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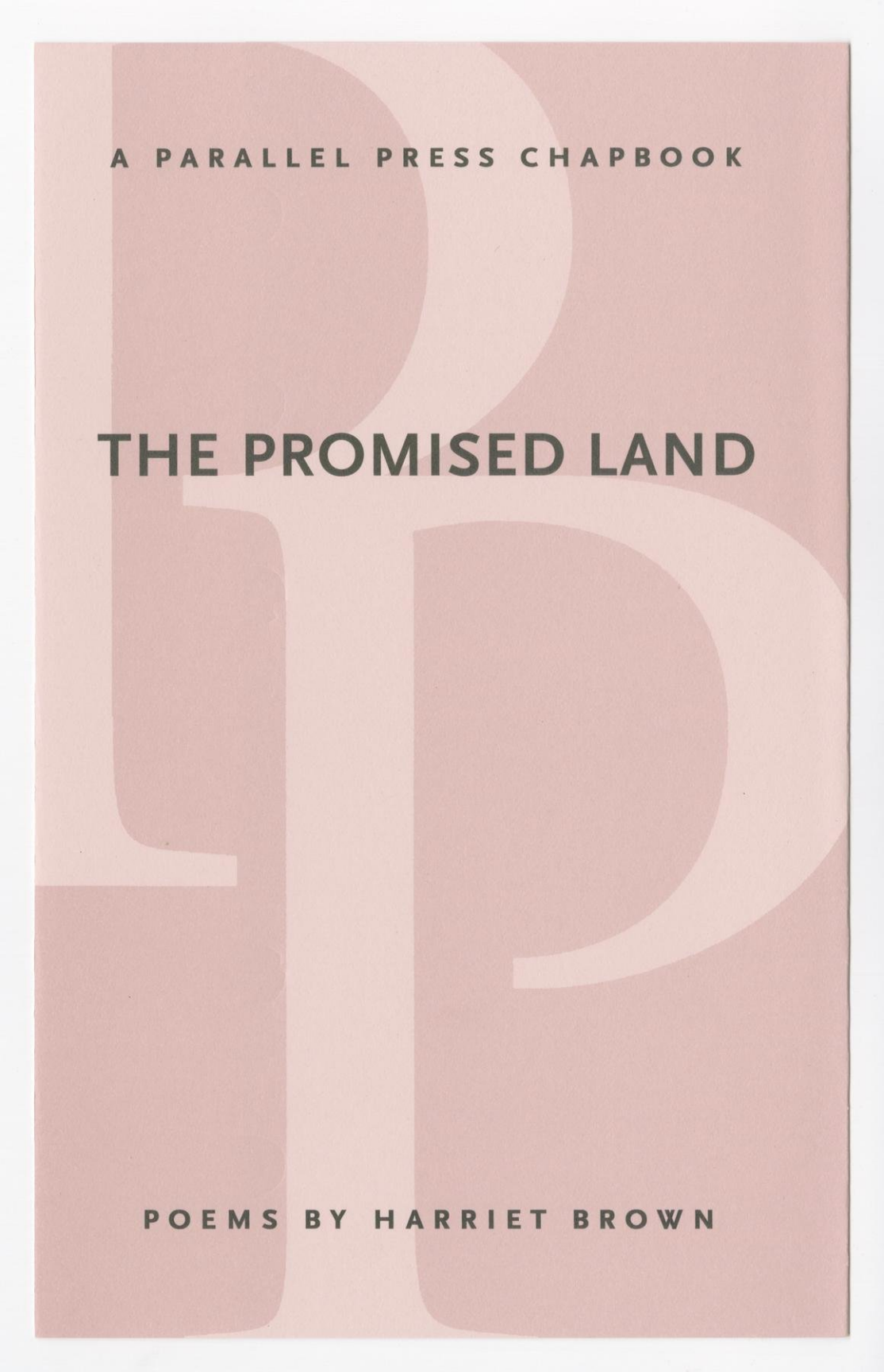
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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

