

**A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO**

# Short:

An International Anthology of  
Five Centuries of Short-Short Stories,  
Prose Poems, Brief Essays, and  
Other Short Prose Forms

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Teacher's Guide by Alan Ziegler

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Fernando Pessoa Jayne Anne Phillips Edgar Allan Poe Francis  
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Klein Ross Joseph Roth Vem Rutsala Sonia Sanchez Scott  
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An International  
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Centuries of Short-  
Short Stories, Prose  
Poems, Brief  
Essays, and Other  
Short Prose Forms

# short

Edited by Alan Ziegler



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## **I. Notes and Activities:**

### **Ten Approaches to Teaching Pieces in Short**

I have been teaching Short Prose Forms classes—some terms as a literature seminar and others as a creative writing workshop—to undergraduates and MFA candidates at Columbia University since 1979. For the past decade, I have conducted the class as a hybrid seminar/workshop. Occasionally, I ask students at the end of the term if they might have preferred a class that was exclusively workshop or seminar. The overwhelming response is for doing both.

Selections from *Short* can be utilized both in literature and creative writing classes. In literature courses, students may acquire an enhanced taste for—and understanding of—the texts by writing pieces modeled (directly or indirectly) on pieces they are reading. And creative writing workshops may be enhanced by exercises based on the texts.

The following Notes and Activities outline some discussion points for a sampling of pieces in *Short*, followed by one or more writing activities.

#### **1) OBJECTIFYING**

“No ideas but in things,” wrote William Carlos Williams in *Paterson*. Of course, an idea can be conveyed with no-thing attached, but an object often acts as the pivot for a piece of writing. Many pieces in *Short* feature objects (some of which are listed in the “Commonalities” index). Here, we will take quick looks at “The Pipe” by Stéphane Mallarmé (p. 33), “The Pleasures of the Door” by Francis Ponge (p. 90), “The Salt and Pepper Shakers” by Ron Padgett (p. 177), and “What Do We Have in Our Pockets?” by Etgar Keret (p. 238).

In “The Pipe,” the narrator settles in for an evening of writing his “grand books,” only to be transported by his pipe to memories of the previous winter in London. He was separated (except for brief visits) from his “faithful sweetheart,” whom he has not contacted since his return to France. Mallarmé does not dwell on the pipe itself, but utilizes it as a gateway to the recent past.

Padgett’s prose poem “The Salt and Pepper Shakers” features “plain old diner variety” salt and pepper shakers that his family carries “back and forth between kitchen and table.” Padgett closes with the claim that these specific salt and pepper shakers reveal “the society that produced them” and that you can “read this and know me.” These are intentionally hyperbolic statements, but Padgett’s piece humorously demonstrates how objects contribute to our understanding of culture and character.

Ponge’s “The Pleasures of the Door” also celebrates an everyday object, starting with the obvious but nonetheless startling declaration that “Kings do not touch doors.” Ponge goes on to describe the intimate process of opening a door (“grabbing the midriff”) to reveal “a new surrounding.”

Here’s a “fraction” of what’s in the pocket of Keret’s narrator in “What Do We Have in Our Pockets?”: “A cigarette lighter, a cough drop, a postage stamp, a slightly bent cigarette, a toothpick, a handkerchief, a pen, two five-shekel coins.” The narrator goes on to fantasize about a fortuitous use for each of these objects.

#### **Activities:**

- Select an object connected to a meaningful time in your past. It may be an old piece of clothing that you’ve never been able to discard, a gift, or a souvenir. If you don’t have anything on hand, rummage through old photographs for one that contains a forgotten-object. Start by describing

the object, then segue into any memories it may elicit. See if there is any connection to your current life.

- Take a fresh look at a common object that a King (or President) might not typically touch (a wallet, car keys), and write about it so that a King would be jealous of those who have access to the object.
- Write a piece centered on an object used by more than one member of your household (either now or when you were a child) that reveals something about you and/or our culture (such as a remote control, a microwave, soap).
- Invent a door. Describe it. Open it and gaze upon a “new surrounding” of your imagination’s choosing.
- Load up a character’s pockets (or tote bag) with random objects. Create a narrative where each one comes in handy.

## **2) LETTERS, INSTRUCTIONS, TESTS, AND RECIPES**

Numerous pieces in *Short* appropriate forms that are not generally associated with literature, breeding on their familiar tropes and rhythms, such as:

Business Letters: Robert Walser’s “The Job Application” (p. 61) and Joe Wenderoth’s “In Response to the Disciplinary Action Taken Against Me by the Human Resource Manager” (p. 236).

Instructions: Margaret Atwood’s “Instructions for the Third Eye” (p. 170) and Amelia Gray’s “AM: 3” (p. 256).

Tests: W. S. Merwin’s “Make This Simple Test” (p. 135) and Jack Anderson’s “Phalaris and the Bull: A Story and an Examination” (p. 150).

