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POEMS BY KATHARINE WHITCOMB



ISBN 1-893311-05-8





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PARALLEL PRESS



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## Saints Of South Dakota

From smoke-soaked hotel rooms, from the plastic cutlery bins  
at Hardee's, hosannas are floating up. This is the truth

from the edge of the expanse, South Dakota spreading  
like a prayer shawl to the mountains. The parking lots are festive,

slotted and shouldered and familied with mud-lacquered pickups.  
There is a road sign between Sioux Falls and Sioux City

that simply says T-E-A. The name of a town.

I got a flat near there once a long time ago and caught a ride

from a cowboy farmer to the next exit. The light golden  
in the summer and humming. I didn't come to harm. I sat

on a hump of concrete outside the Amoco station while a man  
named Butch put a new tire on the Pontiac. The syrupy light

bathing the afternoon, the clotheslines and gravel driveways.  
If this sounds like some longing to live with Butch

in a white farmhouse in Tea, South Dakota, it might be. To live  
here would be like sleeping on the floor of the ocean,

lolling in the troughs of the sea. Everything foreign sweeping by  
all battered and exhausted, skittering on its way

to somewhere else. O praise the long straight road  
that cuts and carries away, praise everything that flies flushed

from the ditch. I tell you this feeling of holiness is what moves  
the snakehandler to lift his first snake, hoisting it up

writhing amid the moans of true believers. You can get  
desperate for anything rapturous, disaster or bliss. Maybe

reach the point where dying might be just another way  
to change your life, poised here on the lip of something vast.

## How I Want It

Before I'm awake to see the lamp posts kill their lights,  
some street cleaners will lean blue cotton elbows  
on the zinc bar, laugh, throw back shots of espresso  
and apple brandy. I can't bear for them to straighten up,  
shuffle off, bark good-byes to each other

in the street. Why not let them linger?  
Their lips this frigid morning are rose-colored, chapped,  
the inside of their mouths tastes like honey and smoke.  
As I lean down to rinse the shampoo out of my hair,  
I want the museum janitor across town to sing

lungfulls of Algerian radio music while he glides  
his wide mop down the Baroque galleries, yellow Walkman  
clipped to his belt. He is thinking of his rosebushes.  
By this time ashtrays fill up in another cafe,  
chairs scraping back urgently, but who cares?

Let all the tardy absent lovers roll over  
in their beds, smiling at their clocks. All day  
I want to wear a long black coat on the subway  
while the stranger next to me reads  
*Remembrance Of Things Past* aloud, want to walk

from the train past the park where the pigeons sleep  
on the stone conqueror's shoulders, past  
the river that slides boats down her middle.  
Let your package be waiting when I unlock my door,  
two books in brown paper, your note inside one flap

that says *It feels like the entire world is buried  
in my heart. I stay inside and try to sleep. God bless  
and love.* Let me remember to take off my coat and wash  
my face, the street cleaners happily at their dinners,  
the janitor tending his garden in the dusk.



Let me lean against the window  
while I chew the bread I brought home. Sometimes  
the streetlights shrug on while I'm watching.

Sometimes I'm too late. Let lover go to  
lover, let me write you a letter on my bread.

## Who Do You Love?

Rockers. Men

who play guitar. Jimi, Stevie Ray. Pete.

Who do you love? On the Ides of March

in 1982 I left my contacts drifting in a shot glass

full of water in my future husband's dorm room.

Three months later I'm talking him off bad acid,

the Colorado forest rolling down the mountain

towards him. I held his shivering ribs to the carpet

retelling Beowulf as well as I could remember,

him calming to my voice, eyes never leaving my face.

Our wedding in '85 annoyed both families, Rickie Lee

Jones, not a church in sight. We drove off laughing,

radio thudding behind the glass. I bought him a Guild

guitar for his thirty-third birthday, Cesar Rosas

has one, and Bob Weir. He said I read

his mind, he'd never told me that was the kind

he wanted. Who do you love? I want to tell you

about a gorgeous white dog I talk to nearly

every afternoon as I'm cooling down the last leg

of my run. Nobody from the house ever plays

with her, no kids climb the swing set. She's so

happy when people walk by. The chain link's high

enough I can't reach over, but she leans her soft

body flush to the metal wire so I can stroke

her with my fingers. Who do you love? Listen.

I'm afraid she'll be hurt, something sharp

thrust at her. I don't want her to trust just

anyone, and she might.