THE PROMISED LAND

POEMS BY HARRIET BROWN

HARRIET BROWN grew up in New Jersey and lived for many years in New York City. She's been writing poetry since she was twelve. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and other literary magazines, and have won various awards, including Grand Prize in the *Atlanta Review's* International Poetry Competition. She's been a finalist in the *Discovery/The Nation* poetry contest, and has been awarded a New York State CAPS grant, a fellowship to the Vermont Studio Center, and numerous fellowships to Yaddo. She earned an M.F.A. from Brooklyn College in 1982. Brown is the editor of *Wisconsin Trails* magazine and the author of several nonfiction books, including *Madison Walks* (Jones Books, 2003) and *The Good-bye Window: A Year in the Life of a Day-Care Center* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998). She lives in Madison with her husband and two daughters.

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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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HARRIET BROWN



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I'm grateful to the editors of the following magazines and anthologies, where some of these poems have appeared—*Atlanta Review*: "After a Miscarriage"; *Cup of Poems*: "Weeds"; *The Glacier Stopped Here*: "Young's Pond"; *Oxalis*: "Heartwood," "Manna"; *Poetry*: "Shell"; *Prairie Schooner*: "Sabbath Dinner," "The Frivolousness of Intention," "Fall," "Standing in the Dark," "Like a Mother," "Symbiosis"; *The Sandhills Review*: "The Garden"; *Wisconsin Academy Review*: "Fever"; *Wisconsin Poets Calendar*: "Leap of Faith."

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Weeds

Their seeds are in the soil always.
Dig them or yank them up,
spade over them—they'll be back.
The creepers thread roots
through the soil's lacy eyes.
The sprouters love true darkness.
The binders make a weakness
out of strength.

Crown vetch, velvetleaf, creeping Charlie.
Leaves like umbrellas, like hearts,
barbed arrows lifted to the sun.
The ordinary and the obscure
all bound to the same dirt.

Some defend themselves with thorns
and some with flowers.
Some dig their roots deeper
than water. Some make it
to the edge of the known
world before dying back.

Like us, they are all tender
at the start. What they grow into
is another story.

Family Portrait

for Kasey

The four of us, posed
on the beach by some
forgotten fifth,
squinting, bare
thigh to thigh:
father and mother,
us on either side
like smaller fingers
with the same still root—
I remember, not this day
but this kind of day.
The loneliness of salt water.
The way I watched the other,
happy ones. And now
I see it, in the corner
on the sand, the fist-
shaped stain we made
together, how it swallowed
up each one and spit
us out. The shadow
of our fractured hand.

Like a Mother

What the cat does to the mouse
looks just like love, the way
she lays one foot over its neck
and holds it still, as if
she'd slow its shivering.

When it runs off, how she
fetches it back and worries it,
rings it with her paws
and lets it go, then flings it up,
its fur the same damp gray
as hers, and breaks its fall.

And when it stops, she lifts it
with her nose, and you would think
this was the essence of all care—
this almost tender lick, this pause—
instead of all she knows.

Sabbath Dinner

for Esther Evantash Brown

Dusk is falling in the kitchen
where the chicken's soul rises

in steam, simmers through
the slipped lid like perfume.

*Flour and eggs, oil and sugar,
yeast to make it rise.*

So many times we ate this meal
together, on Friday nights

I waited for all week.
Work in the flour with bare hands.

Now it's been three years
since I've known where

I could find you, and the same
since I have written anything.

I can still hear the *chop*
the metal half-moon made

slicing through bloody livers
in a bowl, smell the fresh-

killed chicken baking
and the line of suds just

underneath your elbows,
your two hands plunged

into hot water, scouring.
Oil the dough and give it time to rise.

You coaxed me up through
the long darkness where

I might have stayed.
Knead the raw dough

until its stickiness turns smooth.
I see you through a veil of smoke

and pale chiffon, your scarf
over my eyes while you light

the candles, gather the new flames
three times, hide your eyes,

and say the Hebrew words
I understand as love.

