the paragraph or sentence instead of the precise and controlled verse line or stanza, but an auditory one. He wants us to listen *and look* and experience the prose poem—to see the shape and structure, to hear the sound; he's arguing the sound of the work versus the look of the prose text;

asking us not to ignore its parents but to look fully on the child that has emerged, and grown up to be the prose poem.

The label, prose poetry, suggests that this form is a hybrid of two earlier genres, prose and poetry. Jerrold Levinson in his article on hybrid art forms, states that hybridity in art is an attempt to categorize the blending of heretofore traditionally separate artistic constructs. He claims that mere complexity does not warrant hybrid status nor do separate types of artistic work which can be identified within a given area. Using prose poetry as one of his examples, he notes that *prose* and *poetry* involve different materials within an already complex artistic form and medium, writing, but not necessarily a new hybridity. If then, in the given area of writing, we somehow separate prose writing from poetic writing, then we could argue for hybridity, but I contend that prose poetry and verse poetry may look different and certainly they can have a different sound, but both are still poetry as much as opera and blue grass are both categories of music, so then, prose poetry and verse are both categories of poetry and not a hybrid. Michel Delville in his book, *The American Prose Poem*, says that the “form whose very name suggests its ambivalent status as a genre writing across other genres [is a] self-consciously deviant form, the aesthetic orientation and subversive potential of which are necessarily founded on a number of discursive and typographical violations” (8-9). He further notes that “Baudelaire’s *enfant terrible* now seems to have 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” (1). For the purposes of our discussion here, prose poetry shall be loosely defined as a non-traditional form of poetry, an open form, and one which has thrown off the restraint of verse line, rhyme scheme, and meter which has evolved from the traditional and prescribed forms of poetry to a

less structured form. And, as David Lehman claims, if nothing else, American prose poetry, though arguably diverse in its approaches to the genre, is a gloriously varied creation.

Clarifying the Differences

Form is never more than the extension of content.

-- Robert Creeley

As a means to more clearly define and understand the differences between verse and prose poetry, John Bradley conducts a bold experiment in shapeshifting which he performs on several well-known poems, changing them from their original poetic genre or form to another—reciprocally—verse to prose. He argues that in doing so “we can get a clearer sense of this chimerical creature we call the prose poem” (132). Beginning with Russell Edson’s work, he shifts Edson’s “When the Ceiling Cries” from prose to verse form. He states that placing this poem in stanza and verse, using various line-breaks, alters perception for the reader more so than the prose form does. He claims that Edson’s prose “carry[s] us off into the funny . . . realms of illogic and unleashed desire” (134) while the shift to a verse format simply causes disquiet and lingering questions. (Questions such as potential child abuse, the mental status of the parents, and the real identity of the poetic speaker.) In short, the experiment doesn’t work because the switch to the more formal construct of verse line interrupts the “illogic” of Edson’s tongue-in-cheek creation and leaves a heavy-handed treatise on family dynamics.

Bradley’s experiment in shapeshifting also incorporates the poetry of James Tate from an anthology classified as verse but described by Charles Simic as prose poems. Bradley notes the enjambment of Tate’s supposed verse poem, “New Blood,” feels forced while the phrasing “signals that this is prose” (137) and not verse. Since Tate, by his own admission, seems conflicted about what he’s doing with his poetry—feeling caught in “the No Man’s Land of the

prose poem world” (Bradley 138), then this close reading and shapeshift highlights one of the “chief dangers, and delights . . . of exploring this ‘formless form’” (138). Tate’s interior conflict notwithstanding, Bradley claims that Tate’s work is prose, even though argued by the poet, sometimes, as verse. Bradley’s additional remarks note the continued non-acceptance of the prose poem by critics who “harbor doubts” about its lack of formal design and he claims that “this lack of formal structure continue to be the prose poem’s greatest weakness and strength” (139). Regardless of its “unique identity, history, and structure,” the prose poem paradox, according to this author, “makes the form ripe for inventiveness” (139). The most interesting of the three poems that Bradley examines in his shapeshift experiment is that of Elizabeth Bishop’s verse poem, “The Fish.” He claims that “Bishop’s keen details make the piece feel like the writer was influenced by Robert Bly’s object poem, with his call for close observation and absorption into the object at hand” (135), and in this instance, the shift works. Bishop’s poem, while changed, is still viable in a different form, although Bradley notes that the prose alters the lyric pacing and loses the sense of timing that Bishop’s verse offers. He states that Bishop’s text succeeds as a prose poem because she “draws on prose, specifically journal entry, field report, and campfire tale” (136) and the poem’s “employment of prose techniques” is apparently why this successful shift is possible. Even though Bishop’s *verse* line-break is interrupted, Bradley’s experiment in form-swapping succeeds—not in spite of the line-break but because of it.

The Line and the Line-break

*Obviously the most important question and
the one about which there's the most
uncertainty is, what is the line.*

-- Denise Levertov

The line and the line-break are conventions of poetry worth considering for a moment when we examine prose poetry, especially given that it *appears* as if prose poets have abandoned the line. Denise Levertov states that “there is at our disposal no tool of the poetic craft more important, none that yields more subtle and precise effects, than the line-break if it is properly understood” (“On the Function” 30). If Levertov’s argument is correct, that the line-break is paramount for any poetic writing regardless of traditional or non-traditional form, then the line vs. sentence description of differences between verse and prose poetry is simply a means of identification and definition, not an excuse to ignore the value of the controlled line and line-break. It is not a lessening of the art or craft of prose writing but an observation of performance within the poetic craft each represents. In other words, when we observe prose poetry as abandoning meter, rhyme, and in some cases metaphor, and declare that prose poets appear to have given up the use of the line-break, we lessen or ignore their syntactical use of the line-break within their sentences. When a sentence is structured do we not consider its length, its punctuation, whether it is compound, complex, or concise? Justly so, I would argue, the prose poet has merely changed the technique by which they manipulate and control the language, the meaning and the line. Unlike the verse poet’s controlled and measured verse line, managed by intentional breaks, line length, and sometimes punctuation, the prose poet has chosen to control their line with the strict use of punctuation and the margin’s edge, (or in some cases the print and

layout of a given text), and in doing so have effected meaning for the reader. Levertov's further discussion of the line-break notes its power to create meaning in the text. She says:

In poems one has the opportunity not only, as in expressive prose, to depart from the syntactic norm, but to make manifest, by an intrinsic structural means, the interplay or counterpoint of process and completion—in other words, to present the dynamics of perception along with its arrival at full expression. The line-break is a form of punctuation additional to the punctuation that forms part of the logic of completed thoughts. (“On the Function” 31)

I would suggest that both verse and prose poets engage this poetic convention, the line-break, for the purposes of crafting an expressive and meaningful text. And, in the case of these three prose poets, they have intentionally structured their prose to create accessible and intimate moments to create meaning for the text, and between the speaker and the reader. Levertov, in furthering her ideas of the function of the line-break, claims that it “gives to each unique creator the power to be more precise, and thereby more, not less, individuated . . . [that it allows] the inner voice, the voice of each one's solitude made audible” (“On the Function” 35). Her emphasis on subjectivity in open forms and the use of the line-break cautions writers to be aware of the importance of the tool that line-break represents and to be mindful of its expressive power. Klein, Williams, and Bly's choice to write in the open, prose form, their sense in understanding the proper use of the line-break with all its expressive emphasis and punctuating power, suggests they understand that this significant tool controls the open form and allows their inner voices to speak. Denise Levertov has articulated the poetic importance of not only the line-break but the ability of poetic pauses to create meaning. She says that, “it allows the reader to share more intimately the experience that is being articulated . . . thus the emotional experience of empathy or

identification,” (“On the Function” 31) which fosters the elements of inclusivity and sense of intimacy between speaker and reader.