Recipes: Guillaume Apollinaire’s “Little Recipes from Modern Magic” (p. 64) and Fillia’s “New Year’s Eve Dinner” (p. 100).

### **Activity:**

- Tell a story or make a point using one of these forms.

## **3) “THE BEGGAR WOMAN OF NAPLES”: A MAX JACOB MYSTERY**

The omniscient narrator knows everything; sometimes it’s interesting to confine narrators to what is before their eyes and in their heads. This limited perspective can open up myriad possibilities for the reader to imagine what is going on beyond the text.

Max Jacob’s prose poem “The Beggar Woman of Naples” (p. 58) appears in his breakthrough 1917 collection *Le Cornet à dés* (*The Dice Cup*). I keep coming back to the poem, as if it were a small, mysterious painting in a museum that leads you to say to your companion: “Would you take a look at this!” I have read it over and over, each time “getting it” a little more without ever being certain about what I was “getting.” This uncertainty—rather than being a weakness—is a manifestation of the poem’s power.

The poet Edward Hirsch points out that “The Beggar Woman of Naples” is characteristic of Jacob’s “toying with reality” and “playfully mistaking one thing for another.” Max Jacob also toyed with reality in his personal life. Gertrude Stein writes about the time he served as Guillaume Apollinaire’s second for a duel, negotiating in a café with the opponent’s second such matters as “under what circumstances were they under the absolute necessity of having a glass of brandy with the cup of coffee” until everyone went home unscathed—a reality much preferable to an actual duel. And Blaise Cendrars describes Jacob’s refusal to appear as poor as he was, wearing an “opera hat, frock coat,

cravat, monocle, shined shoes,” with his overcoat “buttoned up to the chin to conceal his lack of underclothes.”

The narrative of “The Beggar Woman of Naples” is simple and brief: A man leaves his “palace,” tosses some coins to the ubiquitous beggar woman, realizes he’s never heard so much as a “thank you,” and turns to confront her. But no one is there, just a “wooden case painted green which contained some red earth and a few half-rotten bananas.”

Questions raised by the prose poem include: Why does the narrator pick today to be bothered by the lack of thanks? Was there ever a beggar woman? If so, why has she never thanked him, and why isn’t she there today? If not, what’s been happening to all those coins? Why is there a painted wooden case in front of the narrator’s palace?

The poet doesn’t tell us, but that doesn’t make this piece ambiguous. Every part of the poem is clear, if nearsighted. What the reader doesn’t know is also unknown to the first-person narrator. In three sentences, Max Jacob has created a memorable scene, likely to evoke feelings about the narrator (do we identify with the narrator’s irritation, or are we irritated at the narrator for giving money to the poor as long as it does not involve a human connection?).

#### **Activities:**

- Assuming there was in fact a beggar woman, write a piece from her point-of-view; you have total leeway to invent this character. Who is she? How does she perceive the narrator? Has she taken to hiding before he comes out, waiting to see if he will ever notice she’s not there? Has she been saving the coins to invest in paintings by Max’s friend Picasso, and now there’s a museum wing named after her?
- What will happen to the narrator? Will he turn even colder and no longer deem to give money on the street, or will this be a wake-up call to pay more attention? Will he scour the city for the beggar woman and take care of her, like Jean Valjean adopting Cosette in *Les Misérables*? (Incidentally, Max was an acquaintance of Victor Hugo’s great-grandson Jean Hugo, an artist who illustrated an edition of *The Dice Cup*.)
- Discuss or write a version of “Beggar Woman” in which the narrator does confront the beggar woman for not thanking him.
- Write the scene from the point of view of the carriage driver who has witnessed this interaction every day.
- Try to locate a memory of a situation you didn’t fully understand because you didn’t have all the information. Write a piece using just the information you know. Then try it from the point of view of an omniscient narrator.
- Write brief descriptions—from memory—of several places or people from your daily rounds you have never really stopped to look at closely. Then go take a direct (but discreet) look, and write what you see. What mysteries remain?
- Start a section in your journal marked “Just beyond my peripheral vision.”

#### **4) IN DREAMS**

A student once told me that he had never written a prose poem. I asked if he ever wrote down his dreams, and he said yes, lots of times. Well then, I replied, you probably have lots of drafts of prose poems.

Dreams are often compact, laden with symbolism, with rapid transitions and leaps over conventional logic. Indeed, the term *dream logic* refers to the natural ability of our unconscious to make sense out of what appears to be nonsense and to convey truths through nonlinear, often elusive narratives and images. Sounds like one kind of prose poem to me.