Punish the bread because it isn't you.
In the language of fire

and smoke, the prayer
for grief is only for a son

or daughter, standing with others
in late afternoon, chanting the bell-

like syllables together.
There are no words

for granddaughters to mourn.
Divide the dough in threes

and make from each a line.
Squeeze them together

at one end and braid. This meal
I make and eat alone,

calling up sweetness
with each bite of bitterness,

shaping raw grief into
what it becomes—

something bloody and hot
and good, brief in the mouth,

a long time in the belly,
full of all the words I'll ever need.

Heartwood

for Jamie

From this room you see what your father saw:
valley and dark blue clouds, the pond's lip
butted to the sloping hill, toy lights winking

to life so far below. In this room tools
are ranged on every wall—the big saw in its cabinet,
routers and lathes, the hand tools slowly rusting

in their drawers. The year he died your father
spent what time he could here. Turning a blank,
he'd watch the trees color and come into full leaf,

forget what bloomed in him. His last wish
was that his body be burned, so there is no place
you can go to look for him. On good days

you imagine him roaming, amazed, through an enormous
light-filled place. You teach yourself, now,
what he knew: how at the center of each tree

there is a spine of dead wood, buried beneath
sapwood and bark, where the tree shapes dense,
extravagant, wild grains. This is the part

you work, using rare woods your father never dared—
bubinga, purpleheart, amboina, whose red dust stains
what it touches. As the sun falls its last light blesses

and abandons what is in this room, and you work through
the hour of its lapse, keeping your hand steady against
the jiggling saw, scraping the plane in one clean line.

Still, every piece you make bears on some face
the faint mark of your tools, a dig beyond repair,
some knot that can't be sanded or refined.

After a Miscarriage

When spring came I came alive again.
The air was finally gentle
and I breathed deeply of sweet

lilac and hyacinth and some faint
scent I couldn't find or name.
It wafted through the house

like light, forgotten in our long
winter of darkness. The plums
and cherry trees around the block

were laced with flowerlets and
tiny leaves and made a subtle
dazzling of hope. Not a forgetting

but a softening, as if the harsh
outlines of loss were growing
over now with something like the tender

grass of spring, its blades a clear
luminous green, a color from childhood,
from a time before grief and its

terrible healing makes traitors of us all.

The Frivolousness of Intention

Something ate all the gladiolas,
the pink ones in a row
along the garden's edge.
Something bit clean through
every stalk, trampled
the fat green mallow leaves
and took the flowers off.
Down in the orchard
that's been weeds for twenty years,
rioting pricker bushes, goldenrod,
short pollard stumps with suckers
in the hundreds—why shouldn't
the flowers be fair game,
and the dill, which I am happy
to share, which I just like to see
growing, a miniature forest
of palm trees. Nothing
has touched the peonies,
so far, or foxglove.
The catnip either never made it
or was eaten fast. And the wild thing
that came up at the garden's edge,
its trunk red and its leaves hiding
explosions of red blooms—
why shouldn't it thrive, here
in good dirt I didn't make,
on the border of the cultivated world?

Young's Pond

We'd sit on the dock, bundled in sweaters,
while ice chunks bobbed and tiny fishlike things
swam round and round in the freed water.
One mild March day we spread towels
and lay naked in the grass, watching

the color in its slow rise up each stalk.
You dove into the pond, came up
blowing and blue but so alive
from that darkness. In April
I went in, slid off into the puddle

of warmed shallow water where the sun
reached down. Thick clouds clung
to the shoreline's reeds. I couldn't
bring myself to touch the milky globes,
so pale, defenseless, but riding

each wave and buckle and remaining whole.
By May the first voices began, the frogs
singing a scale of single notes. We lay down
and looked into the pond. There were no tadpoles,
after all, but newts swimming furiously

or else just hanging near the surface, belly down,
like creatures held fast in an amber cube.
As we watched, their splayed limbs would slick back,
they'd break into the air, flip long muscular tails
and disappear. Above us, birds and water striders

combed the pond's smooth face for food. The newts
clung briefly to each other and darted away,
their backs shining with spots of brilliant color.
Before we left I dove in one more time, hoping
to feel their bodies under me, but with the first

fierce slap of water I forgot. Next time
would be true summer. We'd hold our breaths
and float out on the water for as long
as our bodies would stay buoyant, for as long
as we could bear each other's weight.