Robert Bly’s anthology, *Selected Poems*, offers us not only his poetry but expository essays that provide insight into his prose writing and thoughts on poetry. In discussing the verse and prose forms he says:

All poems are journeys. They go from somewhere to somewhere else . . . Some poems carry us on their sound, and other poems carry us to the new place on their minute detail, on what they give us to see . . . Yeats had no doubt; the function of meter, he said, was to put us into a trance, so that we can approach one of the far places of the mind; and the poet accordingly chooses the particular rhythm appropriate to the trance he wishes for the reader and for himself. A poet writing prose poems, then, is not more respectful than the metered poet of the reader’s privacy or mindfulness; he puts you into a different sort of trance. (89)

Bly clarifies the role of the poet and their ability to influence the reader by the pace of their poetic writing. The speaker in the poem and the line-break itself bear significant roles in mapping that shared journey, and as such, are essential to creating the intimate relationship between the speaker and reader; as much as the imagery, the accessibility, or the experience offered in the language of the poem creates a community bond. Charles Simic comments on the line in his essay, “Some Thoughts about the Line,” and says that “to see the word for what it is, one needs the line . . . for me the sense of the line is the most instinctive aspect of the entire process of writing . . . I want the line to stop in such a way that its break and the accompanying pause may bring out the image and the resonance of the words to the fullest” (79). Simic and Bly

align in thought on the line-break's value, whether applied to the prose or verse form, as being paramount to create understanding and as a means to offer "the living voice. The damn thing has to speak to someone" (Simic 79). Yes, it does, and in the hands of Bly, Williams, and Klein, the prose convention speaks in a powerful and welcoming manner.

David Lehman, editor of *Great American Prose Poems*, offers his definition of a prose poem as "a poem written in prose rather than verse" and further that "on the page it can look like a paragraph or fragmented short story, but it acts like a poem" (13), which suggests that prose poetry looks normal to the casual reader. "Act[ing] like a poem" is more easily described by William V. Davis in his essays about Robert Bly's work. He, along with Michael Benedikt, dissects the attributes of prose poetry writing. Using a poetic lens they claim that the:

five essential properties of the prose poem [are]: "the need to attend to the priorities of the unconscious" and to this "particular logic, unfettered" by the "interruptions of the line break"; an "accelerated use of colloquial" and other everyday speech patterns; "a visionary thrust"; a sense of humor that "registers the fluctuating motions of consciousness"; and a kind of "enlightened doubtfulness, or hopeful skepticism." (qtd. in Davis 36)

I would argue this complex explanation distills down to simple ideas—sound, shape, and structure. Even David Lehman concedes that within the varied nature of the prose form—sentence, paragraph, newspaper article, list, memo, speech, and dialogue as the poetic line, we find that the prose poem form enables inclusivity and intimacy; that it gives value to sources other than the lyrical muse and that it "align[s]...with working class discourse" ("The Prose Poem: An Alternative" 45). In doing away with versification, overt symbolism and abstraction,

and I would add rhyme and meter, prose poetry can allow a more democratic or every man reading, an entry point to enjoy and embrace the language and narrative offered in the prose form. If we agree with Lehman, that prose poetry embraces inclusivity, colloquial language, and ordinary speech patterns, then this is part of what makes prose poetry accessible, particularly in the way that Bly, Williams, and Klein work in the genre, which allows a path into the essence of the language and content.

Intimacy and Accessibility

I write prose poems when I long for intimacy.

--Robert Bly

David Orr, in discussing modern poetry in his book, *Beautiful & Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry*, says that:

a smart, educated person who likes Charlie Kaufman’s movies and tolerates Thomas Pynchon’s novels, who works in a job that involves phrases like “amortized debentures” . . . that person is often not so much annoyed by poetry as confounded by it . . . [w]hat poets have faced for almost a half century, though, is a chasm between their art and the broader culture. (xi)

Illusive, difficult, and “confounding” is not a recipe for accessibility in art. In his article, “Talking About, Talking With: Language Arts Students in Conversation with Poetic Texts,” Toby Emert states that he wants his young readers “to be willing to climb inside a poem and sit awhile [but he has found that they] see poems as little more than extremely difficult puzzles” (68). This is a typical complaint about poetry in general—poems are not accessible because of

the convoluted way poets speak of everyday issues, the use of abstraction to capture thoughts and themes of the poet, coupled with the unnatural appearance of the language—all of which can become a barrier for the listeners—enter the prose poem.

Ron Silliman appears to agree that prose poetry invites intimacy and offers accessibility in his article, “New Prose, New Prose Poem,” in which he discusses prose poetry as a literary genre that welcomes consumers to enter into the written work, with a preset expectation dependent on the literary form. This freedom from traditional form, in the everyday look of a prose poem, grants agency to the reader—accessibility to the art. In exploring the history and evolution of the modern prose poem in America, Ron Silliman acknowledges the work of the modernists “who sought to develop poetic forms that accurately represented the paratactic, as distinct from syntactic, orders of the speech chain” (162); in essence to work towards breaking from syntactic expectations in prose writing. Robert Dana claims that Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Bly broke through the formalist barricades and created a “new orthodoxy” in poetic form and verse even as the “masters of traditional form” (73) continued to write and publish. He further argues that Pound and Williams’ influence cannot be overstated for contemporary poets as the former’s insistence on the musicality of the composition and the latter’s discussion of free verse established a new poetic aesthetic beyond the scope of experimental status. Dana contends that as poetry was stripped of its “public function and made to serve increasingly obscure private purposes,” (74) that it developed a means of survival, prose. He explains that “not the prose . . . of the news magazine or nightly commercial, although even these registers of speech might be invoked when necessary, but an instrument of great suppleness and wide-ranging music, one capable of great sophistication of

order and disorder, grotesquerie and grace” (74). The grace that Dana argues is elegantly exhibited in C.K. Williams’ “Dance”:

Catherine studied ballet when she was young; she never talks about it, but once, in the most boring room of a depressing museum in Denmark, she suddenly whirled three perfect piqué turns across the floor and ended up in the corridor, ready, to my relief, to leave. (100)

While this poem is four lines in length, determined in this April 2014 edition by the page margins, in reality it is only one sentence long. Williams uses a short paragraph, and intentional punctuation within it, to take the reader to that moment of beauty and life in Catherine’s unbidden dance juxtaposed against the depressing museum backdrop; the spontaneity of movement in tension with the public embarrassment and boredom of the poem’s speaker. Williams expresses in this short piece all the trips we’ve ever taken with a family member or friend that had that awkward yet disconcerting moment of awe when we wish we had the strength to admit we’re bored and want to break out in song or dance, anything to break the ennui of a visit to the Impressionist wing filled with subpar canvas. Williams allows the readers into an intimate, imagined memory between him and his wife. His speaker shares that Catherine danced as a child, that they are visiting Denmark, but most importantly, that she has the capacity in three simple turns to surpass what hangs on the walls and sits on the pedestals; that she still has enough grace in movement to be the art form in a place built for art yet bereft of it. Robert Dana’s description of prose poetry makes the case that this open form reclaims poetic written intimacies as “an art of the many for the many” (74); that prose poetry is the art of the masses intended for every man, and Williams’ use of the prose form, as a more democratic form of

poetry for this every man experience of a vacation and museum visit, is a fitting example of prose poetry's ability to speak in a common syntactic style about a common yet intimate occasion. Dana's argument and Williams' prose combine to remind us of the accessibility of the form and the welcome into an intimate space and memory.

A Theory on Reader-Response

The common element of this criticism is an emphasis on the role of the reader in the construction of meaning . . . the reader is no longer the receiver of meaning but rather the maker of meaning.

--W. John Harker

Art for every man reaches across the divide between speaker and listener, writer and reader. This sense of connection is the very heart of the concept behind reader-response theory. Much like W. John Harker in his article, "Reader Response and Cognition: Is There a Mind in This Class?" it is not my intention to mount a "terminological rescue mission for reader-response criticism" (29) but to grasp its possible implications on the idea of intimacy between the prose poem text/speaker and the reader/listener. Wolfgang's Iser's supposition that readers do not elicit meaning from the text but are instead "participating in a performance" (Iser 27) and that "the meaning of a literary text is not a definable entity, but, if anything, a dynamic happening" (22) supports the theoretical notion that it is in the moment of reading, a singular reader or plurality of readers, that causes meaning to emerge and through that moment of meaning-making, an intimate response by those same readers, the community who are engaged in this work together occurs. And while a study of Stanley Fish would indicate that he is in "agreement with both Rosenblatt and Iser" in contending that "meaning evolves linearly during the temporally ordered act of reading" (Harker 31), Fish takes the reader's role a step further. Harker, further

commenting on Stanley Fish's work states that he "[Fish] does not conceive interpretation to be totally centered in the individual . . . [but rather] sees interpretation to take place within what he terms 'interpretive communities,' groups of readers who share similar interpretive strategies and who therefore construct similar texts and meaning" (31). If reader-response theory is valid in its supposition about the making of meaning in a given text and is in fact interested in why readers have certain responses, then the idea of the prose form engaging readers through its accessibility, which I would argue then enables corporate intimacy, announces that readers have regained their importance in this conversation.

Natasha Trethewey, in her article on the necessity of poetry, suggests that "to be a reader or writer of poetry is to recognize the ways in which it is a cultural force, to believe in the necessity of it" (55). Prose poetry's accessible nature, examined here in the iterations crafted by Bly, Williams and Klein, seems the natural means by which this symbiotic relationship is created in contemporary society; this corporate intimacy that changes how we consider and consume poetry. It allows and encourages a dialogue between writer and reader. Trethewey further suggests that a poem can reach "across time and space . . . [and that] a single voice could speak into the silences, the emptiness" (59) which a tragedy or loss can cause. Trethewey's idea here seems to echo Levertov's "inner voice and solitude" and Bly's shared "journey." Trethewey states that, "this is the great cultural force of poetry. In its intimacy, the individual voice of the poem can show us ourselves by showing us the interior life of someone else, can inspire in us great empathy—a sacred gift—and can bring us back from the depths of despair" (59). Poetry, prose poetry in particular, and its potential ability—can mean something to its readers as they share interiority through the prose.

Ziyad Marar in discussing the idea of human connection through literature posits “an imagined loving history” (189), a narrative moment when we imagine ourselves as protagonist and speaker in the line; when the words and thoughts, the situation and emotion become cloyingly familiar and we empathize, we connect, we see, we understand and know the story because it is also ours. Marar’s suggestion about connection and shared “imagined history” correlates directly with Bly’s idea of the “giver of attention,” the role that the prose poet assumes. Bly says that when he tries to “embody in language what the eyes see, [he] like[s] the mildly hypnotic rhythms of prose” (*Selected Poems* 88). Bly’s preference as a poet for prose over verse writing in order to share what he sees with his readers is the unique gift the prose form can offer as a means to communicate and share “imagined history.” Marar further suggests that “because literature helps us with perspective taking and empathy, it can have important political consequences” (191). Citing Beecher-Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as potentially just such a text, which in a very real sense had consequences for the abolitionist movement, supports his theory on literature’s influence. This idea complicates and develops the argument that “those political consequences can provide a more enabling culture in which intimacies between previously disconnected people can begin” (191). The idea of readers making meaning in a given prose text, then, is paramount to the concept of corporate intimacy; enabling and allowing “previously disconnected people” to link through a literary relationship that can be garnered from a group reading. And in speaking of a group reading, I am not suggesting that corporate intimacy can only be created if a group of people sit in the same room and read a poem at the same time, then talk about their response in that static setting and all arrive at some magical intimate level. I am contending that because Bly, Williams, and Klein’s poetry is so accessible to everyone who chooses to read it, and because of the inclusive nature of the writing, using the shape of common

prose, the sound of colloquial speech, and the streamlined sentence structure of prose, that this is what creates intimate reality, a community of readers. The shared readers' experience, whether years or moments apart, is the catalyst for the intimate relationship between poetic speaker and reader, and between the readers themselves. Prose poetry creates this level of familiarity and communion.

