

GRAY LODGE ---

Every afternoon I close the door to my room and lie down. For a while I will look at my hands. Even though they are my hands, they are beautiful and I am trying to work that out. When it is quiet enough I ask my wife to look at me. She is dead, but what does that mean. It is new for both of us, and hard, but I am not afraid of work. If there are birds in the yard we begin there, the old way. Every bird counts for something, we believe, like the camera giving you a picture of light, or happiness. Once at Gray Lodge we watched a thousand snow geese rise off the water. And when one lifts up, they all lift up. It is plain that geese love each other. And still, in my room, I lock my thumbs together to make a goose, to make a goose cry. Sometimes I wish I were stronger. Then I could say, "It's not raining, by God, and I have these houses to build." And then the world, the world would fall in place like the carpenter's trilogy. Every twenty-four inches another joist, nailed, on center. But no. In here it is quiet. So quiet we don't need to see each other to know. When you live like that there are no houses. Birds come inside. They fly right through you.

*From: If It Weren't for Trees by Tom Crawford
Lynx House Press, Berkeley, CA 1977*

Kathleen McGookey

WHY I WRITE PROSE POEMS

It started by accident. While I was finishing my MFA, I had a demanding full-time job, not a teaching assistantship, that left me little time or energy to write. So, out of desperation, I got up at 6 a.m. and wrote three pages as fast as I could. This usually took half an hour. Then I closed my notebook, showered, ate breakfast, and went to my job. After several days, I'd go through the notebook and highlight anything that still interested me: images, word combinations, sentences, bits of narrative. These I'd copy onto a clean page, writing from margin to margin. Sometimes while I was copying, I added new material. I don't know why I didn't use line breaks. Maybe because I took fragments from a page that had margins. The question of line breaks never occurred to me; maybe I suppressed it because I didn't think I had time to consider it. But there was something satisfying about producing a solid block of text, and above all, I was happy writing.

I had heard of prose poems before I started writing this way, but I wasn't setting out to write them. I was trying to find my way to some language or subject matter that I feared my internal editor would shut down if I paused to think about what I was writing.

Because I was enrolled in a poetry workshop, I handed in my prose poems. I am naturally shy, so just being in a workshop was a stretch. And

Kathleen McGookey's poems, prose poems, and translations have appeared in over 40 journals and 10 anthologies including *The Antioch Review*, *Boston Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Epoch*, *Field*, *Indiana Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, *Quarterly West*, *Seneca Review*, *West Branch*, and *Willow Springs*. Her book, *Whatever Shines* (2001) is available from White Pine Press. She lives in Middleville, Michigan with her husband and her two young children.

a prose poem pretty much announced itself as different as soon as you looked at it. This is what some classmates said when they saw my prose poems:

I don't know what to say because I don't know how to talk about prose poems.

This poem looks like a coffin.

Just what is a prose poem?

This would be even more powerful in verse.

People usually got stuck on how a prose poem looked. Maybe I would have, too, if I hadn't been writing them. Still, I felt a little annoyed. Of course, the discussion would eventually move beyond this. And my professor would often write on my prose poems, *I like this*. Plenty of people had helpful and interesting things to say about my prose poems. But those initial comments got under my skin. I've never particularly felt like an underdog or set out to write something experimental or subversive for its own sake. I had figured out a way to keep writing when I feared I would stop. So I kept at it. One of my theories at the time was that if you do something long enough, you are bound to get better.

Luckily, my instructors helped by telling me who to read: Russell Edson (who I had read once as an undergraduate), Killarney Clary, Charles Simic, Gary Young. These are still some of my favorite writers. And of course, reading helped clear the way, showed me examples, and helped me figure things out. I've had two breakthrough moments in writing prose poems, which will probably sound very insignificant. But here they are. Reading Clary's work helped me figure out that I could break a prose poem into paragraphs to pace it, sort of like how stanzas pace a poem in verse. Without reading Clary, I don't know how long it would have taken me to realize this. The second breakthrough moment happened only a few years ago, when my prose poems got shorter and more narrative, and my instructor Sharon Bryan suggested I use wider margins. Now I'm writing much smaller paragraphs. Simply changing the margins transformed my shorter prose poems in a magical way.

Even though I eventually quit my demanding job, stopped my three-pages-a-day routine, and finished my MFA, I kept on writing prose

poems. There's something about the form that I just love. For starters, I love that the prose poem invites the reader in. Readers are surrounded by prose every day: newspapers, recipes, instruction manuals, *The Polar Express*. These are all made of paragraphs, which generally don't intimidate. But just looking at a poem can make a reader wary. So the prose poem looks unassuming. Kind of regular. A reader could pick up one of my prose poems and not realize she should be on guard. By the time she realizes it isn't an interview with Princess Fergie in *The Ladies' Home Journal*, I hope she's hooked. Or at least interested enough to keep on reading.

I like to play with sounds and repetition and toy with sentence structures, and tell a story through a string of images. For a while, I liked to tell a story and leave parts out. Could I do this in a poem in verse? Probably. But what's interesting and fun about doing this in a prose poem is that the form—the paragraph—implies I am going to tell a story, deliver information, and then I don't tell the whole thing. I liked creating a disjointed feeling and using the prose poem's form to amplify that feeling of disconnection.

What I love most about the prose poem is what the sentence can do when it stands on its own as a unit of rhythm. I probably sounded geeky when I used to tell my students that I love playing with sentences. But I do. I like putting long complex sentences next to short ones. I like using fragments and exclamations and questions and one-word sentences. I like to use repetition of words, phrases, and sentence structures to create music in my prose poems. This I couldn't do in the same way in verse because line breaks would interrupt the music of the prose rhythms.

And finally, I love its small, unassuming size. My prose poems tend to be about two hundred words or less and I love reading prose poems about that size. I love the little magazine *paragraph*, which published untitled paragraphs; I love the magazine *Quick Fiction*; I love the smaller size of Simic's book *The World Doesn't End*. Right now, I still don't have time or energy to write. I'm home with my one-year-old and four-year-old all day, every day, which turns out to be a much more demanding job than the one I had when I was working on my MFA. Now I work

twelve-hour days most of the time, and most weekends, too. So it's even harder to find time to read or write, but a small paragraph? That I can certainly write.

POEMS

October Again,

and the maple's leaves turn fire-red, starting with a single branch. My garden's tangled with mildewed vines. No frost yet. My wristwatch ticks. You never meant to hurt me by dying. The neighbor's dog, mistakenly let out of the house, vanishes. My son learns the alphabet, the sounds the letters make. Ducks fall from the sky, bleeding, same as every year. The tall grasses, swaying in the window by the door, catch my eye and make me think someone has come. When I answer my son, *Yes, everyone dies*, he replies, *Not us*.

Wish

I demanded, when available, seven to eight theories of sleep, including the whereabouts of our dreamselves during waking hours: twice in the night I've fallen for the touch that lingered, the luscious kiss on my bare shoulder. I couldn't help dreaming it. Such a pretty story: in love like stuck in the mud. The weather inside my head got better when couples sat on green park benches in the rose garden. But the names were wrong. They didn't know a rose was no talisman. My wish was short—a blue mitten no larger than a thumb, no larger than a dime, a wish so small. And it rose into the air.