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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

when gertrude married alice

POEMS BY EVE ROBILLARD

EVE ROBILLARD's great-grandfather (seven times removed) was sent from an orphanage in Paris to Canada during the reign of Louis XIV; thus her interest in all things French.

Her poetry chapbook *everything happens twice* was published by Madison's Fireweed Press; her work also has appeared in *Monserrat Review*, *Madison Review*, *Wisconsin Poets at the Elvehjem*, Chicago's *Midway Review*, *Great River Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, *A Room of One's Own Anthology*, *Wisconsin Academy Review*, and other publications. A former writing teacher at UW-Green Bay, Eve writes for both adults and children. She lives in Madison and is employed as a Children's Librarian at Middleton Public Library.

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A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

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Poems by
EVE ROBILLARD



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For Michael,
who travels with me

“ . . . and in the middle of the water was a river.
It can happen like that.”

Gertrude Stein

Jet Lag

He flies over the ocean to see his girl, his Sorbonne
girl, his ginger-skinned girl waiting for him in the City

of Light. Everywhere river and almost-spring gardens,
everywhere bridges and rainy statues. Streets going

nowhere, streets going on all night. I love you my mona
my lisa, my cabbage, my gargoyle, Degas' little dancer

in dawn's ragged gown. But on the third day she
picks up her books, tells him she needs to study:

she *adores* this town, she's not coming home in May, she's
going to stay all summer. Lowers her morning-calm eyes.

He's all right in the cab, all right on the plane droning
him home in only three hours American—key in his lock now

his tick-tock apartment, shiver his shadow, his need
to sleep. Then with a tiredness washing over and

over him and through his raveling bones
he begins to know.

*Miss Ivy Goes to Paris & Stands in Front of David's
"Coronation of Napoleon"*

This certainly is a very large painting, Miss Ivy thinks.
As big as my apartment. Just to make sure, she begins
to pace it off. *Yes*. If this were lying on her floor

the wide-eyed clergy—all cloak and chasuble and *crostiers*—
would be assembled in front of her bookshelves; the Pope
(not all that old, not bad-looking) would be sitting

on her bed! Napoleon himself, crown in hand,
stands just where she performs her morning yoga;
the crucifix dead center could be the rabbit ears

on her TV; and Josephine, bowing so graciously
before us, is beginning to resemble her kitchen table,
draped today in ermine and velvet. And finally,

Miss Ivy notes, those plumed generals, their exquisite
wives—roses in her window box, clever heads still
blossoming on fine, unaristocratic shoulders.

Louis XIV Gets Out of Bed

Some of them have stayed up all night.
Some are still drunk and are quietly removed.

The others stand hushed & expectant behind
the balustrade, waiting to see their King

blink, stir, rise with the seventeenth-century
sun. They are the courtesans, applauding

each step of the spectacle—the priest anointing
the royal forehead, the *barbier* busy with lather

and blade, the page guiding his feet into a pair
of gilded slippers. Two more bearing the enormous

wig; another to escort him behind a tapestried
screen. *Arpeggio* of piss, thunder of fart; *vive*

le Roi—breakfast is served in the Apollo Salon.
My great-great-great-great-great-great-

grandfather, an orphan working in a gunpowder
factory just across the river, will not be joining them.

Searching for You on the Pont Neuf

Surely, despite the centuries, something
of you remains; surely if I come every day

to this ancient bridge, I will find you—a boy
adrift in a city, a boy with my father's eyes.

. . . Only the fiddler's nimble tune;
only a woman feeding the pigeons;

over our heads, the old, slow song
of the bells.

Proust's Bedroom at the Musée Carnavalet

For the longest time I imagined it red—
scarlet and crimson, velvet and satin—the drapes,
the canopied bed heavy with dust, with memories,

with unfulfilled desire—the kiss withheld,
footsteps dying away on the stairs, the sound
of a carriage passing by in the night. And thick

with books—uncertain stacks of them, building
and spilling; pages marked with the random object—
a pair of opera tickets, a photograph, a glove, a bit

of orchid that once lay between Odette's lovely breasts.
Instead I find a French-blue coverlet over a narrow bed,
pillows rolled and neatly tucked, elegant striped wallpaper,

curtains airy and light. The better to let him breathe,
to let in that odd, melancholy boy, the boy who could not
sleep without his mother's touch. The scent of roses

from his grandmother's untidy garden, the *madeleine*
beside the cup of tea, the tiny Chinese papers floating
in the tea; blossoming, telling their story.

