

# How Writers Write Poetry 2014

CLASS TWELVE • Video Transcript

-So over the course of this course we've given you a lot of different formal strategies, ways to generate work, to revise work and now in this last session we wanted to open it up into less traditional forms, more surprising things. Marvin Bell will speak about free verse and letting the form find you and then I'm going to branch off of that, thinking about Marvin's new work in the prose poem and just give you a little bit of a sense of the prose poem.

-Marvin Bell was a long time fixture at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He taught there for forty years, retiring as the Flannery O'Connor professor of poetry. He's the author of many books of poetry, a collection of essays, *Old Snow Just Melting*, and collaboration with the wonderful poet William Stafford. He has been the poet laureate of Iowa and he is a beloved teacher to many of the best poets in America. And it's a great pleasure to finally formally introduce Mary Hickman, my partner in this course. She is the author of two books of poems, *Wildlife* and *Rayfish*. She is a book artist. She grew up, interestingly, in China, in Hong Kong and Taiwan so she has a really interesting connection to the mission of the IWP. She's completing a Ph.D. in book arts and it's really so much fun to have a chance to be with you here.

-Thank you. Ditto.

-I'm Marvin Bell and I've been asked to talk about some aspect of craft and in particular about a form of poetry that I've created, known as the dead man poem. I'm going to begin by talking about free verse in general. I think of free verse, not just as unmetered lines of poetry, or a form if you will, but as a method for finding new forms. There are all kinds of free verse out there, of course. A free verse line can be short or long or elastic. It used to be that free verse itself was automatically interesting, in contrary distinction to the foremost verse in meter and rhyme that dominated at the time but of course, over the years, free verse in this country has become the style of the age, if you will. The thing about free verse is that we talk about the line a lot but the fact of the matter is that the secret to free verse is syntax. Syntax provides all of the opportunities for running the line over smoothly or syncopating it, perhaps using, making it an end stop line with a punctuation mark or creating an enjambment where it just runs over to the next line. It provides all the opportunities for those effects and it provides all the opportunities for changes in pitch and tone and pace and timbre. Syntax is the real secret. A young poet could do worse, a young free verse poet in particular could do worse than, say, to read the novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton and absorb all the varieties of syntax.

So in the beginning - the truth is I discovered contemporary poetry by means of the poems of William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsburg, Robert Creeley and of course I would imitate them. I would imitate Robert Creeley's very syncopated free verse. I would also write very fluid free verse in which the lines would move down the page quite smoothly, in terms of the syntax. Most of the time free verse poets will try to combine run over lines and enjambed lines and create that effect and also, most free verse poets aren't really writing free verse, they don't know this and they don't have to



know it but they're writing a kind of accentual verse because they like the look of the poem as it moves down the page. They like the lines to be about the same length, to maintain a certain length as they move down the page. They like that look and of course, in effect, they end up with a poem that's maybe four beats for line except for an occasional line that's three beats, an occasional that is five beats. So the effect of it is really more what we would call, what I would call, an accentual poem, actually. A more elastic line, one that has lines that are much shorter or longer than the others, is another matter. So I'll give you one example of a poem that has elastic lines. This is a poem I wrote a few years back called White Clover. Clover grows on our neighborhood lawns here because all these lawns were once farmland and the clover is left over from the field. This is White Clover and I'll hesitate ever so slightly at the end of each line. In free verse usually I think a reader wants to hesitate ever so slightly at the end of each line to honor the lines. The lines should make a difference even though syntax is the secret. Here we go, White Clover.