Leap of Faith

Last night we watched the big flakes fall.
Today the sycamores are lined with snow,
along each branch, down one side of each trunk,

like two worlds laid together for a time.
Almost, I think, *Yes I believe*, almost
take back our conversation where I let

go hope. The trees whiten and split
and heal themselves in their slow rush
toward light. I want to put my arms around

something more holy than myself and hold on
till I'm wet and cold, hold on, skin
against skin, through the long melt.

The Garden

They pulled down the driveway
in a caravan, the lead car veering
side to side, the others following
through ruts puddled with summer's
muddy rains. Stones flew out
from their wheels as they pulled up
in a loose horseshoe by the barn,
and two men helped him out,
his skull shining and skin
washed thin by pain. One of them
told us how the man had grown up
here, fifty-some years ago.
His parents' ashes were spread
in our orchard, and now he wanted,
please, to say good-bye. I watched them
from beside the pond,
the four men dressed in suits
lifting the other down
through weeds up to their waists—
the gold faces of daisies,
purple cheeses, burdock leaves the size
of dinner plates, the last strawberries
tangled underfoot. They disappeared
over the hill, but in my mind
I followed them, past
the dwarf apple we'd cut back,
past our six walnut seedlings,
down to where the orchard was still wild,
unpruned and full of thorns
and pricker bushes gone to seed.
He sat down where the path trailed off
and looked over the apples, choked
with green suckers and hard, wormy fruit,
and saw the place he knew—
the wild paths mowed, the trees
just planted, not yet bearing fruit.

He sat on thorns and felt the pillow
of sweet grass I'd many times imagined
but not yet coaxed back, and saw
the spot I put my garden in last year.
I planted dill and basil, peppermint,
carrots, a ring of flowers, but all I got
were weeds, tall furry things with yellow heads
that broke my heart. I thought
he must be wondering who squared
this patch of dirt, turned it
and filled it with good soil and seed
to grow such useless things.
When they came back, the man leaned
on the car while the rest thanked us.
He turned his face from the closed window
as they drove away. And not until
much later, when I picked my way
downhill, barefoot, over the hollow
straw of last year's weeds and prickly stems,
did I see the swath of white and purple daisies,
shoots of big-leaf mint grown wild,
and, in the center of my garden,
all the foxgloves I had planted
lifting tall stalks belled with perfect
rosy flowers. My seeds gone
underground, blooming
mysteriously and in their own
sweet time and not for me.

Fall

for Vivian Young Langan

Out past the fox fields,
beyond the pasture where the geese rise up together,
down past the sloping, uncut fields of grass,
the silver birches leaning by the road,
I am putting one foot in front of the other.
I am climbing a hill and walking through a valley.
The deer pass on the ridge behind me.
I don't have to see them to believe

they're there, the way I came to believe,
in a tropical country for the first time,
that the trees were filled with fruit
though all I saw was dark wood
and a mass of leaves. The heavy smells hung
in the air—guava, papaya, passionfruit—
a lushness that at first was heavenly
but later overwhelmed, as if too much sweetness
was harder to bear than not enough.

Now I stand still along the road, wait for the forest
to take up its secret life after my passing,
for something to resolve out of the shadows—
a face that would embody wisdom or amusement,
an answering intelligence, even
the light-struck haunches of a deer in flight.
Over the road a branch bends with green apples.
My fingers curve up and around and bring one down,
to where it makes a nice weight in my hand,
to where it balances the other, empty one.

Manna

Where the hill's back broadens to a field
I stumbled on the body of a deer, its neck
buckled, its belly soaked with blood.

I turned through grass littered with clumps of fur
and thought of how the crows had woken me,
flocking in circles to this field, barking,

and how I'd smiled. Now I saw wings folding
as birds dropped from the air, their dark beaks
dipping again and again into good fortune.