*After Her Father's Slow, Terrible Death Virginia Woolf
Travels to Florence, then Paris Where She Visits the Home
of the Sculptor Auguste Rodin*

I imagine her in flowery hat and linen dress, moving
thoughtfully through his studio. The old wooden floors
crying out beneath her feet, the elusive French tongue

bewildering her ear. And the statues! A few tranquil
faces recalling her mother, the dear, lost days. But then
row upon row a tangle, a writhing, an orgy of torsos,

buttocks, calves struggling to free themselves from
stone. A man's face lost between a woman's breasts.
And here in *The Kiss* the enormous toes curled with

desire, the woman in his arms surrendering, limp. Virginia
fleeing the creaking, wood-wormed house, the frantic
summer garden, hurrying back to the oven of her room,

pulling the curtains, wrapping herself in shadow.
All that summer she is mad—King Edward whispering
obscurities in her ear, the birds singing to her in Greek.

March, 1941

Virginia is taking a walk today
through the fields to the river,

stones in her pocket, a blue
envelope for Leonard waiting

for him on the mantle. *I want
you to know you have given me*

every happiness. All
she had wanted was for people

to stop leaving her. (The river's
terrible embrace.) For the words

to keep coming, and to make sense.
(Wild, incoherent with Spring.)

And yes, to be able to sleep.

Photographer Unknown

He or she has captured it all: Sylvia Beach—slender,
intense, in front of Shakespeare & Company, along with

her hero, the great James Joyce. Joyce self-assured,
dapper, with trilby hat and ash-plant walking stick—

the only bit of Ireland I have left. Sylvia, minister's
daughter, worshipper of the written word, who publishes

the book no English-speaking country dares to touch,
who endures the endless, illegible, and very expensive

corrections, who smuggles *Ulysses* past the American
censors, who lends him money—for lunch, for taxicabs,

to pay his rent, to feed his wife and children. And when
he is famous and splendid with royalties, he will not think

to repay her. But all this is far off—today she stands
with him on a quiet Parisian street, and the light

in her face, her thick, cropped hair seems
to come, not from the sun, but from him.

Lovely June Day, 1940

(Adapted from the Memoirs of Sylvia Beach)

Sunny, with blue skies.
Only 25,000 people left in Paris.

Adrienne and I on the boulevard,
watching, through our tears,

refugees moving through the city—
cattle-drawn carts heavy with household goods, children,

old people and sick, pregnant women, women
with babies, poultry in coops, dogs and cats. Sometimes

they stop at the Luxembourg Gardens
to let the cows graze. Behind them the Germans,

the men and the machines all a cold gray,
and they move to a steady, deafening roar.

Shakespeare & Company Vanishes

(Adapted from the Memoirs of Sylvia Beach)

Then he came in, speaking perfect English.
That copy of *Finnegan's Wake* in the window—
I will have it, please.

It's not for sale.
Why not.
It's the last one I have. Out

he strode, trembling
with rage. *My men will be coming*
to confiscate your goods. We carried

the books upstairs, and all the furniture.
I had a carpenter take down the shelves
and someone painted out the name Shakespeare

& Company. The Germans never
found the shop, though eventually
they did find the proprietor.

when gertrude married alice

when gertrude
married alice

sturdy gertrude
slender alice they lived

among the paintings
that no one else

would buy a picasso
in the parlor

a picasso
in the hall and *woman*

with the hat done by one
henri matisse when gertrude

married alice
slender alice

like a flower sturdy gertrude
with her laugh *boom* now gertrude's

laughing *boom boom* her knee
is slapping while alice who is lovely

very lovely
very lovely

makes a delicate sandwich
with her delicate hand

for the parties for the people who are going
to be famous rich and very famous very soon

and when the party's over
in the morning of the dawning

on the gray and rainy left bank of the lovely
river seine sturdy gertrude slender alice

flyingflying up the stairs
past the paintings

in the hallway
past the woman

with the hat and they find
a little flower and they find

a little flower
hour after hour
in their curious

room nibble alice scribble gertrude
scribble gertrude nibble alice and everywhere

the paintings
and the garden

of their bed

gertrude gets a haircut

we are told it grew
& spilled
in the greatest
imaginable
profusion

& as one can see
from the early
photos she's ill at ease
beneath the hat

just as she must have been
with the convention of corset
& petticoat until one day

