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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

CHAPMAN'S  
PACK

POEMS BY JOHN D. NILES

JOHN D. NILES was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and has lived most of his life in the San Francisco Bay area. He joined the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 2001 after teaching for many years at the University of California, Berkeley. He is known for his writings on *Beowulf* and other examples of Old English literature, and he has also undertaken research into traditional singing and storytelling, particularly among the traveling people of Scotland. Although he has published translations of poetry, this is his first collection of original verse.

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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**



# CHAPMAN'S PACK

*Poems by*  
JOHN D. NILES



PARALLEL PRESS · 2003



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ISBN 1-893311-41-4

This chapbook is produced with a tip of the hat to the anonymous Anglo-Saxon poets who composed the literary riddles of the Exeter Book; to Frau Wolle and the many other talented storytellers who took part in the International Congress of Oral Narration held in Guadalajara, Spain, in June 2001, and to the organizers of that conference; and to Anna Remennik and all the other immigrant students who make university teaching in America a more stimulating profession than it would otherwise be. Thanks also go to Ron Wallace for his encouragement, to Carole for her patience and love and for some helpful criticisms, and to the members of the Brightness and Light brigade: Daniel, Mayumi, Margaret, Alan, and Emily.

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FIRST EDITION

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# *Storyteller*

*So the spindle spins,  
so the tale begins.*



1

With a single thread of yarn  
she pulls in a skein of listeners,  
a circle extending as far  
as the first and last person's fingers  
ever to hold your hands on earth.

One crimson thread  
of truth traverses a carpet  
of intricate truth-in-lies.  
One tall gold ship of fact sets sail  
on seven boisterous seas of possibility.

The storyteller's wool  
is plucked by hand  
from a black sheep from the Isla de Sueños  
and a lamb that has never been born.

It is dyed in a tea  
brewed of lichens, oak gall, and brambles.  
Then it is seasoned  
with sex and salt.

It is spun on a wheel  
made of bog oak and birchwood  
cobbled together by imps  
who work by the light of the moon.

It is woven into cloth  
on a midsummer night when hill fires are burning  
and forests harbor the fragrance  
of a passing thunderstorm.

The cloth is sewn  
into a text of many colors.  
It clothes us when we are needy  
and gives us shape and form.

3

She tells of cows  
tumbling head over heels down chimneys,  
of a rooster that lays blue eggs,  
a donkey with two gold teeth.

She tells of grit that knows no limits,  
of an ogre and a clever fool,  
of luck, of pluck, of Old Nick and Lazy Jack  
and a girl with a one-eyed bull.

She is paid with the chink  
of stars that drop to the pavement,  
with the rapt gaze of a child,  
with the news that is brought

by a silver fish  
darting up and down the rivulet  
of wool that twists  
and twists through her busy fingers.



4

Listen to my voice and you will hear  
sea-spray flecking the ribs  
of a coracle rounding Thule,

the wind stroking the branches  
of a tree that grows  
by the well at the world's end.

Look into my eyes and you will see  
skies of Tyrolean beauty  
on a cerulean afternoon.

Now breathe my words and smell the scent  
of tendrils pushing up  
through layers of dank earth,

of dough rising,  
of smoke curing the rafters  
of a cottage in Wales or Sicily

where your great-great-grandmother  
once sat spinning  
and telling familiar tales.

5

What is the distance  
between east and west?

—Easy. It is exactly two arms' length,  
for the east is *here* to my right  
and the west is *there* to my left.

What then is the distance  
between heaven and earth?

—Easy. It is  
no more than a stone's throw  
when an angel misses his mark.

But what then is the distance  
between the truth and a lie?

—Easy. It is barely  
the thickness of a coin,  
two sides of a single story.

All right. But now try this:  
what is the sound  
of one hand clapping?

—Easy. It is the sound  
of an otter turning in deep water,  
of a tree falling in a forest of sighs,  
of the tune that a dead man hears  
when they pipe him into the grave.

6

There is the voice  
of one crying in the wilderness,  
and there is also the hum of the shuttle  
plying its usual path  
while the hearth is glowing as usual  
and the winds are arranging the needles  
of the pine boughs all night long.

7

Yarnspinner, laughterwinner  
memorykeeper, starsweeper  
spellbinder, truthfinder  
sundancer, necromancer.

She draws the wool through her fingers  
with neither hesitation nor remorse,  
long ago having mastered  
the art of letting go.

As long as her voice is heard  
you can hear the whirr  
of worlds spinning and unspinning,  
of seasons going their rounds.

She pulls the wool over your eyes  
so you begin to see.

*Spin, span, spun,  
my tale is done.*



## *Four Riddles*

1

I have seven tongues.  
Each tongue has twenty tips,  
each tip contains the wisdom of an angel.  
Each word I speak will raise you up  
until you see  
the walls of Jerusalem gleaming.

2

I am a field of buff and gold  
across which deer are chasing.  
I am a carpet upon which no feet have walked  
since the beginning of time  
yet birds have left strange tracks on me,  
black marks on a drift of snow.