The “Dreams and Leaps” index contains many pieces that utilize dream logic. Therapists and literary critics might chomp at the bit to explain, interpret, and analyze them, but, for now, let’s just enjoy the ride these writers take us on, such as:

The dream logic in Macedonio Fernández’s “A Novel for Readers with Nerves of Steel” (p. 54): “A Sunday rain was falling, completely by mistake, since it was Tuesday, the dry day of the week par excellence. . . . I took my rack from its hat and, putting both arms into the sleeves, wound the calendar, ripped that day’s leaf from the clock, put some coal in the icebox, added ice to the stove. . . . as a street-car ran catchably by, I sprang to the sidewalk and fell comfortably into my desk easy chair.”

The cartoonish pummeling Henri Michaux’s narrator gives an innocent fellow diner in “My Pastimes” (p. 89): “. . . I crumple him up, squeeze him dry, roll him into a ball, which I drop into my glass. Then I lift it in the air and spill it on the floor. ‘Waiter, get me a clean glass, will you?’”

Bernard Cooper’s opening question in “Saturday Night” (p. 208): “Can Mother muster enough thrust to leave the earth in a sudden leap?” And the closing: “Spying their children aglow on earth with a meager heat, do flying parents cry like geese?”

The dream-outside-the-dream in Russell Edson’s “Headlights in the Night” (p. 155), which begins: “As a man slept his car drove up the stairs into his bedroom, blinking its headlights.”

#### **Activities:**

- Write down a dream as best you remember it. Sculpt it into a prose poem.
- Using “Saturday Night” and “Headlights in the Night” as models, start with an impossible opening sentence and follow its dream-logic.
- Take a typical situation to dreamlike extremes: The mayhem in “My Pastimes” starts with: “some people . . . sit opposite me in a grease joint, stay a while, pick their teeth, they want to eat.”

### **5) NEAT LITTLE THINGS**

In 1965, Vladimir Nabokov was asked, “What do you think about paperback books?” He responded by telegram: “Neat little things.” *Short* has dozens of neat pieces that are far littler than a paperback book, including works by François de La Rochefoucauld (p. 8), Chamfort (p. 14), Joseph Joubert (p. 15), William Blake (p. 16), Friedrich Schlegel (p. 18), Giacomo Leopardi (p. 19), Félix Fénéon (p. 44), Gertrude Stein (p. 55), Karl Kraus (p. 55), Ramón Gómez de la Serna (p. 75), Paul Éluard and Benjamin Péret (p. 84), Malcolm de Chazal (p. 97), E. M. Cioran (p. 108), Kenneth Patchen (p. 112), and Augusto Monterroso (p. 122).

Just because a piece is tiny doesn’t mean it can’t have rules. Twitter’s cap of 140 characters has spawned such forms as *twitlit*, *twitterfiction*, and *twitterature*. Other neat little things include, in descending order: drabbles (maximum 100 words), dribbles (50 words), hint fiction (25 words), and the six-word-story—which has a literary legacy, albeit a dubious one. Ernest Hemingway is said to have been challenged (or to challenge himself) to write a complete story in six words, coming up with: *For sale: baby shoes, never worn*. It is odd that—considering the surfeit of Hemingway material—there’s no verifiable evidence of this actually taking place; indeed, as the website Snopes.com points out, the legend may have begun with John deGroot’s one-man play *Papa*. But no matter: it’s a good story and it has begotten thousands of word six-packs, including those in *Smith* magazine (smithmag.net), the “home of six-word memoirs,” which has produced several books as well as six-word games and T-shirts.

#### **Activities:**

- Write several “neat little things” with the limitation(s) of your choosing: number of words,

syllables, or characters. Or, in a limited physical space: the back of a postage stamp, a Post-it, an index card (if you're feeling expansive).

- Write a series of proverbs (William Blake: “No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings”), or use Paul Éluard and Benjamin Péret’s pieces from *152 Proverbs Adapted to the Taste of the Day* as a model and write some “surrealist proverbs,” which *sound* like proverbs whether or not their meaning is apparent (“Sleep that is singing makes the shadows tremble”).

## 6) LISTS

Writing a list poem couldn't be simpler (which doesn't make it easy). Think of a topic and make a list. We do it all the time. The list poem needs no transitions, no conventional narrative, no dialogue (unless it's a list of things people say). The trick is coming up with an interesting premise. Here are some writers who do so in *Short*: Catherine Wing, “Possible Audiences for this Work” (p. 247); Paul Violi, “Acknowledgments” (p. 189); Vern Rutsala, “How We Get By” (p. 147); Max Frisch, “Catalogue” (p. 109)—which doesn't even have a premise but is compelling throughout.

### Activity:

- Start by making a list of lists: any topics you can think of. Then start listing!

## 7) SORDELLOS

In my book, *The Writing Workshop Note Book*, I discuss the uses of real people in literature, quoting Ezra Pound's “Canto II”:

Hang it all, Robert Browning,  
there can be but the one “Sordello.”  
But Sordello, and my Sordello?