Lynn Jamieson, in her book, *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*, suggests that our:

innate potential and highly developed social ability to see things from the other person's point of view . . . to anticipate and understand how the other reacts . . . distinguishes humans from other animals . . . Community, friendship, all co-operative relationships rely on the human capacity for and interest in building shared knowledge and understanding with others . . . [this is] constructed through symbols – words, language, gestures, and meaningful actions. (3)

Prose poetry, among many other means of communication, seems a fitting writing instrument which communal groups can access to better understand the human experience and each other, and as a means of connection on intimate levels. Why is this level of intimacy of such importance to society? Sociologists suggest that while many societies through history:

have not been characterized by “disclosing intimacy” . . . [today] talking about yourself, “sharing” are generally advocated as part of an individual's emotional well-being and of good relationships . . . if intimacy is defined as any form of *close association* in which

people acquire familiarity, that is *shared detailed knowledge* about each other, then it is impossible to conceive of a society without intimacy. (Jamieson 7-8)

I would argue that if we consider Iser and Fish's ideas on reader-response theory and the idea of shared intimacy as a means to create community, self-understanding and identity, then prose poetry is the literary answer. The immediate connection to this aspect of intimacy as individuals with the speaker in the poems, and the experience as a communal group of readers, through the poetry's colloquial language and accessible form, makes it the candidate of choice. Elaine Hatfield in her work on communication and intimacy supports the idea of deeper relationships and disclosure, and argues that "research supports the contention that men and women are willing to disclose far more about themselves in intimate relationships than in casual ones" (208). Prose poetry's accessibility and inclusivity for every man creates the opportunity for just such a relationship, on a deeper level with all those who have listened to the same voice, the same poetic soul.

Structural Expression

Deconstructionism . . . burn it all down.

-- Robert E. Oyer

Considering the shape, sound, and structure, which define this loosely fashioned form confirms the aspect of accessibility—the lack of versification, structured rhyme and meter, lessening of abstract intent, and the normalcy of language, with its emphasis on sound, the object, and the common experience, (which is not to say that prosody does not exist in the prose form only that intentional rhymed and measure feet are not present), I would suggest that prose poetry is the ideal construct in which to experience and create this sense of corporate intimacy. From the early days of Bly and Simic, to the current day texts of Klein and Williams, the

relationship between poetic speaker, text, and reader relies on a communal relationship, a group making of meaning. Michael Klein's prose poetry is a striking example of this level of intimacy, the open passage that affords the opportunity for a deep and familiar connection. Taking a brief look at one of his poems from the collection, *then, we were still living*, we note the level of detail, disclosure, and disciplined construction all within the prose form.

"Looking for the body music"

My friend Frank calls it *looking for the body music* - the music my mother heard.

At the end of *looking for the body music*, one stumbles upon a woman's body

with the whole world taken out of her - but before that scene,

a foreshadow: my mother at the boarding school

She's 12, child of 2 alcoholics, vaudevillians, shadows on a stage.

She's overweight and sees beyond herself even then, so the girls

are mean in their pressed dresses and routinely hang my mother out

the window by her feet for a long time waiting for the exactly right cadence of *please*

before they pull her back into her life.

That was in 1940-something - the year my mother began

the book her mind was writing called *this is what happened to me* -

the book she read to us - pill-language to cushion the abyss of two marriages -

one husband beat her up, one husband took her money and broke her off

with the world until she got written as the *failed suicide* after hanging by a thread

by a hair, by her feet, borne of her first suspension

over something called a *youth*. (24)

Klein's sentences in this piece clearly emulate and support Levertov's argument about utilizing the tool of the line-break to elicit "expressive emphasis." Many of Klein's lines are interrupted by the margin while others are intentionally enjambed. He is crafting his prose lines, his sentences, as carefully as any verse poet, and in doing so crafting an informal, yet intimate piece, and its very nature engages the reader from the first sentence. This poem of 16 lines is actually only 5 sentences long. Klein, working in an open, prose form, is crafting line-breaks to cause the "infinitesimal hesitations" that Levertov refers to in her essay, "Technique and Tune-up," where she discusses many of the challenges of young writers and the perilous creation of open form poetry. She describes the creation of poetry as "the poet stand[ing] openmouthed in the temple of life contemplating his experience" and that the "pressure of demand and the meditation on its elements culminate in a moment of vision" (8) and that vision becomes a poem, "an opportunity to share the image, experience, and correspondence" which, Levertov says, "as a means of communication with others was something I assumed in the poem" ("Origins of a Poem" 45), and in Klein's prose work that is exactly what occurs—he communicates and creates all in the same moment.

Robert Bly's "A Hollow Tree" performs the same expressiveness in a significantly different way, although still using the intentional line-break, not in verse line but in sentences and hard returns. This poem offers an intimate moment effectively focused on an object that is commonplace—while using the shape, sound and structure of prose.

I bend over an old hollow cottonwood stump, still
 standing, waist high, and look inside. Early spring. Its
 Siamese temple walls are all brown and ancient. The walls

have been worked on by the intricate ones. Inside the hollow walls there is privacy and secrecy, dim light. And yet some creature has died here.

On the temple floor feathers, gray feathers, many of them with a fluted whitetip. Many feathers. In the silence many feathers. (27)

The shape is two indented paragraphs. A quick reading of this poem in two different Bly volumes, *Selected Poems* and *The Morning Glory*, its original publication, reveals that the structure of the line is answering to the page setting in each volume, to some degree to the printer's specifications, and to Bly's line length and punctuation as it strikes the margin. The sentence structure appears almost ordinary. They are not intentionally enjambed or broken for poetic pause but do vary in length. There are several shorter phrases noted like, "Early spring," and "Many feathers." The structure does not observe any particular metrical beat, in fact the closest Bly comes to any metrical pattern is in four of the total of nine lines or sentences, which each contain 13 syllables. There seems to be no discernible pattern to this choice. But the sound of the lines are filled with air, the "h" in hollow, the repeated refrain of the word feathers in the last section, which actually helps the reader; helps to hear the wings as they beat, helps to hear the feathers whisper as they fall and then the breathy sensation dies in silence. The intimacy of the whispered thoughts in Bly's prose rustles and elicits an intimate, hushed response from readers to this object-focused prose poem. Robert Bly says that "[w]hen our language becomes abstract, then the prose poem helps to balance that abstraction, and encourages the speaker to stay close to the body, to touch, hearing, color, texture, moisture, dryness, smell. Its strength lies in intimacy" (*Selected Poems* 202). This prose poem asks us to use our senses—to see and feel

the rough bark of the stump and the soft, downy feathers, and to hear the whispered silence that follows. This familiarity and use of a corporate sensory connection is available because of the loosely fitting form that is recognized as prose poetry.