I pull fish from out the sea,  
     rocks from cold space,  
     blood from out the womb.

I urge lovers to the hill  
     and coax the howl from the wolf's arched throat.

I strip the surf from the sands,  
     unclothe the barnacles  
     and wrap them in salt again.

My sister and I  
     are two acolytes of the air.  
 Before you were, we were,  
 a pair of coins that God tossed high,  
 two lamps he lit to read by,  
 two clocks running in perfect synchrony,  
 two dancers *dos-à-dos*,  
 two boats of gold and silver that were once set adrift  
     down the black river of time  
     dragging a seine of stars.

Changeless, breathless  
     I am never the same for long,  
 now veiled in black, now hung in argent robes.  
 In frozen woods you will see me  
     glazing each twig with light.  
 At harvest time I bulge  
     like a melon on the hill.

Queen of heaven and ocean  
     patron of owls and thieves  
 I am artist, shape-shifter, vagabond.  
 Madmen and sailors take equal delight in me,  
     poets sing my praise.  
 You too have loved me,  
 my broad face and fair eyes:  
     do you not know my name?

I spin a thread so subtle  
     it can catch all the hues of dawn.  
 For the elves I weave small hammocks,  
 for the Riders, reins and bridles,  
 for the gods, little of value  
     but for their wolves, unbreakable cords.

My patience is legendary, like my love  
 of music and mathematics.  
 Perhaps at times you have seen me  
     in midair, sorting dewdrops  
     at midnight, tuning my lyre.  
 When I pluck the strings pizzicato, field mice cock their heads;  
 when the strings hum ceremoniously, the souls of the dead draw near.

I pitch my tent in the crannies  
     of attics and basements,  
 in clumps of horsetails and hounds-tongues,  
 among juniper pearls  
     and in the musk of hollow logs.  
 No one who tries my kisses  
 takes much delight in them.

Although my husbandry is useful  
 I am the housewife's implacable foe.  
 Made huge by the imagination, I am the stuff of nightmares  
     for fools and the mad or ignorant,  
 but treated gingerly, I can be friend  
 to woman, man, and child.

I am architect, geometer,  
   hangman.  
 Can you guess my name?



## *Six Fancies*

## *Firebird*

*In poetry:*

The bird that had been preening its feathers  
outside my window  
all night long—

the one with the topaz eyes  
and the hundred golden wings,  
    each wing arching to enfold me  
    each one with the eye of God  
    unblinking in its midst—

flew on.  
The Madonna among all saints  
turned her stone eyes toward the hills.  
The moon among all stars  
slid toward the blank side of existence  
smiling her moony smile.  
One lily in a field  
trembled, touched by the wind,  
and the wind went away  
saying nothing.  
One hare cocked up an ear  
and went on chewing its blade of grass.

*In prose:*

Woke up as usual.  
Drove the kids to school  
and took the dogs for a walk.

*Late Night at Three Rivers*

Sooner or later one comes back  
to the simplest things:  
pinewood fire  
bread and a friend to break it with  
a forest watched by stars.

*Fire, forest, friend—*  
as you pronounce each word, for a moment you become it.  
And all your scaffoldings of thought,  
your glittering ambitions—

how quickly they become small,  
smaller than the stars' tiny holes of light,  
smaller than a single spark that flies into the darkness,  
until at last they are so small  
they have become  
nothing at  
all.

## *The Princess Speaks*

How can I miss my home  
when I have not been there  
at dawn, as larks burst skyward  
at midday, when doves flutter in the dovecotes  
at dusk, listening to my mother reading,  
watching the pages turn  
while logs hiss in the fire  
and village bells are pealing?

How can I miss you too, my friend  
when we have never met  
at dawn, our lips holding sweet conversation  
at midday, my eyes mirrored in yours  
at dusk, your head cradled in my arms  
as I sing you to sleep?

There is a philosopher  
on a far mountain peak.  
Each night he rides his jaguars around the world.  
Each day he writes the answers to these riddles  
on a wisp of silk  
that he ties to a moth  
and tosses to his boisterous friends the winds  
to bring to my attention.

## *Arachna and Pers*

She was precocious at all her lessons  
but at recess, while boys went slamming into fences  
she would sit by herself  
longing to learn to spin.  
Her favorite number was eight,  
her favorite rhyme “Miss Muffet.”

One Sunday when she was nine  
her uncle Pers took her to Golden Gate Park.  
She loved the carousel  
but mistrusted its glamour,  
the parade of lions and unicorns  
bobbing their brilliant manes.  
“Too heraldic, too *orgueilleux*,”  
she declared in her most grown-up voice.  
Her uncle nodded gravely,  
then took her for ice cream.  
Some nights she would imagine herself  
riding a tarantula  
as if it were a Russian bear,  
holding on tight in the wind  
and bounding toward sherbet mountains.

Later, at boarding school  
she was the despair of ten psychiatrists  
and the suicide of two.  
In the course of her legendary escapes  
she came to know every cave in the Green Mountains.  
Someone once told her that a spider falling on one’s hand  
portended a letter or parcel.  
She would seek out hidden crannies  
and stretch out her arms for days.