Once when the moon was out about three-quarters  
 and the fireflies who are the stars  
 of backyards  
 were out about three-quarters  
 and about three-fourths of all the lights  
 in the neighborhood  
 were on because people can be at home,  
 I took a not so innocent walk  
 out among the lawns,  
 navigating by the light of lights,  
 and there there were many hundreds of moons  
 on the lawns  
 where before there was only polite grass.  
 These were moons on long stems,  
 their long stems giving their greenness  
 to the center of each flower  
 and the light giving its whiteness to the tops  
 of the petals. I could say  
 it was light from stars  
 touched the tops of flowers and no doubt  
 something heavenly reaches what grows outdoors  
 and the heads of men who go hatless,  
 but I like to think we have a world  
 right here, and a life  
 that isn't death. So I don't say it's better  
 to be right here. I say this is where  
 many hundreds of core-green moons  
 gigantic to my eye  
 rose because men and women had sown green grass,  
 and flowered to my eye in man-made light,  
 and to some would be as fire in the body

and to others a light in the mind  
over all their property.

So that's a poem with elastic lines. Some are longer or shorter than others, noticeably so. Well, I went on, writing poems of elastic lines and I'd written all sorts of free verse over many years. I'd written skinny poems and fat poems, short and long poems, poems in short lines, long lines, poems in which the lines were regularized and poems in which the line was very elastic, syncopated lines, fluid lines, prose poems, pages that mixed lines and prose, poems in stanzas, poems without stanzas, you name it. Meanwhile, as I said, free verse had, which had once been automatically interesting because it was odd had become the style of the age. I've said elsewhere that I think every free verse poet now needs to reinvent free verse.

I had written a poem called Poser, the French word poser and when I look back now I realize that it might have predicted something. It might have been a prediction of something. Here's the poem. It's written in sentences. It's written in whole sentences. That is, every line is a sentence. Every sentence is a whole line. The line can be very long or very short, very, very elastic. If the line reaches the edge of the column and gets wrapped, that's fine. Every wrap gets indented so that you can see it's all part of a line in progress, it's not a new line. So I'll read Poser. Every sentence is a line, every line is a sentence. Here we go.

I confess what I did in the tombs and the displays and how I filtered the reports through an hourglass.

I admit to turning out the green light in the grapes.

I own up to emptying the squid of its ink.

All because I conceived of a rope with a noose at the end of it and I imagined a now chemical tide smothering the shore in gold.

I'm not even the corpse at the end of this idea.

I tried to refill the night but my eyes were open.

The two ends of the equator unraveled as I tried to cross.

The peeled apple took its skin back before I could eat.

Stars swept up their rays and the Milky Way poured itself over the rim of the planet rather than be named on my maps.

I awoke and was dead.

So I decided to take my own life and ended up alive after my self inflicted demise.

That's a bit more surreal than White Clover. Well, looking back at that poem I realize maybe it had set the stage for something because one day when I was in Port Townsend, Washington in the winter I wrote a poem that sounded strange. It sounded as if it came from one of those lost wisdom books of antiquity, that sort of thing, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, perhaps, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, perhaps. I called it From the Book of the Dead Man, put it into a book of poems and never intended to write another poem like it. It took me a couple of years before I happened to write another poem like it and then I was hooked because it was clearly another kind of poem. It was another form and I always look for a new form before I, you know, once I've finished what turns out to be a book of poetry. I'm always waiting for a form to discover me, if you will.

Dead man poems are written by sentence. It's as if I'm putting down, laying down paving stones. I pile up the sentences. There are a number of unusual things about them. Every poem from *The Book of the Dead Man* comes out of a Zen admonition, in part. An old admonition. It says, live as if you were already dead. In other words, take part fully in everything but have a long view too. Also, each dead man poem comes in two title parts. The implication could be you think the poem is finished? No, it could go on, any poem could go on. Also, it's kaleidoscopic. The free association in it is very kaleidoscopic. To me that makes sense because I think our perceptions come at us all at once, from all directions. And our perception is kaleidoscopic. So that the dead man poem line two may not lead to line three, line four may not come off line three but line two may connect to line sixteen, or line three may connect to line twelve in the second part, that sort of thing.