Pound is referring to three versions of Sordello: The real life troubadour with that name; Browning's version of that person in his epic poem *Sordello* (which Pound once read out loud to Yeats at Stone Cottage); and Pound's own depiction of Sordello. Whenever you write about someone—even if you strive to be as faithful to the flesh, mind, and soul as possible—you create a *sordello* (if I may coin a term) of that person.

Christopher Milne is the real-life son of the author A. A. Milne; the character Christopher Robin in Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*; and the title character of Czeslaw Milosz's “Christopher Robin” (p. 111). See the “spotlight” author's note on Milosz in *Short* (p. 277).

Milosz once described his best poems as “childishly naïve descriptions of things,” and he taps into that voice in “Christopher Robin,” one of translator Robert Hass's favorite pieces in Milosz's book *Road-Side Dog*. Hass calls the poem “a musing on youth and age, time and eternity,” initiated by a notice in *The London Times* that Christopher Milne had died at the age of 75.

The speaker of the poem is Milosz's *sordello* of Winnie being reunited with Christopher Robin after Christopher Milne's death; more than a third of the brief piece is in Christopher's voice (talking to Winnie) as he goes from being Robin to Milne (“My legs became long, I was a big person, I grew old, hunched, and I walked with a cane, and then I died”) and back to Robin (“Now I won't go anywhere, even if I'm called in for an afternoon snack”). Robin reports to Winnie that during his sojourn as Milne, “the only real thing was you, old bear, and our shared fun.”

About the warm reaction to “Christopher Robin,” Milosz said, “You know, Winnie the Pooh



belongs to everybody, because everybody remembers from childhood that story.” Jack Keruoac tapped into this collective memory in the last paragraph of *On the Road* when he wrote, “and don’t you know that God is Pooh Bear?”

**Activities:**

- Select a character who has existed in real life, a book, or a movie (or all three, like Abraham Lincoln) and make your own *sordello* of that person. You might want to look at “Lazarus” by Liliana Blum (p. 249), “Cyril Tourneur: Tragic Poet” by Marcel Schwob (p. 48), and “Goodtime Jesus” by James Tate (p. 184).
- Write several *sordellos* of yourself, in the form of “contributors notes.” See the pieces by Stacey Harwood (p. 225) and Michael Martone (p. 229).

**8) CAUSE A CREATURE**

The speaker of Jorge Luis Borges’s “Dreamtigers” (p. 87) was, in childhood, “a fervent worshiper of the tiger,” though he only saw tigers in zoos and books. His childhood passion dissipated, but the speaker still dreams of tigers. In fact, aware that he is dreaming, he wills himself “to cause a tiger,” which, alas, comes out “stuffed or flimsy, or with impure variations of shape, or of an implausible size, or all too fleeting, or with a touch of the dog or the bird.” The story ends there, but I would love to know more about these implausible tigers of Borges’s imagination.

We don’t have to wonder about the eponymous creature that Paul Colinet causes in “The Lobster” (p. 86): “the only carnivorous bird that flies backwards. . . . the lobster’s calcified eye is used, in shoemaking, to fasten half-boots.”

**Activity:**

- Select a creature you have strong feelings about and “cause” it in dreamlike or mythological terms. Perhaps think of this as a prank Wikipedia entry, full of glorious misinformation.

**9) TAKE A WALK**

W. H. Auden said, “It takes little talent to see what lies under one’s nose, a good deal to know in what direction to point that organ.” Walking provides the nose with an ever-changing array of subject matter.

*Flâneur* is French for *stroller*. Balzac may have overstated it when he wrote, “To walk is to vegetate, to stroll is to live,” but you catch the distinction. Baudelaire writes: “For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the middle of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.” Victor Fournel (another nineteenth-century French writer), wrote: “Going on infinite investigations through the streets and promenades . . . walking along, with serendipity . . . stopping in front of stores to regard their images . . . giving yourself over, captivated and enraptured, with all your senses and all your mind, to the spectacle.” And, Walter Benjamin compares the flâneur to a rag-picker “picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick . . .”

Although flânerie is usually associated with urban strolling, the narrator of Robert Walser’s “A Little Ramble” (p. 63) walks on a road through a “mountainous world” “like an enormous theater.” Nothing extraordinary happens on Walser’s walk, and that’s his point: “We don’t need to see anything out of the ordinary. We already see so much.”

In “Balcony” (p. 12), Louis-Sébastien Mercier lets his surroundings do the moving, as he observes—from above—a traffic jam of carriages in eighteenth-century Paris. Mercier goes beyond



the visual, inferring character backgrounds and interactions: “A poorly paid lawyer in his cab . . . may hold up the Lord Chancellor.” “A call girl yields no ground to an archbishop.” “A young fashionable thrusts his head out of the carriage-window, and bawls till his throat aches: ‘Well, you pack of rascals, have I got to wait here all day?’” while “a plethoric double-chinned financier on the other side takes no notice of him, or of his surroundings.”