(when lindbergh was planning
his flight & gershwin writing
an american in paris)

she went with alice
into the garden (alice with scissors
in the pocket of her apron)
and then

farewell
heavy & thick
farewell
unruly abundant

au revoir foolish
useless
beautiful

let the birds take it
to build their nests

let watch fobs be made from it let

picasso fashion brushes
to paint his important

pictures I
am

done

with

you

Of Course

We'd begin in a bookstore, somewhere
between Kandinsky and Klée, I asked

if Van Gogh was in V or in G, and then
someone said *coffee*? and there we were

at a table, cups and saucers chattering
politely and me trying not to stare at

your hands. It had been raining,
and now as we walked rain clung

to the leaves before falling, each drop
unhurried, its own slow event. When

you asked *Can I give you a call* I reached
into my pocket and pulled out the bookmark

I'd found that morning on my way to the store—
The Kiss, by Klimt, and wrote down my number.

The Five-Thousand Dollar Roll-Top Desk

Once a week I pay it a visit—the dealer
aware I'm not here to buy. I just want

to sit in its oaken glow, the way one sits
in a house of worship, a library, a splendid

theatre. Oh, the useless things I could keep
in these tiny dovetailed drawers—buttons, old

post cards, ribbons I will never wear. An army
could camp on the plains of its surface; terrible

wars might be conducted here. A village
could spring up, complete with miniature

Bruegel-esque inhabitants. Those larger
drawers, it seems to me, are full of un-penned

novels—the skies of one's childhood, dark lakes, ships
sailing off the edge of the earth. To lower its great,

wooden top is to bring down some final
curtain—Anna Karenina stepping onto the tracks,

Bogart alone on a rainy runway; the heroine
of a Puccini opera dead or dying—the tenor rushing in

from offstage—too late, always too late;
his voice filled with longing and loss.

Lesson, with Questions

You (in very good English)
are explaining to me

how Matisse did not
paint *things*—he painted

the relationship
between them. You

point out
to me

the geranium in its pot
the goldfish in its bowl

(your hands quick now, light—as if you
were holding your own invisible brush)

and the way apples on a table
mirror the woman's breasts then

I say to you (in my very bad
French) I like this one, I like

how the woman stands at the window
the book lying open like that

the sky so wide
so impossibly blue.

If You Come

I will meet you in Chicago, I will dream up
a lie, I will tell them my parakeet has passed away.
I will wait for you near the two bronze *lions*

in front of the museum, I will show you everything—
your beloved Matisse. Picasso. Cezanne. Chagall's blue
windows, telling their immigrant story; and beneath them

the courtyard—the happy, yellow umbrellas, people
at the tables, talking and laughing, like those you see
every day on the boulevards. Cassatt. And Whistler—

expatriates both. We keep them downstairs, with the
Americans—and if you do not agree with this, sir,
then perhaps we'll have to sit down under those yellow

umbrellas to discuss this, *non*? I was eight days
in your country, *m'sieur*, and no one saw me but you
I will be there if you come.

Notes on the Life of Sylvia Beach (1887–1962)

American-born Sylvia Beach moved to Paris in 1917, and two years later—with the guidance and support of her dear French friend, Adrienne Monnier (proprietress of La Maison des Amis des Libres)—opened a bookstore for English-speaking Parisians. Shakespeare & Company soon became the meeting place for many expatriate writers and artists, including Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, André Gide, and Paul Valéry.

In 1922 Beach published, under her imprint, James Joyce's highly controversial novel, *Ulysses*, outlawed as obscene in England and the United States.

The Nazis closed her bookstore in 1941, and Beach was briefly interned by the Germans in 1943. She published her memoirs in 1959 in a book entitled *Shakespeare and Company*. The Shakespeare & Company bookstore still stands today on a quiet Left Bank street in Paris—but not in its original location.



when gertrude married alice

by Eve Robillard

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