What else? You should know that the dead man is alive and dead at the same time. He bypasses the notion of time. He's not a persona but an overarching sensibility. Is the dead man me? No, but he's someone who knows a lot about me. You can't tell what is autobiographical and what is more of a portrait of mankind. Also the poetry is, has a philosophical element. I like poems to have that but I also like ideas to have some dirt on their shoes and that's why I write poetry instead of essays about philosophy. What else? I think that's about it. I'll give an example. I pulled a poem out of my most recent book of dead man poems called *Vertigo to Living Dead Man Poems*. I've pulled out one called *The Book of the Dead Man (Decomposition)*, in parentheses it says *Decomposition*. So here we go. There are two parts to this. This is *The Book of the Dead Man (Decomposition)* and below the title it says "Live as if you were already dead," a Zen admonition. The title part one is about the dead man and decomposition.

The dead man has a mulberry bush on the brain.  
 A mulberry chopped down thirty years ago, not one other can see.  
 It grew by the house, it was immediate, it was personal.  
 The dead man is of more than one mind about it.  
 The dead man's nature, like his brain, has been etched, chiseled,  
     planed and diverted by a single bush, tree or flower, by a  
     moment as quick as the claw foot of a bird overhead.  
 It takes little to inscribe in the dead man the forefront of  
     the mystery.  
 To the dead man, that one mulberry was more than a forest.  
 To the dead man, the heron in his cedar was more than a rookery.  
 The dead man evades the notion of species to count by ones.  
 He is himself unlike others.  
 Others may sense, perceiving the dead man, that the silences  
     of nature are a welcoming, and the sounds of nature  
     are cautionary.  
 The dead man's love of nature, like yours, must be cognizant of  
     the end.  
 It was not nature invented time.  
 It was not the devotees of entropy who said to live and let live.  
 The nature of nature will not be replicated in poetry ink.  
 The dead man greets Aristotle in the mindscape of imitation, it is

not re-creation but a new world.  
 Such is nature to the dead man that the world may be endlessly  
 reborn.  
 Even as the long dead live on in the dead man, so a mulberry bush  
 may stay behind.  
 And then comes part two called More About the Dead Man and Decomposition.  
 Have you been waiting for the dead man to compose or  
 to decompose?  
 The dead man, in becoming, unwrites and unsays.  
 The dead man has left no tracks on the loess, not in the humus, the  
 loam, the dust, the salt or talcum.  
 Not in the peat or chalk, the silt, the gravel or the spilled fee.  
 His footfalls in the rain and snow lifted off, into the ethereal.  
 The dead man's weight is not dead weight but disperses, aerated  
 and released.  
 Your memory of the dead man is a child's balloon, and where is  
 that off to?  
 Of the dead man, still there remains the whole of nature.  
 In the whole of nature, the dead man is of many forms, a thread, a  
 mesh, a graft, a skin, and the spine of the natural.  
 The dead man does not save for posterity, he dispenses with  
 drafts, he lightens the future for his children.  
 He is out ahead of literature in this regard.  
 It was the what beyond words that made him speak to you this way.  
 Take a line from it when anxious, for it will compose you.  
 You may remember it, you may memorize it, you may take it to  
 heart, it will endure the interstices of time.  
 For here the excerpt is whole, and the whole is an excerpt – it  
 is so.

Well that's what the dead man poems are like. Once I started writing them I couldn't stop. You know, you find a form, a form especially that can take anything, a form that can make any connection in any way in any place, in any time, it's pretty hard to give it up. It becomes seductive and of course now I should tell you that I've begun to write in paragraphs. That's my new form of free verse: prose poetry.

-So having just concluded with Marvin Bell's wonderful video and craft talk on free verse and on finding the form or the form finding you, I wanted to actually bring you one of his prose poems. So he talked about the sentence as the unit of composition and that now he's moved to paragraphs and he's writing these prose poems. He's writing a book called *After the Fact: Scripts and Post Scripts* with Chris Merrill, our very own Chris Merrill and I have the privilege of having one of these poems in front of me. They are writing prose poems, back and forth, in response to one another's poems and Chris, you may know, is a globe trotter of the highest order and so a lot of his are written from all over and Marvin's are in Iowa City, written in Iowa City, written out in Washington. So it's from a

mix of locations. And so a mix of all kinds of inspirations and textures and things like that coming in. So we'll start with this. I wanted to bring this to you to show you the kind of work that they're doing with this.