Juan Ramón Jiménez aims his eyes upward in “The Moon” (p. 68) while walking along midtown Manhattan’s Great White Way, describing the electric advertisements as “new constellations”: “the Bottle which pops its ruddy cork with a muted detonation against a sun with eyes and a mouth, the Electric Stocking which dances madly by itself like a tail separated from a salamander, the Scotchman who displays and pours his whiskey with its white reflections . . .” The piece ends with the narrator musing on whether the moon is really “an advertisement for the moon.”

**Activity:**

- Designate an hour to be a flâneur, and another hour or so to write about it. Pick a starting point. Don’t plan your route. Look, listen, take notes. Give everything a fair chance for your attention: the tops of buildings, storefronts, people, animals. Observe interactions but stay apart—this is not participatory journalism. Perhaps repeat your route during a different time of day (a business district during rush hour and on Sunday morning). Write your results in a page or so of prose. The title of your piece can be the location and the time of your stroll. As an alternative, pick a vantage point (a table at an outdoor café, someplace with a view down to the street), and see what happens. This can be done with a partner; don’t talk to each other during the stroll or at the café. See how your pieces compare.

**10) MASHUP**

Jazz musicians sometimes quote other songs or musical phrases in the midst of an improvisation. In the Count Basie Orchestra’s rendition of “April in Paris,” Thad Jones’s trumpet solo quotes “Pop Goes the Weasel.” *Short* is replete with phrases and images that might lead you to think, “I wish I wrote that.” Well, now you can, as long as you provide some artistry to the thievery.

**Activity:**

- Flip through *Short*, copying whatever catches your eye—preferably phrases and images devoid of context. Put them all into one file, and play around with the order, adding connective words, deleting anything that doesn’t connect with something else. Have fun.

## II. Indexes

### By Commonalities

For my Short Prose Forms classes, I often organize some of the readings by commonalities of subject matter and approach to language. These groupings demonstrate how writers from different countries and time periods have approached similar tasks. Also, because short-short stories don't appear in abundance until the latter part of the twentieth century, thematic (rather than chronological) clusters expose students throughout the term to a mixture of genres. Please note that many of these pieces could fit into more than one category and that this index does not include every piece in *Short*.

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### III. The Short Prose Hall of Fame Inaugural Induction: A Fantasy by Alan Ziegler

**Introductory Note:** I started to write an essay discussing the emergence of modern short prose forms (beginning, as in *Short*, with Louis “Aloysius” Bertrand and Edgar Allan Poe), touching on the roots and offshoots of these seminal writers. As I was inserting quotes and making connections, it occurred to me to subvert the essay form by putting it into a theatrical format. I wound up with this fictive conversation.

The dialogue is factually-based; words actually spoken by the characters (sometimes lightly adapted) are in italics.

**TIME:** The never-present

**SETTING:** The Théâtre du Splendide Hotel. The backdrop—hand-painted by Manet—reads: “*And the Splendide Hotel was built amid the tangled heap of ice floes and the polar night.*”—*Rimbaud*. The stage is bare except for five café chairs for the inductees. The audience includes members of the Short Prose Society, who represent several countries and centuries. The occasion is the Short Prose Hall of Fame’s inaugural induction, scheduled to coincide with the publication of the *Short* anthology. Because it is my fantasy, I get to be the host.

AZ

Welcome to the Short Prose Hall of Fame’s inaugural induction. Thank you all for coming from such distances of time and space; I expect that many of you will be sitting on this stage in future ceremonies. Our first honoree’s only book, the posthumously published *Gaspard de la Nuit* (*Gaspard of the Night*), is widely considered to be the first book of prose poems, though he didn’t use the term. Louis “Aloysius” Bertrand lived most of his life in Dijon, with forays into the Paris literary scene. He attended Victor Hugo’s salon, where the great literary critic Saint-Beuve described his “shrewd and bantering expression” as he read his “little ballades in prose.”

(Louis “Aloysius” Bertrand enters, a bit dazed by the applause.)

Edgar Allan Poe, our only non-French honoree, is a writer of tales, poems, and essays, as well as an editor. He is known as a master of the macabre and the inventor of the detective story. Of most concern here is his enormous influence as a writer of short prose.

(Edgar Allan Poe enters, not terribly surprised by the acclaim.)

And now the man who made the first important translations of Poe’s work into French, and credited Bertrand as inspiration for his *Paris Spleen*, which was the first self-identified collection of prose poems—alas, also published posthumously. He is also an art critic and essayist whose work chronicles and fosters modernism: Charles Baudelaire!

(Charles Baudelaire runs out and engulfs Bertrand and Poe in a group hug.)

