

Selection from

The Rusted City
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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.

The Oldest Sister Smashes Cans

on the sidewalk with her spindly boyfriend. They crunch them beneath their feet, dancing to the clatter of aluminum crumpling. Each can lets out a wheeze as it folds into itself, a burst of breath that whooshes the rust-laced pollen on the ground around it away, clearing a spot of pavement. Soon a long stretch of sidewalk is dotted with flattened cans, glinting silver among the red.

The smallest sister has been watching, counting the cans dead. She spots one yet half-crushed. "Here," she says to the oldest sister, and points to the can at her feet. "This one's still living."

"You do it," the oldest sister says.

So the smallest sister lifts her left foot, sees the metal shell turn dull in her shadow, and steps on it, quick. The top tab snaps off and laughter flings into the air with a ping. The smallest sister picks the tab up and shoves it in her pocket like a dime, as the oldest sister's boyfriend unravels with laughter, draping the scene: laughter cast across the sidewalk, laughter lying in strings, laughter strewn like garlands over crowds of crushed aluminum.

The Smallest Sister Meets the Favorite Father

and he is perfect. He is all clanging and steam. He is in the kitchen, sorting through pipes beneath the sink. She follows him out to the heat-wilted yard, where he solders his feet to the soil with guilt.

“I’m going to stay this time,” he says to himself, not sure yet how to speak the language of daughters. The smallest sister reaches down and wipes the red dust from his work boot. She studies the way it settles into the grooves on her fingertip. It looks like a solar system, a red ringed universe—or a wound, glowing orange, seething. “My favorite,” she says.

The Smallest Sister Spots an Iris

she must have. This one is still blue, a new late bloom, not yet clothed in red. Every flower in the scrap garden is red—bluebells, lilacs, daffodils, violets—except this iris.

She reaches for it, sliding her arm between two sword-leaves, and grasps its stem, stiff in her hand. She pulls until the stem begins to split like a cable, shedding wiry fibers. Stubborn in its roots, the iris doesn't give. So she digs a sliver of pig iron from the soil, tiny but sharp enough. Holding the frayed stem in one hand, she presses the iron shard against it and cuts the iris loose.

Red dust has already begun to collect in its center like an idea. A bright red heart has formed on the head of the yellow pistil, pumping her through with dread.

The Smallest Sister Finds

an opening in the burnt amusement park—a door beneath the iron letters DOR, belly of ADORE, the name of the abandoned ballroom, a sign left open-ended. At her ankles, smoke still snakes through the snow. She sucks her jujube of fear, tasting the prick in her chest, a bite on the back of the heart, a rap at her shuttered throat's window. The door swells and splinters blister from the wood, offering themselves. The mottled lock sighs and sucks in a swath of air, clearing the fresh ash in its hollow to expose a bright tongue of magenta paint on the metal. The smallest sister taps the clear knob and it seems to click on, light rushing in to fill the glass facets. Like a mouth, her hand takes the knob wholly into itself, closes, and opens. She sees how, like lips, the door and its frame must always part.