## Code

In a small town, everything is elsewhere. My memory of radio remains lodged in Morse code. That's how we went from here to there in those days. Roy's hand radio shack was his attic; Herb's was his backyard repair shop; Van's was a one room house in the woods where he built transmitters, only to see if they worked, one after another. The smell of solder glued the walls and a dozen dials glowed to measure space. Memory, like the fabled primordial ooze, lies shapeless at a murky depth. It may emerge in the form of a boy's twenty watt call to the far world. It may live again as a whiff of smoke or solder or as a song at highway speed and it may hold a kind of code. My memories go their own way. Some are too personal for words. Some are just dry storage but oh my, the ones that still matter. If one can crack the code and read between the lines. The old telegraph operators could copy behind and would let the Morse message run on ahead while they packed a pipe or retied their shoes. Just so, the years run on ahead but memory catches up. Morse code has been phased out like muscle memory over time. It was years before I knew that Dorothy puts herself to sleep by silently reciting poems, state capitols, the ninety nine counties of Iowa. Yet she has tried to learn international Morse code and cannot, so she says. I suggested she learn the dots and dashes for the when I might have a stroke but be able to blink my eyes in code. I think this reason has something to do with her not being able to learn Morse code. Love is the child who closes her eyes to make things go away and to relive the past. I heard three times from Saint Pierre and Miquelon Islands.

So in that we have a character thinking about Morse code, thinking about communication across distances, memory, all of these sorts of things. One of the things I wanted to point out, and I'm going to take you through a little history of the prose poem and then think of one of the specific techniques that I think makes it most lively. One of the things that's happening here in Marvin's is parallelism. So if you take a poem and it's a prose poem, what is the prose poem versus a free verse poem? Well, you've taken away the line breaks. That means that the line is no longer the unit of breath. It's now the sentence that is the unit of breath. So the line break which creates so much of the tension and drama and pausing and back and forth and treading and re-treading of the free verse poem is gone. How then, do we build tension? How then do we make prose poetic? How does it become something other than just the galloping forward of thought? One of these techniques is to make it highly sound oriented, highly sonic in different ways. With parallelism, and it's a very common technique in say the Old Testament, other kinds of things. We're returning to the same sentence structure over and over and that creates a kind of almost line break like return to a beginning. Here we have Marvin Bell saying, Roy's hand radio shack was his attic; Herb's was his backyard repair shop; Van's was a one room house in the woods where he built transmitters only to see if they worked, one after another. So he breaks the parallelism a little at the end by continuing forward and adding details in. So, beautiful, wonderful instance of this. The prose poem itself, you know, it has diction, it has narrative, it has all of these things but that's not what makes it a poem. What makes it no longer just an essay or a story or something like that, the kind of thing that happens within it that elevates it into maybe the register more of song rather than just sense is a

collection of tensions, of struggles that happen in the syntax and the tone.

It struggles within itself, even as it moves forward. It builds these kinds of structures. So the stanza, the room that we've talked about in earlier videos, is now the paragraph, right, it's now something that's bigger and has not the line breaks to be the walls, things like this. So instead the sentences themselves enact these different kinds of architectures, mixing in different domains of thought, logic, the imagination, these are things that can all come together and combine. So the prose poem, what, you know, prose poem, it's a contradiction in terms. What is it? In the early eighteen hundreds, I think a lot of people, credit Aloysius Bertrand for sort of, the modern revival of the prose poem. We have some things happening in ancient Greek and Latin literature but this is maybe where we would start. And then Baudelaire, he's got a poem called, well translated, as *Get Drunk*, you know, and he's, part of his sort of flâneur through the city is these tumbling, rumbling thoughts about these things. Rimbaud, Arthur Rimbaud, now he's I think maybe who a lot of young poets, a lot of us found our kind of entry into the prose poem and our love of the prose poem. So I'll read just a short one by him, *Royalty*. And this is translated from the original French.