Returning to Klein's prose on his mother, we ponder—is Klein referring to actual music or that which we all hear in our heads during vacant and challenging times in our lives? Or does he want us to listen, to hear his poetic speaker and the story of his mother, of her life beset with difficulty, as she “sings.” In his confessionally crafted prose, he drops the curtain on this family's secrets and allows us access to the sordid past, the broken marriage, the struggle to survive at school, in life and relationships. The language is every day, ordinary with hints of the poetic sewn in—the use of anaphora in the last lines hint about its underlying presence, “by a thread / by a hair, by her feet” (“Looking for the body music” 14-15). Robert Bly says that “[t]he metered poem . . . finishes with a click as when a box closes, and the metered poem has two subjects: the thought of the poet and the meter itself. One is personal, one impersonal. The thing poem written in prose has two subjects but quite different ones; the movement of the writer's mind and the thing itself” (*Selected Poems* 200). If we apply Bly's definition to Klein's “Looking for the body music,” it reveals exactly what Bly describes. Because this prose poem does not need to contend with a metered pattern, it can concern itself with the “thing itself” and “the movement of the writer's mind,” his thoughts and reasoning on this subject—his mother, her history, and the music that she creates by living. This prose poem ignites thoughts of the relationship between mother and child, life and the living, speaker and listener—and because of its welcoming shape, sound, and structure—intimacy grows.

Robert Bly – The Object Speaks

*It is not a genre for beginners . . . and
though it has no obvious elegant shape,
the reader nevertheless asks it to arrive at
elegance.*

-- Robert Bly

Robert Bly, a revered writer in the prose art form suggests that “it is easy to start a prose poem, but not easy to make it a work of art” (“The Prose Poem as an Evolving Form” 200). He further states that it is an open form which desires free expression only measured by the margin’s boundary, recalling that the prose poem is not necessarily a poetic structure that assigns line length or stanza; neither does it require a rhyme scheme or metric foot noted as measurable units but rather—pace and sound, image and meaning existing together as new units of measure. In Bly’s prose poem, “The Starfish,” there exists a structure that is paratactic and syntactic in equal measure in a prose style while maintaining the language of accessibility. He uses indented beginnings on each of the three paragraphs, while the word count and sentence count reveal no master plan or repeated structure. Bly’s opening of the poem makes succinct statements in one-syllable words. “It is low tide. Fog. I have climbed down the cliffs” (*Selected Poems* 1). His particular style of prose poetry, one which he himself describes as “object poetry,” is focused on the object, the starfish, which is ordinary in classification, but exposed in this style and structure, to reveal all the nuances of the creature. His sentence structure in “Starfish” includes many dashes and ellipses to slow the thought process and interior voice, much like line breaks in verse poetry. I would suggest that this is Bly’s means of pacing the reading, his meter for the piece. Bly utilizes a traditional poetic convention, the metaphor, to create a memorable moment at the edge of the tide pool. In speaking of the starfish he says, “It is delicate purple, the color of old carbon paper, (4-5) and “The starfish is a glacier,” (15-16) and it has “globes on top of each, as at

world's fairs" (9); each metaphor, each phrase snaps a tiny picture of an animal and the world, a sea creature and potential shared experiences of the readers, the collective of listeners which stir their own memories of just such an adventure at the shore. In Bly's essay, "The Prose Poem as an Evolving Form," he says that "the object poem," [the style in which Bly composes in several collections of prose poetry] centers itself not on story or image but on the object, and it holds onto the fur, so to speak" (199). Bly's intention to "hold onto the fur" of this iteration of prose poetry is yet one more example of how his crafting in this form remains inclusive, colloquial, and intimate.

Bly's intimacy with the reader-at-large extends through his poetic work as he discusses and defines the ordinary objects that surround us. In his poem, "Grass from Two Years," he speaks at length about grass and twigs, sunlight and trees, and adds a penetrating query, who is man, as he writes three cryptic words followed by an ellipsis, "Whatever I am . . ." (4). The beauty of discovering the answer is seamlessly woven through the text. The structure of the poem on the page is two simple paragraphs, one indented, and the other not. The speaker begins with a direct address to the reader, and, with the repeated use of the pronoun "I" and use of the first person voice, incites an intimate connection, a conversation between the speaker and the listener. In describing his writing process, the speaker claims that "I need to be near grass that no one else sees, as in this spot, where I sit for an hour under the cottonwood" (1-2). Bly does not write "I sit on the grass," or "I go outside to sit on the lawn," but "I need." The word "need" peels back a layer to expose desire and hunger for a sense of place, a soul-deep longing for just the right spot to write. This sense of correctness in where we are when we take on certain tasks or activities resonates in the bones and psyche of everyone who has ever sought that perfect location to create—even if it was simply a lopsided snowman, there is a right and a wrong place,

and Bly directs our attention to this idea. In assigning a finite time period, “an hour,” the speaker alerts us that he is not wasting time but carefully doling it out for this purpose; for this piece of writing that will become ours, as the reader, as much as it is his, as the writer. The speaker in the poem makes several comments about the grass. The grass is long, like hair, formed into a ring that is “pale and tan.” In this text grass “flows,” “circles,” and provides “joy” to the “nervous man who sits” on the grass near the tree and the twig. It is the very nature of nature that is celebrated here. “Knobby twigs” and long grass seem to claim the season as fall with all its pale and brown colors, the history of the wild things almost at an end as the season draws to a close. “The branch” has been “ignored” perhaps because it is no longer part of the mighty tree that it now lies beneath, and as each one of us will fall from the family tree to lie quietly beneath the grass, so do the seasons of spring and summer, winter and fall, life and death, ebb and flow.

Another Bly object poem that reserves its focus for a nature-inspired moment is “Frost.” Originally drawn to the piece because of the title, assuming that he might be framing or heralding Robert Frost’s poetry in some way, alas the prose captures neither Frost’s work nor style but given the harshness of winters past, and recalling numerous moments of similar connection to the coldness of the exterior and the warmth of the interior, which combine to cause frost on the glass, this piece of prose is nonetheless another strong example of the powerful intersection of prose and intimacy. Structured in one paragraph it enfolds a bitter reality—death, represented by the frost, and yet a promised future, represented by the “roads” and “ribbons” that conclude the work. It is five sentences long. Each sentence grows more fractured, emulating the frozen fractals that make up ice crystals, described here as “glittery, excited, like so many things laid down silently in the night” (29). Bly infuses the natural phenomenon of frost with life suggesting that it “wavers, it hurries over the world” (29). The poem’s speaker shifts or turns in

the last two lines to change perspective and visually consider a different view through a higher pane of the frosted window. Bly breaks from completed sentences to perpetual imagination as he uses ellipses to finish each of the thoughts, and in doing so, leaves room for our imagined memories and experiences on frost, windows, roads, death, and life. His “expressive emphasis” in the manipulation and control of the line, here composed as sentences bound by ellipses, connote an innate connection between man and the natural world and form elemental layers of intimacy. As Bly uses the prose form, his speaker reminds all the listeners that we, too, are part of the natural world and seasons of change. His object-focused prose, ripe with manipulated line length and breaks, whether walking the edge of the tide pool, sitting in the meadow, or peering through the silent solitude of the frosty window pane—all invite intimacy, all offer connection to the interior thoughts of the speaker—and beyond to those existing quietly beside him, listening.