Stéphane Mallarmé published prose poems and verse poems in the same book, further establishing the prose poem as a form of poetry. He has had enormous influence in spite of—and perhaps in part due to—his celebration of the difficult and the obscure. Even his good friend Degas fled a eulogy he was giving, exclaiming, “I do not understand. I do not understand.”

(Mallarmé enters and addresses the audience.)

#### MALLARMÉ

*I become obscure, of course! if one makes a mistake and thinks one is opening a newspaper.*

(Mallarmé introduces himself to Bertrand and Poe, and enjoys a warm reunion with Baudelaire.)

#### AZ

I’m not sure if our final inductee has arrived, but let me tell you about him. His star shone bright but was self-extinguished before the age of 21 when he embarked on a new life in Africa as an itinerant entrepreneur (though reports of his involvement in the slave trade are greatly exaggerated). His two books of prose poems, *A Season in Hell* and *The Illuminations*, have been enormously influential, and his face and last name are cultural icons: Is Arthur Rimbaud here?

(After a minute of anxious waiting, Arthur Rimbaud reluctantly saunters across the stage, looking bemused at the Splendide Hotel sign. He nods to Mallarmé—whom he knew only in passing—and gives a respectful bow to Baudelaire, whom he never met but called “the first seer, the king of poets, *a real god*.” As much as Rimbaud tries to act blasé, you can tell that he is glad to be here. The inductees take their seats. I invite members of the audience to stand and speak whenever they feel so moved.)

#### AZ

Bertrand and Poe were born two years apart (1807, 1809), separated by an ocean and a language. But they shared a sensibility that would set in motion this anthology.

#### BAUDELAIRE

(addressing Bertrand)

Louis, *it was while thumbing through—for the twentieth time at least—your celebrated Gaspard de la Nuit that the idea came to me to try to do something analogous*. I knew it was going to be a remarkable book but was sure that it would *pass unnoticed*.

#### AZ

*Paris Spleen* established you as the inventor of the prose poem.

#### POE

Excuse me, but *I* published a prose poem, “Eureka,” fifteen years before the first of Charles’s.

#### AZ

Yes, but that was a different creature, almost forty thousand words. In 1765, Jaucourt used the term *poeme en prose* to discuss “poetry in prose works . . . which might have never seen light if their authors had to subject their genius to rhyme and measure,” but he gave as an example Fénelon’s novel-length *Les Aventures de Télémaque*. Let’s stipulate that “prose poem” and “poetic prose” are not necessarily synonymous. But let’s also stipulate that we go with whatever the author says: John Ashbery published

a book called *Three Poems*, the shortest of which is thirty-seven pages, and I'm not going to tell him he can't call them prose poems.

(addressing Bertrand)

You had a formal notion of the *short* prose poem, even if you didn't call it that.

**BERTRAND**

I did try to create a *new kind of prose*; I referred to my paired paragraphs as *couplets*, and I left instructions for *Monsieur typesetter to cast large white spaces between these couplets as if they were stanzas in verse*. I sold the book—including my illustrations—to Eugene Renduel, then I waited and waited for him to publish it. After five years I made one last plea for his good will, leaving a conciliatory sonnet by his door. Five more months went by, and I stopped living.

**AZ**

Two years later, your friend David d'Angers acquired the rights by returning your advance to Renduel, and the book was published.

(Hisses and boos from the audience. One figure skulks out the rear door, while another receives handshakes from those around him.)

**MALLARMÉ**

In 1865 I wrote to Louis's eventual publisher for a hard-to-get copy, imploring that *it pains me to see my library deprived of his deep exquisite work*.

(addressing Poe)

*I learned English solely in order to read you the better.*

**BAUDELAIRE**

(addressing Poe)

*The first time I opened one of your books, I saw, with horror and delight, not only topics I'd dreamed of, but sentences I'd thought of, and that you had written 20 years earlier.*

**MALLARMÉ**

(addressing Poe)

*You have one of the most wonderful minds that has ever appeared on this Earth.*

**POE**

*I wish I could write as mysterious as a cat.*

**AZ**

Arthur, you're being quiet. You closed down your poetic voice at the age of twenty-one, but do you have any idea how influential you've been? By the way, the first appearance of the *Illuminations* poems was credited to "the late Arthur Rimbaud."

**RIMBAUD**

*Merde!* But understandable. I got a letter saying I was becoming *legendary in a small coterie*, and that

*my death was widely rumored*, but I didn't bother coming back. For one thing, I had spent so much time in Africa that I was afraid France would be *too cold*.

AZ

You became kind of a rock star.

PATTI SMITH

(from the audience)

I *am* a rock star, and in 1973 on the anniversary of your death I gave the first of my "Rock and Rimbaud" performances. I also have one of your calling cards.

