Preface

This volume introduces and provides wide-ranging perspectives on English-language prose poetry, discussing a broad range of examples. Prose poetry is a highly significant literary form flourishing in most English-speaking countries and it deserves sustained critical attention. Because of the contemporary renaissance in prose poetry, we focus to a considerable degree on works written in the last forty or fifty years. To convey a sense of how the form has evolved, however, we also consider a selection of compelling prose poems from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

English-language prose poetry had a checkered history for most of the twentieth century and only fully emerged as a major poetic form in recent decades. We explore prose poetry’s trajectory as a literary form and discuss the emergence of significant key practitioners—some of whose views have strongly influenced the way the form has been received and understood. The views of many scholars and critics of the prose poem are also represented and discussed as we probe the ways in which they have characterized or defined what has often been understood as a contradictory or paradoxical literary form.

Although our focus is on English-language prose poetry, we also provide some examples of prose poetry in translation, mainly to illustrate prose poetry’s development in nineteenth-century France, and to give a brief indication of prose poetry’s literary antecedents. We are particularly interested in what constitutes, and may be said to define, a prose poem, and in the question of how prose poetry differs from (while using many of the same devices as) lineated lyric poetry and poetic prose. We also trace the social, historical, cultural, and aesthetic contexts that have informed prose poetry’s development.

In order to link the history and evolution of prose poetry to contemporary examples of the form, and thereby to contextualize and explicate the practice of contemporary prose poets, we have divided this volume into three parts. Part 1 ("Beginnings," chapters 1 to 3) introduces prose poetry and discusses the periods and contexts from which it grew. Chapter 1 focuses on prose poetry’s development in nineteenth-century France and its early reception and subsequent critical views about the form. It defines the prose poem’s main features and discusses the challenge prose poetry presents to established ideas of literary genre. Chapters 2 and 3 explore specific historical contexts for understanding prose poetry’s development—its relationship to the Romantic fragment in England and Germany, the
way fragmentariness is a defining feature of the form, and the connection of many of prose poetry’s characteristically diverse rhythms to the urban centers in which it developed. This includes a consideration of both the rhythms of perambulation and—in terms of recent work—prose poetry’s suitability for the articulation of postmodern experience.

Part 2 (“Against Convention,” chapters 4 to 6) provides different perspectives on the ways in which prose poetry challenges or defies traditional literary assumptions or expresses itself in unconventional ways. Prose poetry may not always be subversive but, as chapter 4 demonstrates, it does not conform to the expectations associated with either conventional, lineated lyric poetry or conventional narrative prose. Importantly, prose poetry is an open form that rarely exhibits the kinds of formal closure associated with the lineated lyric, even in its free verse manifestations. Chapter 5 considers the American neo-surreal as an influential strand of prose poetry, adapting ideas that originated with the surrealists to challenge assumptions about how the world should be understood, and prose-poetic narratives ought to be read. Prose poetry’s distortion of space and time is the focus of chapter 6, which explores the effects created by prose poetry’s simultaneously condensed and onrushing language.

Part 3 (“Methods and Contexts,” chapters 7 to 10) examines how individual prose poems employ particular literary techniques and devices to achieve characteristic effects, and highlights two of the important and particular contexts that strongly influence contemporary practitioners. The use of visual imagery remains a hallmark of prose poetry as the twenty-first century unfolds, and chapter 7 examines how such imagery relates to evocations of memory, and the continuing connection of some of prose poetry’s effects to those generated by photographs and ekphrastic responses to a range of art forms. The use of metonymy and metaphor is another central feature of prose poetry, and chapter 8 discusses the importance of such figurative language to reading and interpreting individual works, allowing an understanding of the ways in which many prose poems simultaneously present a variety of possible (often shifting) interpretations. This chapter also looks at prose poetry’s resonant employment of intertextuality to enrich its content. The final two chapters (9 and 10) focus on specific contexts for, and features evident in, contemporary prose poetry, especially works written by women—including the strong emergence of feminist themes and ideas in recent decades and the influence of online publishing and social media, in which prose poetry has powerfully established its presence.

Prose poetry is an expansive and rapidly developing field with many strands and numerous practitioners. We thank prose poets everywhere for their help and inspiration, and for the many thousands of prose poems that enriched our lives while we undertook research and wrote this book.