C.K. Williams – An Intimate Invitation

*We should be able to entertain anything
the mind casts up as potentially useful for a
poem, while at the same time forgiving
ourselves for such after all private matters.*

-- C.K. Williams

C.K. Williams, in his essay “Poetry and Consciousness,” suggests that poetry instructs us. He argues that:

It is thus that it [poetry] teaches us the limits of the elements of consciousness we value so—our reason, our discursive language, our notion that we can analyze the substances of being. Perhaps the real matter of the human soul is poetry itself; perhaps it is the community that is established between the speaking soul of the poet and the attending soul of the listener. (30)

Williams poses a question on the idea of a “speaking soul” and “the community that is established” between that speaker and the listener or reader. His clarifying question is answered by his own prose as part of the “substance of being” that Williams refers to, defined as our human emotions and experience. In a new collection of prose poetry, *All at Once*, published in April 2014, one poem in particular, “Youth, Sorrow, System,” uses the prose form to grapple with the concept of human emotions. The shape—a block of text with intentional hard returns that causes the enjambment of several words and phrases; the structure—five sentences, properly punctuated, each indented as a new paragraph except for the first; the sound—overflowing with repeated patterns but no outright rhyme. The first sentence begins with the “th” sound. “My theory was that though others claimed they experienced *emotions*, in truth what they were speaking of were suppositions, theories, undiscovered traditions of response and retelling” (53). Williams, who writes in both verse and prose, has made a conscious choice to craft this particular piece in the prose style and he builds this poem on the threesome of shape, structure, and sound which aligns with not just the formless form of prose but by dissecting this shared concept with the reader and using the personal pronoun, “my,” he also creates the very community he mentions in the quote discussed earlier. The poetic speaker is trying to define true emotions, not just reactions or memory but a true emotion—as the community leans in to listen to what he will say.

Williams’ use of repeated sound runs throughout the piece. Initially with the “th” sound in the first phrase, then a small nod to anaphora with “response and retelling,” and then he moves to the “tion (shun)” sound in a veritable litany: emotions, suppositions, sensations, perceptions, projections, illusions, representations, reflection, convention, frustration, dejection, intellection, desperation, and speculations. And even as he handily utilizes this sound, the “tion,” the speaker

struggles to understand what an emotion is, its definition. The topic of this poem is part of every human, every reader, and in assessing what emotions might be or how they are formed and understood, readers connect as we look around the circle at each other and realize we've all had this question, this ache to distill down to the elemental level of our emotions—fear, anger, love, lust, the best and the worst, to know in greater measure what they are, what they represent, and who we are in the maelstrom that is human emotions. Williams is correct in his supposition that “[p]erhaps the real matter of the human soul is poetry itself; perhaps it is the community that is established between the speaking soul of the poet and the attending soul of the listener” (“Poetry and Consciousness” 30). Here the “speaking soul” postulates with an exterior voice that allows inclusivity and access to a conversation which creates connectedness and community. We all have emotions and we all, as individuals and as the corporate body, need to understand and own them.

Another aspect of the human condition, of interiority, is the idea of identity. Williams approaches the idea of intimacy by discussing someone from his life, another supposed poet. His language and casual syntactic pattern allows the reader to know the poet, Bobby, as well. Note the look of the first section of Williams’ “The Poet.”

I always knew him as “Bobby the poet,” though whether he ever was one

or not,

someone who lives in words, making a world from their music, might be

a question.

In those strange years of hippiedom and “people-power,” saying you were

an artist

made you one, but at least Bobby acted the way people think poets are
supposed to. (21)

How do we consider this a prose poem and what is Williams doing here? First, this is a prose poem because even though the poem appears to be in verse lines, it is not. Sandra McPherson, in her essay on “The Working Line,” says that “when a poet begins to write something down, he has an innate sense of whether to write it down in long lines or short . . . [w]here does his feel for pattern come from? And what does the line do? . . . the line is a unit to *work in*. It is a compositional aid” (57-58). Recalling Levertov’s thoughts on the significance of the line and line-break as a tool and adding Sandra McPherson’s ideas on this “compositional aid,” we observe Williams making a conscious decision to compose long familiar sentences which strike the right margin and wrap to the next line, not verse lines. He chooses language and crafts sentences that are familiar, using ordinary language with no prescribed rhyme scheme or meter. And in this prose poem’s accessibility, the style invites intimacy in this conversation about identity, a conversation about the substance of this person, Bobby. Williams’ speaker connects face-to-face with the reader community about what makes each of us who we are. Our identity is not necessarily dependent on what we do, but can be understood more by how we act, how we conduct ourselves in society. “Bobby” was known as a poet, “whether he ever was one or not” (Williams, “The Poet” 21), that is how his contemporaries knew him. Williams suggests that his readers consider all the people they, and we, have known in our own lives that perhaps were not who they appeared to be. He further suggests that we consider our own identities, how we conceive ourselves—are we what we seem? Williams is creating community, a corporate consensus on “Bobby.”

Another touchstone for poets working in open forms is the communal fear that creeps in when spectacular events happen. Three Mile Island was one such event. In Williams' poem, "Tar," he weaves in the concern of every man about this new kind of catastrophe, a nuclear meltdown and jet stream patterns driving toxic matter, into a piece that at first seems to be simply considering the inconveniences of having some work done on the roof of the house. He breaks the poem into three sections of almost equal length. There is no discernible pattern, no rhyme, no meter but the shape is filled with long, margin-hugging prose, the sound, while poetic, is not a lyric poem, and the structure is built on the bones of the compound sentence. Williams' tone is conversational, discussing the workers schedule, the news, the lack of real knowledge about what the roofers are doing up there, and whether there should be any concern about which direction the wind is blowing from Three Mile Island. Here again, we listen to a poetic speaker who talks in language we can understand, about a subject that could potentially affect us all, in a form that is pleasing, ordinary, and yet filled with beautiful language and a sense that the speaker is talking to us, as individual listeners, and at the same time, to all of us, the corporate crowd of readers.

Michael Klein - The Confession

*Does having a day job make me less of an
artist than someone whose day unfolds like
another sunny desert island to inhabit?
Probably. But whatever I do as an artist is
the result of every job that living brings on.*

-- Michael Klein

Turning to the intimate prose poetry of Michael Klein augments the understanding of how Charles Olson's ideas about breath and syllable and sound work in concert to create poetry

free of form; at least any of the forms typically assigned to poetry at the time of Olson's writing in the 1950's. Olson describes the process of:

register[ing] both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath . . . [which draws our attention] to the smallest particle of all, the syllable. It is the king and pin of versification, what rules and holds together the lines, the larger forms, of a poem . . . It is by their syllables that words juxtapose in beauty, by these particles of sound as clearly as by the sense of the words which they compose. (241)

Robert Bly discussing Olson's thoughts on breath theory claims that "Olson wonderfully understood that American poetic form could not be an imitation of English form, and that the roots of form go back to the body and its breath . . . he was interested in the time after the invention of the typewriter" ("Reflections on the Origins" 39). Prose poetry's "effective emphasis" for the reader is in greater measure noted by Bly because the typeface, print layout, and margins are an ever present reality for the modern day writer. They are powerful agents in crafting prose and the interiority of the heart, all of which intersect the reader and their interiority, history, and reading experience. Klein's content is, while personal, deeply, undeniably personal, closely interwoven with his prose style, a style that emulates Olson's "breath" as an influence and energy in the poem. This echoes again the trio of shape, sound, and structure as components of the intimate prose form. In teasing apart these elements of Klein's prose poetry—from the energy that informs it and from the form that merely takes its shape from that same intimate content—it reveals to the reader the inner self of his poetic voice and assists in reaching another level of intimacy.