Going home, I waited to be lost, but
there was no way through the woods except
the half-lit, looping path I'd always known.

Standing in the Dark

Absolute attention is a prayer—Simone Weil

Standing in the dark, rocking from hip
to hip, I hold the helpless weight of you

on my shoulder, waiting to let go into sleep.
And in the attenuated minutes of your waking

my life passes before me, not the everyday
but what I've come to think of as the life

of the spirit, which rises from the clutter
and bustle and points itself toward meaning.

All my impatience is useless here, where
what is required is just being absolute

and present. I have come to know,
for instance, the shape of your breath

from the inside out, the way the pulse
drums on the top of your head, where

the bones are still soft, and my cupped
hand catches it. So much happens here,

in a dim room at the end of day.
With you in my arms in the dreamy

darkness something shifts inside me,
like a slipped disk falling simply

into place. The numbers on the clock
change like a slow heartbeat, the blue five

giving way with a click to six.
Nothing has happened.

A child is being rocked to sleep,
that's all. And in the end

I lay you down, wait while you rustle
and thump your whole body to one

side of the crib, turn your face
into the corner and lie still,

and only then I leave.
Years from now these hours

will be what I remember,
long after we have come to know

each other, when we have talked and cried
about everything, when I have learned,

finally, to pray and you
can face the dark alone.

Symbiosis

for Helen Green Young

At ninety-four, still she would live
forever. Her heart, weak fist, shudders
with every charge. In her room fear,
that bad dog, guards the door.
Its claws scrabble as it climbs
into bed with her. It lifts its head—
one goodnight kiss—and she sees
yellow teeth, how everything
it's ever eaten's wedged
between them. Good girl, she folds
her glasses, props her pillow up,
lies back. Don't go, she says.
The dog swears it will see her out.

Learning to Pray

It came to me as a gift,
my face lifted high

toward a window
suddenly awash in sun,

eyes shut, and then
at once a feeling

of such dazzling
bone-warming light

that all the darkness
in me fell away.

I held myself there
in the stillness forever,

for as long as I could.
So this, I thought

when thought returned,
this is believing.

The Promised Land

for Allan Brown

Passover night. The full moon
burns white over my roof.

I wake up smelling smoke,
walk the house, sniffing

for danger. Then I recognize
the scent: cigars, a sweet

stale cloud of smoke,
the smell of *seder* nights

at my grandparents' house.
He had to smoke outside,

she said, to save the furniture,
and so he always smelled

faintly of fire and rebellion.
He slid the paper rings

off each cigar
before he smoked it,

and I wore them
through the long nights

of my childhood,
when rage spilled

through the house
and no one was passed over.

In the old story
it took darkness and plagues,

a casting out, salt water
rising in a bitter miracle,

and that's how it was
for me, stuttering my way

toward the future,
when there would be

no more miracles,
just ordinary darkness,

plain bread for a grown-up appetite.
After she died

his clothes were always
flecked with ashes,

powdery with burns.
One day he stopped,

when there was no one
in the world left

who could make him.
Now in the moonlight

in my house, the sweet
spring air blows through

the screens, the front door
swings open to let God in, and

I wish my grandfather
stubborn and full of fire again.

There is no smoke here,
after all, no flames, just

the remembered taste
of manna—green as scallions,

bitter as freedom—
in my mouth.

Shell

I found it in the wash, the orange
shell I picked up on the beach
that last time. One of my girls—
the one named after you—

must have found it in my room
and wanted it. Clean calcareous
curve, a palm open to nothing,
reeking of sunshine

and your death. For years
I didn't know what to do with it.
You would have liked
this story: how a child

slips grief into a careless pocket.
Breaks it to pieces. Lets it go.

Fever

The old life burning away
in waves, everything
you've ever wanted
like a brand,
scorched into
muscle and bone,
marking you.

What you knew
sucked into air,
fuel for the conflagration.

This must be change,
this pain, this pure
heat near your heart,
this ash overtaking you
in a hurry, forcing you
once more to be born.



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by Harriet Brown

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