At Radcliffe

her beauty was as legendary as her brilliance  
but she aroused nervousness on the part of young men  
who had heard of the fate  
of the spider husband.

She came to prefer dancing solo,  
seeking out clubs in the North End  
and doing her own step, the Crawl.

Perhaps this helps to explain  
why she is content to stay alone, now,  
in a cottage on a friend's estate.  
Each day she is up at dawn, inspecting the grounds  
and taking in their changes:  
here a new silk thread binding a tuft of grasses,  
there a shaft of air  
immaculately wrapped into bundles.

She neither locks her cottage  
nor sweeps it out.  
Each of its rooms has become a nursery  
with cobwebs for curtains.  
Her greenhouse, it is said, is a laboratory  
where she breeds delectable species of flies.

Behind her back, children call her "the Black Widow"  
but to her face they speak with a tense politeness  
until their parents whisk them away.

At Halloween she offers them  
    chocolate spiders  
    cinnamon spiders  
    arachnipops  
and specially wrapped sweets from her greenhouse.

Few people call on her, but Uncle Pers  
drives up each month from the City.  
He still delights in her company,  
the way she spins the threads of thought  
into a refulgent fabric,  
a web of words so deftly woven  
it captures each hue of light.  
They will walk the grounds for hours  
watching fish dart in the shadows  
while vines twist in the sun.

Can you see them?  
They are there now, arm in arm,  
picking their way through the vineyards  
while the skein of their words  
billows about them,  
as if each one had spun a web  
and had caught the other  
and had captured the world as well,  
transforming all things  
into one text, one testament of life.

One day while crossing a stream  
he slipped on a stepping stone.  
One leg tangled another, and all at once  
they both tumbled into the shallows.  
Laughing, they shook themselves off  
like Pinocchio and Pucinella,  
pretending to empty fish from their pockets.  
Then they counted their arms and legs  
to make sure none was lost.  
The sum was eight.  
“Wouldn’t you know it?” he joked.  
“My favorite number, too.”

## *The Place Where Lost Things Go*

There is a place beyond the seven seas  
where everything you have ever lost on earth  
remains  
in a box  
with your name on it,  
a treasure chest  
just the right size to meet your needs.

How can you doubt this?  
It is well known  
that the Vikings, who discerned  
the secrets of many worlds, had a name for the ship  
that carries those chests, those time capsules  
that archive the course of a life by tracing  
all that it leaves behind.

They called it *Naglfar*,  
“the ship of nails.”

Sailors returning from the coast of Labrador  
sometimes catch a glimpse of it  
fitting as the aurora borealis flits  
on a still midwinter night.

*Naglfar* is made entirely of people’s nails, they say—  
dead men’s toenails and fingernails  
that keep on growing beyond the grave.

It is the hugest of all ships.

You have not sailed to Labrador, so what right have you  
to doubt these well known truths?

I have not yet found  
my treasure chest, but I have no doubt  
my roller skates are there,  
the ones I gloried in when I was six.  
I will also find

my tonsils  
a bull whip  
a Bible that my father thought I threw away  
a pair of bellbottom trousers  
a bra with sentimental value  
two socks that eloped from my house one day  
a half-finished bottle of vodka  
my errant manx cat Jessie  
a hundred songs I have forgotten  
a hundred friends that I once had.

I like to think  
my mother and father will be there,  
manning the decks alongside the rest of the family  
from St. Louis and New York  
generations and generations past.  
You too will be there, *mia amiga*  
singing shanties as you hoist the sails,  
idling the day away in talk with the cook or master  
while each night you stand at the railing  
keeping watch for me,  
your skin luminescent  
in the flowing stars and wind.

Some day I will reclaim those treasures,  
all the crazy bric-a-brac  
of a season spent on earth.  
I will assume my place on that ghost ship  
peg leg, beard, and all.  
The day will come when the real world—  
my lifelong favorite mistress, whose infidelities  
I have always forgiven  
in light of her seductive charms—

the real world, as I say,  
will turn aside  
just for an instant, will release my hand  
just for a moment, distracted by some novelty,  
and when she turns back  
I will have walked up an unfamiliar street,  
always the vagabond,  
and I too will be lost.

## *The Ark*

It was not the enormous labors that they minded  
all that logging and joinery  
nor was it the bad bad weather  
for that too came to an end.

No one resented the endless mouths to feed,  
the problem of herding bugs.  
No, what they hated was  
the day the dove returned with its green flame,

the *arc-en-ciel* displaying itself  
triumphant in excelsis,  
a garish sign of  
God's grandeur and forgiveness,

of the land making plans to heave up its bulk again  
of the whole damn thing starting over,  
when what they wanted was just  
the ark and the waves

no schemes no crucifixions  
just the mooing and purring and bleating  
no sin no forgiveness  
just dolphins plunging

through seas and magical seas.





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by John D. Niles

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