In Klein's poetry collection, *The Talking Day*, he intentionally uses a lyric prose form, both discursive and concise to reveal his inner thoughts; his interior monologue becomes exterior; most significantly notable in his beautiful language choice which creates a blended sense of intimacy between poetic speaker and the reader/listener, between form and feeling; Klein's collection acts like a poem but looks like prose. Because of Klein's mastery of this type of confessional poetry, we can hear the inhale and exhale, hear the attack and release of the words. As a consideration of the idea of shape, sound, and structure, Klein's short poem, "Amazable," gives us both beauty and breath all in an intimate, accessible, prose form.

Who are we without wanting
 anymore what we did not know?
 Knowledge isn't art.
 There was fire left in the paint
 when Van Gogh finished the one about the rain
 and called it something else. (3)

Listen to the first line as it sounds the exhale through the alliterated "w's" of "who...we...without...wanting." Listen to the intake and assurance of "Knowledge isn't art" (3). The "n" in knowledge draws out with the following "ah" sound, then the percussive "edge," "n't," and "art." The next sentence is rife with "f" (fire, left) and then "n" (paint, when, Van, finished, one, rain, and) and then a final sibilant "s" (something, else). "Amazable" is a short, well-crafted prose poem. The tension in the opening question, the quick turn to a modern day proverb about knowledge, and the allusion to Van Gogh's art all contained in beautiful language, measured syllables, and controlled lines is another example of the power prose has to cut to the

bone, to expose and explore, without the burden of overt abstraction or uncommon cadence. “Amazable” warrants a collective inhalation of Klein’s words and which prods an exhalation of corporate understanding, connecting the community of readers and unified, we respond as one. Yes, we have been there, too. We understand the desperate moment when a person either cannot or is not willing to learn one more thing, to exist through another change, and because of that connection between speaker and reader, this text represents both personal and corporate intimacy, singular and plural, and all in six short lines of prose. I suggest that this is the penultimate application of the prose form in Klein’s hands—questioning who we are as the speaker directs us to consider what it means to have no more hunger to learn or perhaps the capacity to do so, while at the same time, the writer regulates our breathing with his “effective emphasis” and craft.

Klein’s prose is the vehicle of the contemporary confessional—the prose poet unleashed to swing wide the gate and in his considered use of personal pronouns and pointed discussion of matters that are personal, yet effect the very threads of society, he makes them available—to Lehman’s “working class” reader. In his inventive and intimately crafted prose style, we also bear witness to shattering moments of the human condition. Klein’s group invitation to enter the lyric story is offered to his readers in the first lines of the poem, “The Talking Day,” when he writes about “Liz and her family” (2-3). He shares the reality of the violence they, his friends, have experienced and his subsequent need to quickly connect to them, to be assured that they are okay after violent news breaks. Emert’s perspective on poetic accessibility would applaud the nature of poems that “speak loudly about many issues . . . [that we] find relevant—acceptance, survival, romance, betrayal, recognition” (68). His list of personal topics might represent a list anyone could conjure, regardless of their age group. The challenge is finding a way to discuss

these issues without making the readership uncomfortable with the intimacy; allowing them the opportunity to grapple with the ideas and societal ills, therein lies the beauty of Klein's confessional prose style.

In relating to the noted idea of inclusivity, Klein's intimate poetry has allowed the reader to recognize a horrific event, as both corporate and personal, even as the language draws a gasp from the community who empathize with Lily's parents amid the tragic "talking day" chaos. In his book on modern poetry, David Orr considers the personal nature of poetry and reflects on Wordsworth when he states that poetry is "the pure expression of our inner lives . . . the prism through which the soul is glimpsed . . . the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling . . . to create a poem is to express something central about oneself . . . poetry is personal" (2). It is as if he had just read Michael Klein's collection *The Talking Day* and was moved to define it. (Of note, although poets have used these same techniques in crafting personal texts, Klein's use in his prose poems, of personal pronouns and the first person voice, is significant in its ability to foster a literary relationship with the reader.) Orr highlights the modern use of the lyric to express personal and private ideas and revelations of thought and emotion. Klein is not the first, nor is it likely he will be the last, to use this overtly open style to create a sense of community with the reader. In Orr's discussion of modern poetry, labelled as personal, he states that "when people talk about poetry being personal . . . they're thinking about poems in which an "I" says something about itself, or the world, or a "You"—and does so in such a way that we experience something like the thrill of discovery. They are thinking, in other words, about the lyric" (7). Klein's use of personal pronouns add to the intimate and lyric quality of his prose work that is not just responsive to the formless, margin-hugging definition but is also about the shape and sound of the words themselves.

In Klein's prose poem, "The Talking Day," the language or "speech chain," expresses the intense, emotional subtext of concern for a friend geographically distant and yet immediately accessible through a phone conversation. What horror will potentially emerge and affect young Lily? Klein places every reader alongside the poem's speaker, listening in on the conversation as, phone in hand, he reaches out. The poem does not stop there, but leads the readers on into fractured memories of all the "talking days" of their own lives—JFK's assassination, the Challenger crash, Columbine, September 11th, Virginia Tech, Fort Hood, Ferguson, and any newsbreak that can be imagined. In the ordinary, colloquial text of a prose poem, Klein creates a sense of the confidant and as Denise Levertov would suggest he is "brought to speech" ("Some Notes on Organic Form" 313) and cannot contain the experience. I contend that Klein composes this piece much like Levertov's suggested "open-mouthed poet" who is "contemplating his experience, [when] there come[s] to him the first words of the poem" (313). And in the same way that "ear and eye, intellect and passion interrelate. . . [we see] content and form are in a state of interaction" (314). This heralds the intersection of tragedy and intimate prose poetry style offered in "The Talking Day." Here is the intimacy, the relationship, and the communal experience that prose poetry asks the reader to embrace. The "talking day" experience is corporate; the east and west coast reader, separated by geography that spans the nation, still sits hip-to-hip to receive, consider, and share a community response to the idea and prose of Lily's and their "talking days."