One fine morning, in a land of very decent people, a gorgeous man and woman were shouting in the town square. "Friends, I want to be her queen!" "I want to be Queen," she laughed and trembled. He spoke to his friends of revelation, of an ordeal undergone. They swooned, one against the other and so they ruled all morning as crimson curtains blazed from windows and then all afternoon as they strolled the palm gardens.

So with this, it's a small narrative, but what happens in it seems to keep switching its direction, surprising us, turning one way and then turning another. So one of the things I wanted to think about with this is, you know, not just parallelism, not just rhythm, repetition, short sentences, long sentences, exclamation, differences of diction, all of these things. Those are all part of it but those are part of good prose no matter what. I wanted to think more specifically about parataxis. And this is the way, unlike prose, prose is often moving forward, making connections, smoothly going the course towards a goal. This is where things are being placed alongside each other. and this brings out juxtaposition, this brings out compression, leaps are made and in fact, between these kind of disparate sentences or ideas or sensations that are placed together, you can even achieve a little bit of the breathturn, that Paul Celan talks about in terms of the line in poetry and that, you know, we've talked about a little bit in future, in earlier craft talks.

This space that opens up, where there's a surprise. There's something that happens there. There's energy there because you're not just moving forward to a goal you already have in sight. There's interruption, eruption, eruption, all sorts of things can happen in that space. A few examples, I just wanted to say, of prose poems that I especially love, Ashberry's *The Young Son*, John Ashberry's *The Young Son*, T.S. Eliot's *Hysteria*, Reina María Rodríguez, *Ski Sauvage*, and then Josely Vianna Baptista. She is a Brazilian poet and I wanted to show you what she's doing with her prose poem. So the Brazilians, they have a history of visual poetry, concrete poetry, things like this, and so she's taken the prose poem and I will show it to you and she's made it glyphic. So if you can, if you can see that - all the letters are pried apart. So that space that you can have between the end of a sentence and the beginning of the next, she wants that between the letters themselves. So trying to read across it, all of this interruption, tension, things like this are happening there just in the way that she's made it glyphic as well as textual. Another example of parataxis and I'll go a little more into details about what I mean by that but first I wanted to read a poem and give us a kind of start for

this. One of our other craft talks by Nick Twemlow where he talked to you about erasure and appropriation. He has a poem titled "I Love Karate." And if you don't know this about Nick Twemlow, he is a black belt in karate. But I'll read it to you, and listen for interruption, direction switches, things like this. And then we'll talk about it a little more afterwards. "I Love Karate."

I love karate. I love karate so much I sweat karate steak dinners. I love karate so much I eat karate cereal in the morning, karate sandwiches for lunch, and karate haiku for pleasure. But like a good karateka (that's the technical term for highly skilled karate person) I don't eat karate dessert. You know why? Because dessert takes the edge off. You might ask, Off what? but if you do, I'll perform a random karate move on you, as I did my mother when she tried to serve me non-karate cereal one morning. That was the morning when I realized that I was a true karateka. I refused the Empire's cereal. If you are a true karateka, you are a rogue. Rogues don't like the Empire. This means that rogues spend a lot of time building dojos in the woods. A dojo is the technical name for a rogue who spends a lot of time building cabins in the woods. There are some karate moves that I can't show you. Those are secret karate moves. Like all karate moves, they are designed to kill. But these secret strikes kill faster and harder. They are to regular karate moves what hardcore is to softcore pornography. I was sensitive once, but karate got rid of that. Now I am tough on the inside as well as the outside. For example, if I was in the Oval Office partying with the President, smoking some grass (which I'd fake doing because karatekas don't smoke grass), I'd ask him to repeat what he said about kicking evil's ass and then I'd ask him to show me how he'd do it. Since I know the President isn't a karateka, I'd administer a very secret strike on him at the moment he showed me how he'd do it. That's pretty much how I'd do things. I want karate to be in the Olympics in Beijing because I want to be on the team and travel to Beijing and win a gold medal.