PAUL SIMON

(from the audience)

Here's the only line from a song I never could finish: *We go together like Rimbaud bo bo bo-bo-bo-bo-bo Baudelaire*.

BAUDELAIRE AND RIMBAUD

We never even met!

AZ

Yes, but your names are forever entwined. On episodes of *Law and Order* and *Dragnet* the two of you are invoked as literary mentors to criminals.

RIMBAUD

I was the one who got shot—by Verlaine—though it was *really just a scratch*.

AZ

Let's take a look backward. The story of Cain and Abel can fit on a page, and "Jesus wept" on a postage stamp. In ancient Greece we had Theophrastus's "characters" and Herodas's "mimes." Michel de Montaigne's sixteenth-century essays derive their strength partly through digressions and *chaque lopins* (fragments)—common characteristics of modern short prose.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

(from the audience)

I advocated language that is succulent and sinewy, brief and compressed, irregular, disconnected, and bold, each bit making a body in itself.

AZ

This is a harbinger of the disjointedness found in, say, Arthur's prose poems, where seemingly unrelated nuggets of coherence are clustered under one title—though Arthur would never alert the reader, as Michel did, with a phrase like "let me switch subject." A couple of centuries later, we have Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

(from the audience)

I kept a faithful record of my solitary walks and the reveries that occupied them, when I gave free rein to my thoughts and let my ideas follow their natural course, unrestricted and unconfined. In prose.

**BAUDELAIRE**

*A sentimental and vile author!* When I stopped living I was working on *My Heart Laid Bare*, in which I was accumulating all my *rage*. Oh, if that ever saw the light of day, Rousseau's *Confessions* would have seemed *pale*.

**AZ**

Now now, Charles, you can't deny that you were thinking about Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* when you considered calling your collection of prose poems *The Solitary Walker* . . .

**POE**

(addressing Baudelaire)

. . . or that you took the title *My Heart Laid Bare* from me: I wrote *that the road to immortal renown lies straight, open, and unencumbered before anyone who writes and publishes a very little book with that title*.

**AZ**

Neither of you published a book called *My Heart Laid Bare* (though Charles left behind fragments for it), but you both found the road to immortal renown! Back to walking: Rousseau's solitary walker roamed the countryside; Charles, *yours* is an urban flâneur walking amidst the crowds of Paris as modernity is brewing.

**BAUDELAIRE**

*In the midst of the fugitive and the infinite—for the flâneur, the crowd is his element . . .*

**POE**

. . . and you don't even have to walk to be a flâneur: *sitting in a café, one can become absorbed in contemplation of the scene without—and regard with minute interest the innumerable varieties of detail, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance*.

**AZ**

The quick changes of scenery, mental digressions, and fragmentation inherent in flâneury is another hallmark of short prose. Edgar used his *Marginalia* column in various magazines as a platform for fragmentary pieces.

(addressing Poe)

Tell us how you came up with the idea.

**POE**

*In getting my books, I am always solicitous of an ample margin, for the facility it affords me of penciling suggested thoughts, agreements, and differences of opinion, or brief critical comments in general. Where what I have to note is too much to be included within the narrow limits of a margin, I commit it to a slip of paper, and deposit it between the leaves; taking care to secure it by an imperceptible portion of gum tragacanth paste.*

**AZ**

If only Edgar had marketed these as *Poe-stits*, he might have lived a more affluent life. Let's hear from the audience about the branches these five nourished.

**ANDRÉ BRETON**

(from the audience)

*Bertrand is Surrealist in the past. Poe is Surrealist in adventure. Baudelaire is Surrealist in morality. Rimbaud is Surrealist in the way he lived, and elsewhere. Mallarmé is Surrealist when he is confiding.*

**ALL**

(simultaneously)

Surrealist? I am not familiar with the term.

**BRETON**

I got it from Apollinaire. You would have loved him.

**JUAN RAMÓN JIMÉNEZ**

(from the audience)

I read Baudelaire in Spain. Charles, you are *the master of all contemporary poetry in the world.*

**PETER ALTENBERG**

(from the audience)

I read Baudelaire in Vienna.

**FRANZ KAFKA**

(from the audience)

And I read Altenberg in Prague. Peter, you are *a genius of nullifications; your small stories mirror your whole life.*

**RUSSELL EDSON**

(from the audience)

*I found a good example in the works of Kafka, who explored the vaunted dreamscape, and yet was able to report it in rational and reasoned language.*

**LYDIA DAVIS**

(from the audience)

Russell Edson *jolted me out of my stuckness in long conventional stories and into one-paragraph freedom.*

**DEB OLIN UNFERTH**

(from the audience)

*Lydia Davis is the source text, the Gospel of Q.*

**AZ**

(addressing Baudelaire)

See how important you turned out to be, Charles. Not bad for a guy who couldn't even get into the French Academy, despite your humiliating efforts.