The juxtaposition of the beautiful symmetry of language and the violent subject matter of a senseless public shooting causes poetic tension and then Klein offers a definition. His explanation of a "talking day" is a revelatory moment for the reader as he writes "No one quite grasps the reality of the situation and everyone spends that first day talking about what happened

and reliving it as language-not so much to understand the violence but to make a kind of recording of it” (15-19). The “talking day” becomes a breathless conversation, turning over the details of a savage day, and yet, the poet tells us, don’t breathe a sigh of relief because we all have a personal connection to the moment. Klein says that we all must make a “recording of it” with our own voices, our own thoughts, our own language; the poetic speaker is drawing the reader into his narrative which fosters a sense of deeper connection and sharing. Klein’s choice to write about this particular subject in prose style, with no stanza breaks or intentional meter, makes the intimacy more poignant. In his story block, the prose poem appears an appropriate choice to tell this personal story of a family and friend, at a breakneck pace all the while exposing a personal moment and societal truth. His intimate portrait, coupled with the use of ordinary yet compelling language has caused us to both see and remember the reality that “we live in a talking day world” (30).

In Jennifer Ashton’s article on poetry she describes the lyric, open form as a “mode of self-expression,” and also reflecting on Wordsworth, [as a] . . . ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’” (217-218). Klein’s “mode of self-expression” within the prose poem structure is almost chummy in its continual use of personal pronouns and first person viewpoint. In Klein’s prose the listener is invited by the speaker beyond the first name basis status and is moved to the level of the personal, the “you” of the poem. In his “Who you loved,” Klein uses the pronouns “you” and masculine “him” and “his,” as the unnamed speaker and listener reveal an intimate Q & A that plague all who have experienced a past love. “You want to be remembered for who you loved and how you moved them to learning” (1-2). Here, the speaker engages the reader to ponder the idea of being remembered and further thoughts on relationships. Relationships are intimate. Klein’s ease with language, using the prose poetry construct, invites

“working class discourse,” and makes the reader feel right at home. His repeated use of personal pronouns built into the prose structure creates a compelling combination as he shares this relationship post-mortem and the readers and community of respondents listen and nod along.

Klein’s choice of topics from love, to societal concern for violence, to preparing a friend’s body for burial, are all discussed with equal significance and imagination and make use of the prose poem’s triple-threat—sound, shape, and structure. “Talking Day” is an expected block of prose that almost fills the entire page, margin to margin, while “Who you loved” and “Meditation” are short bursts of poetry broken into short paragraphs, which some might argue as couplets, of varying length and word count, with indiscriminate use of capitalization and punctuation. In his poem “Meditation,” Klein examines the inner life of thought and prayer. This is at an almost invasive level of intimacy and confession—a conversation between the speaker and his God. With the words, “mostly I run local and have to close my eyes to live outside of time” (3-5), the reader steps into the consciousness and spiritual life of the speaker and now exists at a new level of intimacy, of interiority. Since meditation is by nature a solitary undertaking between oneself and their own consciousness and sometimes between you and your god, the speaker has exposed the most secret place. With the confession, “I don’t pray. I did, but I don’t now. Nothing to pray for. No more looking for signs. One can wait forever” (10-11), Klein uses short statements in a testimony style and admits an aspect of hopelessness for the speaker, a desperation and giving up on the concept of something larger, some spiritual being that might send a sign or answer a prayer. The invitation into this shared admission allows the reader to note their own moments of doubt and hopelessness. Klein, by baring his poetic soul, has included the readers in a moment of spiritual self-reflection. This is the beauty of prose

poetry's "speech chain" and Levertov's "open-mouthed poet" all encompassed in a quiet, stained-glassed moment in the chapel.

The ultimate example of intimacy and prose form craft is found in Klein's "What it was like to have written." Here the speaker/poet plays with the listener/reader as he displays his literary athleticism with pronouns and proclaims the speaker/poet's complete control over language, identity, and style. This short block of prose, eight lines in length, is a masterpiece of monosyllabic pacing. The word "I" is used 15 times and of the 104 words in the entire piece, only 23 have multiple syllables. This intentional use of one syllable words quickens the pace, the breath control of the speaker. "I" is bandied about to equal both the writer and the speaker. Interestingly the speaker/poet steps back from the listener/reader for a moment when he calls himself "the other I" (4). When Klein writes, "And I told him the I is always the I in my poems unless of course I am using an I I want back that isn't for anybody" (2-4). The speaker becomes the poet who reminds the listeners they are here by his invitation and only allowed a glimpse by his say-so. Klein's freedom with pronouns, the anonymity of his poetic characters, (note he rarely names them and therefore they are no one and everyone), along with the lack of punctuation in several places in the line, brings the admission out in a burst of speaking. It increases the speed and the insistence that identity cannot be conveniently defined and every personality represented in the poem is fluid at any given moment in the text. Klein, the poet and speaker of "What it was like to have written," is, as Michael Meyer would suggest, "relying on an intense use of language" (787) to control who gets in to the writing process with him, as the speaker and as the writer, and Klein, by his choice to craft in the accessible and inviting structure of the prose poem, gives the reader, the corporate community of listeners, permission to hear the poetic speaker; to enter and connect, to share the expressive and intimate moments of his prose.

Sweet Communion

*The fact that no critics have yet laid out
formal standards for the prose is a
blessing.*

--Robert Bly

Brooke Horvath says that, “The prose poem encourages the reader’s active participation as co-creator not only of meaning but of the text as poem” (12). Geoff Hall states that, “without a reader there is no text, without a text no reader” (331). And Robert Bly suggests that, “In a prose poem we often feel a man or woman talking not before a crowd but in a low voice to someone he is sure is listening” (“What the Prose Poem Carries” 44), which foregrounds the argument that the poet of the prose poem and the reader have formed a relationship through the prose and that these three poets, each writing in his own style within the loose-fitting garment of the prose poem, have allowed themselves to be what David Orr has described as “vulnerable.” Their voice and “effective expression” which flows from the content of each piece, has emerged and through the shape, sound, and structure of the prose poem, built on the breath of sound and language, the sinew of sentence and line-break, and the bones of the structural page, has offered a fellowship with the corporate community of readers. Williams’ prose represents everyman’s voice and thoughts in its informality, Bly’s prose work offers similar personal invitations to observe the world around us, and his journal-like prose provides understanding through the symbolic and organic representations of starfish, and ants, relationships, and matters of life that none of us can avoid, while Klein’s use of intentionally familiar pronouns and first person voice becomes a prose journal on life and love, on society and subjects that touch every life, and every heart. Their poetic voices welcome the listener into the inner sanctum of each private moment. Herein lies the beauty and cloying familiarity of the prose form, a genre of structure, shape, and sound. Here we find the poetic and precarious leap into the uncharted waters of corporate intimacy

between speaker and between all those who have experienced the prose together; herein lies the welcoming invitation to plumb the depths of not just this fluid form but to breathe in the poetic soul and partake of its sweet communion.

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