## Provence

White horses shamble the reeds, trailing  
tangled manes. Floating islands of grass for pasture,  
  
each mouthful a salt memory. This swamp plain  
grows loud with flocks of flamingos  
  
who ride African flyways to nest in raucous congregations.  
Barefoot pilgrims from Lourdes and Istanbul limp  
  
down the unbending road through sodden fields,  
Camargue. Eyes fixed southward on the holy shrine,  
  
Ste.s-Maries-de-Mer, where Mary, mother of James,  
Lazarus and Mary Magdalene all blew to shore  
  
in a boat with no sail. A gypsy woman points  
to her palm in the windy square by the boules court.  
  
What will she tell me for these hard heavy coins,  
for my leather shoes and bag of blue plums?

## The Grievous Angel

I was punching touch-tones on a broken pay phone  
at Pacific and Grant when traffic quit. Sunday in Chinatown  
that doesn't happen unless someone has died.

A procession: old men marching in uniform, horn players,

then the black Cadillac convertible. Two white gloved mourners  
propping up a portrait of an uncle or a brother.

To hold a painting so huge each needed both hands,  
and tears dripped unwiped on their best suits.

I let the receiver hang. Too many zones between us.

Leaned back against the duck butcher's window  
until all the dark cars had passed, thinking of Gram Parsons'  
friends who stole his body from his family, cremated him

the way he asked and strewed his ash over Cap Rock.

Each body opens up by choice to other bodies,  
in colder cities, and others open up to it.

If I go first, don't leave me to my people.

## At Berryman's Grave

Somebody famous read one of his poems on the radio today, his birthday. You'd recognize it if you heard it, the one about not letting on that life is boring. What a time

of year to be born. Outside the crabapple tree is losing its best purple leaves and nothing can touch the winy dance they do with the gold maples. Time's up. That's a fact.

Even so, some persistent plants carry on like passengers aboard the Titanic, the exploding, claw-blossomed nasturtium, catnip and sage bloomed out and flopped in heavy profusion.

Let it come. Harvest seems finally embarrassed by her own abundance. Like Berryman she tries her death on a hundred times. Outside now the sky is clear, night

of first frost, the blade already teething the air. If you forget the plants, they will blacken and rot. Trees break their fingers on a hard wall of sky. Was John too far gone

in some back acre of decay? I only know I can't imagine him at eighty, but then neither could he. I think he got tired. I read in a writer's memoir her fantasy after working late

was of being rocked to sleep in the arms of a benevolent giant. I recognized that thought. It was my favorite for a while when I was travelling on the road

too much, but mine was more one of a laying-on of hands in a clean green room, rags on my hot eyes. This longing for sleep is madness, really, a sane person would curl up

on the carpet with a blanket, a sane person would go to bed. Night is falling, but where are our caretakers? And where is John Berryman now? Resurrection Cemetery, Mendota Heights,



Minnesota, *my god*. His gravestone is flush with the lawn.  
The airplanes roar over and bright maples lean down. So many leaves  
I had to kick them off twenty graves before I found him.

I left a rock on his name that I'd carried 40,000 miles, one  
I transferred from company car to company car, for luck. I don't know  
if he needs it. He didn't mean life is boring, he was just sick

of listening to himself. I read him a poem different  
than the one on the radio, different than this. How long  
will the last leaves on the crabapple hang on? Maybe

it wasn't so bad finally out on the railing, he didn't need to  
cut his own throat to bring on dizziness after all.  
He jumped. That's a fact. There are purple leaves with the gold out there  
under the flightpath. There will, of course, be snow.

## Truth Has Two Hands

You would say it's the Andromeda Strain, Charles,  
everyone dead on their patios, veins full of powdered blood,  
but it's only the usual stillness of my neighborhood at dusk.

Every person on your jury lives in tidy houses like these  
with shrubs down the driveways, the families  
of your drunk victims too. You know that. And what can you do

but curse your luck that the boy with your bullet in his neck  
remembered you, that he soberly aimed his finger  
from the witness stand at your face saying no doubt in my mind.

Well, there was doubt in the jury box, nothing made sense  
to me in the stop-time of that occasion, nothing.

I saw your picture in the paper this morning, Charles,

*found guilty* typed under it, right down the page from a story  
on Rwanda about village adults who rounded up orphans  
and clubbed them to death. Those kids hardly making a sound

since they'd known their attackers all their lives. And I thought  
of your Vice Lord brother Freeman, testifying against you,  
and your uncle Keith, the coke addict, who brought the cops

to your apartment. I held out my reasonable doubt  
as long as I could. I reached my hand into that tightening  
circle of your familiars to draw you out to safety, and then

you got on the stand. I read that the dead from Rwanda  
wash down the Kagera River, flushed from the forests  
by the rain. Mutilated bodies pile the shores

of Lake Victoria, and as far as I can see the end of the world  
is here already. The truth has two hands, Charles, one  
to slap me straight, the other to steady my head for the next slap.