(Hisses and boos from the audience. Several figures skulk out the rear door.)

**AZ**

(addressing Poe)

Edgar, you said that a short story should be brief and have a “unity of effect.” That describes some flash fiction.

**POE**

I am not familiar with that term.

**AZ**

That’s not important now. We just love putting names on forms and movements.

**RIMBAUD**

I loved pissing off the Parnassians and the Nasty Boys.

(Scattered whoops from the audience, and a few mumbled expletives.)

**AZ**

(addressing Poe)

Edgar, as you can see, your influence on the early prose poets of France became part of the ever-mutating DNA of short prose writers.

**POE**

But why France?

**OCTAVIO PAZ**

(from the audience)

*Such a form could have developed only in a language in which the absence of tonic accents limits the rhythmic resources of free verse.*

(Mutters of agreement from some in the audience; snickers from others.)

**GUSTAVE KAHN**

(from the audience)

French writers had a choice: Not only was I partly responsible for getting Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* into print, I also came up with the term *vers libre* . . .

**AZ**

. . . which became the predominant form in America, where poets—armed with their “tonic accents”—thought: I want my freedom from formal restraints, but I also want my line breaks.

**MALLARMÉ**

So, what I was doing in my poem “Un Coup de Des” caught on, with its irregular lines and the paper’s white space as a surrounding silence? I guess Paul Valéry was right when he called it “*an event of universal importance*.” Me? I was afraid it was *an act of insanity*.



**STUART MERRILL**

(from the audience)

I was born in Hempstead, Long Island, but I spent many years in France. I tried to do for prose poems in America what Baudelaire did for Poe in France. In 1890 Harper & Brothers published my anthology *Pastels in Prose*, which included Baudelaire, Bertrand, and Mallarmé (who even let me publish a couple of pieces before they appeared in his own book). The form didn't catch on.

**AZ**

(addressing Merrill)

Stuart, you'll be pleased to know that eventually the number of Americans writing prose poems and other short prose forms expanded exponentially, especially starting in the 1960s. It's big stuff now.

(addressing the inductees)

As great an influence as the five of you have been, your successors did not deduce a static approach to short prose from your work. I see Max Jacob out there. Monsieur Max, your "Beggar Woman of Naples" was the first prose poem I fell truly in love with.

(thunderous applause)

**MAX JACOB**

(from the audience, addressing Rimbaud)

*You extended the scope of our sensibility and every literary man must be grateful to you for that, but the prose poem must submit to the laws of all art, which are style or will and situation or emotion, and you lead us only to disorder and exasperation . . .*

**AZ**

Hey, he was just a kid!

**RIMBAUD**

*You're not too serious when you're seventeen years old . . .*

**AZ**

. . . and you wrote that when you were fifteen!

(addressing Jacob)

Are Baudelaire and Mallarmé off the hook?

**JACOB**

(from the audience)

*Not with their parables, which we must avoid to distinguish the prose poem from the fable. It is probably clear that I do not regard as prose poems those notebooks containing more or less quaint impressions published from time to time by my colleagues who have a surplus of material. A page of prose is not a prose poem, even if it encloses two or three lucky finds.*

AZ

Here's what I think: If you don't want to call a piece a prose poem because it doesn't meet Max Jacob's standards (or any other), well then, call it something else! Or don't call it anything! The point is, if we take the sum total of all the work done by our five inductees, we have a pretty good foundation for convergence *and* divergence in all kinds of short prose.

(The audience rises, applauding)

Before closing, I must observe that this evening has been pretty much a toast to testosterone when it comes to prose poems. Emma Lazarus wrote some "little poems in prose" in the 1880s, and Katherine Mansfield experimented with the form in 1918, but, for the most part, women came late to the prose poem party.

MAXINE CHERNOFF

(from the audience)

*I was one of the only women writing prose poems in the '70s.*

AZ

I am happy to say that this has changed dramatically, and many contemporary women are in this book.

That's it for now. Please go home safely—stay in your temporal lanes. And remember to pick up some swag in the lobby: We have Poe-stit Notes, Baudelaire Bobbleheads, Rimbaud Joke Fake *Merde*, and *I Don't Break for Lines* bumper stickers.

(The house lights go up in the Théâtre du Splendide Hotel. Audience members mingle as an accordionist plays a medley consisting of Rachmaninoff's setting of Poe's "The Bells" followed by the Phil Ochs version, Ravel's settings of pieces from Bertrand's *Gaspard of the Night*, arias of Baudelaire prose poems from John Adams's opera *Doctor Atomic*, Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun" based on Mallarmé's poem, Benjamin Britten's setting of pieces from Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, Alban Berg's "Five Songs on Picture Postcard Texts by Peter Altenberg," and Erik Satie's second set of "Furniture Music," composed for a long-lost Max Jacob play.)

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