Or at least that's what I'd trick everyone into thinking I was doing. Part of being a good karateka means bolstering the Chinese economy. Sort of like ninjas, except a karateka can beat a ninja 14 out of 10 times. So while people would think I want to go to Beijing to win a gold medal and hang out in the Olympic Village and have a really good time with all the other athletes and media and officials and tourists, I'd really have a secret agenda.

Secret agendas are pretty common for most karatekas. Secret agendas ensure that no matter what you say you really don't mean it. So when everyone else was having a good time at the Olympics in Beijing, seeing how communism is really good on the citizens in China, because the government rounded up before tens of thousands of homeless people and relocated them to details and provincial labor camps, I'd slip out at night and administer random karate moves on officials of the empire.

This happened a lot in Atlanta too, when we held the Olympics - the part about the homeless I mean. So with Nick's the tone seems to be moving between placing beside each other things that seem funny or ironic and things that seem moving or deeply personal - the lyric existing alongside the ironic and a tension being created between the two of those tones. So the texture is coming from this juxtaposition of tones happening sentence by sentence and the surprises being built into the lines that way - into the sentences.

So parataxis, it means, and this in the original Greek, side by side arrangement. So you're placing things side by side, rather than connecting them. Hypotaxis is the term for arranging under, meaning



if this, then that. And hypotaxis, it allows details to accrue to a final point, to an overarching thesis or summary. And parataxis, instead puts: here's this, here's this, here's this, things one after the other. It's a kind of slashing abruptness, a blow by blow. It doesn't let up often. As I said before, the tone can be both lyrical and ironic at once. It adds mystery, surprise, that space that opens between to delight, to disrupt, to startle, to make new.

And so these are a lot of the tactics that we find prose poems using as they move forward. One of the ways I like to think about this is that prose loses itself to find itself - right? you're always moving toward something - but poetry loses itself to stay lost. There's something about what's unsayable, what can only be gotten at in these spaces between, in these things placed together and the juxtaposition that somehow sparks something for us.

Try out a prose poem. It can be something as simple as writing yourself a series of sentences and then placing them one after another in any order and seeing what happens when these things come together. You could try mixing tones, a new tone here, now funny, now stark, now hyper real, surreal - things like that - or line lengths, 2 word sentences paired with 20 word sentences and feel what happens between those. So think of parataxis as one of these main tools for crafting a prose poem, so that you can have the breathlessness of prose.

When I was reading "I love karate," I didn't want to stop, right? Prose does roll us forward - the breathlessness of that roll forward but with these moments that are also always wrapping us back into what came before.

- So the exercise that we're thinking of for this session is to take a bunch of sentences, if you want to attempt a prose poem and use parataxis rather than hypotaxis. Have them bump up against each other. Place things beside each other and see what kinds of tensions arise, or use the model of free verse for this, and you can place lines by each other and see what happens within those lines.

With the prose poem and the sentences, think about Bob Hass's earlier advice to us: "You don't go salt, pepper; you go salt, wound."

- Poets are specialists in salting wounds aren't they? That's what we do. We look back over trauma's and griefs but also pleasures and forms of delicacy - all the different experiences and emotions that humankind undergoes through the course of a life. And in this last session, we're really talking about sentences. We're extending the line, sometimes all the way to the right-hand margin, and so in that way, we are writing free verse, we are writing prose poems. But if we get a hankering for writing a prose poem of longer than a page or so, we're on our way to writing prose and this leads me to invite you to join us for our next move which will be fiction writers talking about writing fiction.

In the meantime, take a stab at these exercises that Mary has assigned. Salt a wound or two. Find some pleasure. Keep writing.