I still don't see them coming. I'll never know what really happened  
in that bar doorway. You placed yourself there, your back  
on those cold metal hinges, where the coroner said

only the shooter could be. You said you held the empty shells  
in your hands all the way to your own backyard,  
where you loped out into the snow, tossing them

to the frozen weeds. I'm chasing the flight of those shells  
through the dead village of my mind to the spot  
where the cops found them. Your uncle on the phone

to the precinct wanting nothing more on his record, hoping  
to keep his job at the cannery. You're going down the river  
of their word against yours, Charles, down the river

of this homesick jury. I shared a room during our sequester  
with a blond Fed Ex courier, who looked up from her pillow at me  
and said this makes you afraid when you see a black guy

now doesn't it and I said go to sleep stop thinking so much.  
Sometimes the only water to drink is bitter. And I lay awake  
amazed that aliens haven't destroyed us, a failed experiment.

I never wanted to lose my doubts about you, and you wouldn't  
remember my face, Charles, but it's a lot like these clever blues:  
stricken in judgment and without grace.

## What You Want, Honey

By the time you get a PhD his mother crackles  
over the phone, you'll be so old no one will want  
to hire you. That's what we see around here, they look

for hot young things. She means I'm late, it's too late  
for me. I don't say what I'm thinking—go tell it  
to somebody who cares—I just hang up. When my unborn

child startled me by drifting through a series of dreams  
with a name and a face and tufted blond hair, I stopped  
listening to anyone in the world who was telling me no.

All a dream needs is a name. Sometimes you get fed-up  
with imprecision. When I was seven the phrase “in the meantime”  
sounded so vague and grim I connected it with the dinner

discussions about the marauding skunks in our garbage,  
that indefinite cruel mean time while the skunks  
were here. I didn't know what to call the misery

I left home with either, the thin blanket I slept under  
all these years. There's nothing like finding out  
what you've been missing. I'm sure Camille Claudel would tell

you if she could, or ask my friend Anne about the imaginary baby  
girl named Emily that sleeps between her husband's body and  
her own. I tell her I think my boy's name is Walt. I think

our un-named dreams are stray dogs that follow us home  
and wait, staring at the closed front door with no way  
to summon us, no way out of the wind. Today my friend's brow

furrows in anxiety studying the deli menu, searching  
among the combos and platters for the turkey and gravy thing  
she's had before. The motherly waitress leans over, listening

to her description, says for next time honey, look here.  
Her red nail under the exact line in the menu, honey  
ask for this, so you get what you want.



## Benediction

Goldfish, spewed from the sewer, gills starved  
for oxygen, write hieroglyphs in the muddy creek bottom  
with their tails, write *the Lord bless us*

*and keep us, make his face to shine upon us*, write in praise  
of time and their golden skin. In the world above, a sparrow sings  
his old story under the winter eaves, sings *oh be gracious*

*unto us and give us peace*. Bless my friend who leans  
across the restaurant table and says sometimes we don't know  
when we're suffering. But it's there in the lines on our palms:

the world is a dangerous place, landscapes drift toward us  
threatening burial or exposure, we skid over the freeway, the snow  
spelling messages, twenty-five below, have courage, *lift up*

*your hearts* . . . In the labor camps of Perm, Sakhalin, Yekaterinburg,  
convicts tattoo themselves, each other, with a secret  
alphabet, pricking with dye made from burnt rubber and urine.

Three dots on a woman's hand means thief. An eight-pointed star  
on a kneecap says I bow to no one. The eyes of a housefly  
ink the cheeks of the rapist. The book of skin reads: *we lift them up*

*unto the Lord*, what is left to lift. And now  
I sit with my hands full of stones, warming them, feeling the story  
of crushing, slamming water, the great blue continents ground

together and apart. Blood warm stones sing a million praises  
to our terrible short flame, all we get and never enough,  
the veins in the rock singing *world without end, amen*.

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KATHARINE WHITCOMB lives in Madison, Wisconsin, where she is the 1998–99 Halls Poetry Fellow at the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Creative Writing. She was a Wallace Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford University from 1996–98. Her poetry has earned her a Loft-McKnight Award in Poetry and the Grolier Poetry Prize. Katharine graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota and she holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College. Her poems have appeared in many journals including the *Kenyon Review*, *Pleiades*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

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