

Selection from

***Whatever Shines: Prose Poems* by Kathleen McGookey**

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*Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press since 2001, the Series publishes one to two books annually. It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.*

**Simple Arithmetic**

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I am still imagining the men lined up, the ones I imagine who want me. I'll tell you everything I know: there was a boy, a girl, and a boat. And palm trees, but the mosquitos on the island chased them back to the boat. There was a boy, a girl, and a dog: I still can't get the story straight—magic fruit? straw into gold?—and night's black velvet has arrived. I am glad for my life and the high clear voices of four-year-olds in the Allegan Public Library. I am not the girl in the story—I am the girl whose mouth is mainly shut but who imagines it open. But where are the other boy and girl? Holding hands and walking into the library while a baby falls out of a pile of money with astonishing grace. She's afraid to go beyond the normal bounds of conversation, the simple arithmetic of the heart. An electric blue butterfly darts in front of the car, just beyond reach and the camera's focus. The clocks tick, their greedy faces shine. The money will always fall out of our hands. We will always be slightly out of place, standing behind ourselves, not getting anywhere—no island, no boat, and no one to save us.

## A Fine Evening

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It was a fine evening, we'd say later, a fine evening followed by an even finer morning: a misty sunrise stained the sky pinker by degrees. Light fell on the blue thistle and did not change its nature. A mole followed his star-shaped nose underground, in his private inky sky. Time has never stopped just for me. When the fog lifted, we saw the dew like jewels all over the lawn. Then multiple veils, multiple jewels, and grandmother's ribbon of thought was privately unlaced. We had planned a romp in the park, but she kept saying, "You're on a long vacation; you're certainly far from home," when really *she* was far from home. Her daughter kept trying to straighten things out. Well, why not try to improve things, even a little? She said she had nothing to wear to the picnic, even after we said her suitcase was in the car. In the park, high winds had blown the sunflowers' pale petals away: the bare centers were stark on the stalks, and the stalks had fallen over. The crows in the trees would not stop their rustling, their raucous whispers. When grandmother sat on the blanket, she said, "Do not help me, I am full of tears." We had argued about what kind of candy she'd like. I'd let my morning glories die because I didn't think the weather, such good weather, would last into October.

**Overnight Ferry, Yugoslavia:  
Ljubljana to Split**

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The man on the ship said it would be nice to hold my hand. The unshaven man in the next seat with teenaged kids back home. Yes, that sloppy man said it would be nice, my hand. He said he was famous and had money. He offered me some. I thought, why not throw my saucepan and tortoiseshell eyeglasses into the sea and proclaim myself a duchess? Couldn't it happen? But it wasn't a ship, it was an overnight ferry. The tea was oily and the duchess could not bring herself to take a sip. We passed a loaf and a knife back and forth until I put them away. Marmalade sun shone through a jar on the ship's windowsill; I left the ship to walk the boulevard under the palms. The cars were nothing to be afraid of, but the long afternoon was, so many hours to fill with a map, walking and looking for a room. Even in the museum I heard the ocean and the palms rustling in the sunlight outside the white walls. I'd exchanged my backpack for a small silver key. On the museum grounds, the bushes trimmed into animal shapes almost hid the marble statues rising out of them. The garden seemed wild, overflowing with growth, but the wildness was carefully calculated and the plants did not overgrow the sidewalks. When my nose began to bleed, I had only my two clean hands to stop it.

## Whatever Shines

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At first, you don't turn the antique coin, don't feel the chip in the crystal, the dented armor, you just coo in admiration. You simply close your hand around whatever shines—a gift to keep but never look at, like the luxury of traveling somewhere together in a car. You open your mouth and I kiss it; you are holding something under your tongue. This weekend you said the word *lover* over and over again until it was lost. You wonder what it's like to be the first and last face I'll see in a day, but you left the garden a long time ago. Not any garden, but the garden where we've never been together, the garden where a father twirls his daughter in a circle in the lake. She wears a red bathing suit and throws handfuls of water in the air just to see the shapes it will take. Her front teeth are gone. A yellow tiger lily opens while a woman on the shore smiles sweetly and waves to the camera. What if nothing remained but the motion of her hand to her chin or her cheek? She removes her white hat and combs her hair. It shines like the gold domes of universities. You know her. She waves to the man and the child out in the water, and to you. The water is rising up to join her, but you don't see it. You are writing our names in the sand.