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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

BONES  
of  
LIGHT

POEMS BY JUDITH SORNBERGER

A native of Nebraska, JUDITH SORNBERGER is a descendant of Irish cattle ranchers and Swedish farmers. She has a Ph.D. in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Sornberger's book of poems, *Open Heart*, was published by Calyx Books in 1993. Her chapbook *Judith Beheading Holfernes*, won the 1993 Talent House Press chapbook contest and was published by that press, as was a subsequent chapbook, *Bifocals Barbie: A Midlife Pantheon* (1996). Her poems and essays regularly appear in journals such as *Prairie Schooner*, *Puerto del Sol*, *West Branch*, and *Calyx*. She has taught in a wide variety of venues. Her first teaching experience was in a Nebraska prison, where she taught poetry and other writing courses. Sornberger is currently a professor in English and Women's Studies at Mansfield University of Pennsylvania in the northern-most tier of the Appalachians. She is the mother of adult twin sons, and is married to writer Bruce Barton.

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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**



*Bones  
of  
Light*

*Poems by*  
JUDITH SORNBERGER



PARALLEL PRESS • 2003



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*In loving memory  
of my father  
William E. Mickel III*

## *When They Dance*

*for Kathie*

Nothing's ever been as sexy  
as your dad handing your mom's purse  
to her sister as they turned,  
as in one body, into music  
on the dance floor.

No one has ever touched us like that.  
The boys we learned our bodies with  
we never touched while dancing.  
Not that way. In "Purple Haze"  
we kissed the sky, strobe lights chopping  
our arms' flailing into a million stills.

Not like our parents getting misty  
holding hands, the outlines  
of their fingers blurring, bodies  
belonging more and more  
to music and that union.

Sure, we had the slow songs:  
his hands around our waist,  
ours clasped behind his neck.  
We pressed ourselves into each other,  
thought sex meant the body.

We ignored our mothers'  
*save yourself for marriage,*  
and when we tried on bikinis,  
their advice: *leave something*  
*to the imagination.* We saved  
our imaginations for self-expression,  
saved ritual for separation.

Sometimes we envy them,  
still dancing with their first loves  
while we keep changing partners,  
as if changing teaches  
how to let the music change us.

But we sense they've missed  
some things. As we whispered once  
about our bodies and their secrets,  
we whisper now about our mothers:  
*Do you think they have  
oral sex, orgasms?*

We know how to dance alone,  
a useful art they never taught us.  
But when we watch the alchemy  
their bodies work with music  
and the ordinary bodies of our fathers,  
we know there's something they have  
yet to tell us.

## *Picking Wildflowers in the Sandhills*

*for Kris*

This land is good  
for loss. It won't mind  
if we pick its flowers

*partridge pea*  
*golden aster*

won't even count its losses  
as you and I count years of work  
lost by our children's ages,  
console ourselves with what  
those years have taught us

*prickly poppy*  
*milk vetch*

My uncle taught me  
look where loss is—  
blowouts where grass let  
the sand sift through her fingers—  
for arrowheads lost or left  
behind by those who hunted

*gay feather*  
*lead plant*

I stopped and lost track  
of the sky whole afternoons  
and never found a single arrow  
pointing to my heart

*false boneset*  
*blue penstemon*

First this land lost  
its bison, then its hunters.  
My uncle's eyes go from  
quartz to slate telling  
of the ranch our family lost

*fringed loosestrife*

then his father's blade across the throat  
in their front garden  
when he lost his county office

*puncture vine*

All that's left: the house  
he and his sister shared  
for sixty years and now  
she's gone

*Platte thistle*

*cancerroot*

When he moved  
into an Omaha apartment  
he broke the window  
over his collection  
and gave my sons  
what I had coveted

*bastard toadflax*

*smartweed*

I find the arrowheads  
stuffed in their junk drawers.  
They pierce me with the afternoons  
my sons lost, not knowing

*fog-fruit*

*motherwort*

Dead flowers clutched in moist hands,  
we mark our way by windmills.  
Their turning bears the same  
witness as crosses:  
water spirited away by sun returns

*evening primrose*

*heal-all*

like wind, revealing  
all our losses.

## *Lunar Eclipse: Take Back the Night*

*for Joanne and Alison*

We had resigned ourselves to not seeing,  
to cloud cover, another night of nightmares,  
as we trailed toward our cottages, three women.  
But something made us turn just as the moon  
began the long push to reclaim her territory.

One of the three has not been sleeping well.  
One of us was raped not once, but twice,  
and this time is a hush in the assault  
of threatening phone calls. It is easy  
to decode the hatred, the voice marrying  
the self-hatred she carries.

It is harder to believe the moon.  
What does she say, even now at her fullest,  
but “O” “O” “O”—the same cool calling  
as the owl paging her mate,  
not trying to soothe a mateless woman.

“We have lost the darkness,”  
the young park ranger told us.  
“What words come to mind  
when you think of the dark?”  
He grins, knowingly.

He thinks his nightmares  
are the same as ours.  
When has a dream come to him  
dressed in flesh to strip  
away the body’s love affair  
with its dark secrets?



How often in our lifetime  
will the moon lose all her light?  
How many times will she struggle  
with the shadow pushing into her?  
“You’re safe here,” they told us.

But we are witnesses that even the moon  
sometimes loses the night,  
that she must suffer under shadows,  
struggle again and win  
over and over and over.

## *Hawk*

I've never looked so long  
at the underside of a thing,  
never had that luxury—  
that soaring above me in a circle  
as if my eyes were prey  
or its beloved.  
Never held to my eyes  
lenses for marks that tell  
one species from another,  
never knew anything without a doubt:  
the white windows on wings,  
the slivered, white cross of the body,  
the dark V where the legs are  
soldered on—a positive i.d.:  
ferruginous hawk.

So different from the red-tailed  
whose name lies as often  
as it tells the truth.  
Sometimes hawks don't follow  
the rules of our books.  
The rule of my heart is to love  
before I can identify the source.  
It's a risk like prairie dogs  
standing in full relief against  
the blue October, the risk they take  
by living in the open.

I've come here to learn to tell  
one love from another, to locate  
the muscles of vision, the tight  
enough squint, to find the patience.  
Is it patience or hypnosis  
that holds the prairie dog  
to the hawk's circle, the hawk's  
naming the rodent in its slow  
language of ever smaller circles: *prey*

*prey*

*prey*

## *The Gulf*

Each night when I was eight  
I lay me down to pray:  
Bless Mom and Dad and Jen and Jill,  
bless Mona and Granddad, bless. . . .  
Oh, the list would bore you.  
And each night the arms of my prayer  
reached farther and farther beyond the cave  
of covers, past our house, our city, our country. . . .  
Everything, even the stars, needed my blessing.

My parents were watching the news  
when I called out: *In a few minutes  
tell me to stop saying my prayers.*  
My fervor frightened them.  
Now there is a term for it:  
obsessive-compulsive disorder.  
But it was order I believed in,  
and I was at its center.

Then one day without warning  
the fever of my faith broke,  
and I was cured. I was grown  
and had a life like many others:  
husband, job, two children.  
And I knew how not to pray.

But tonight on the news there is war:  
a broken face I can't stand to see.  
A POW—a pilot—his shoulders  
folded in like ruined wings.

There is an enemy. There must be.  
They are his torturers.  
Or they are my leaders.  
Or it is the camera—an eye like God's  
that sees pain and accepts it.

Of one thing I am certain:  
this man suffers for our sins—  
but which ones: omission or commission?  
Obsession or compulsion? There must be  
some disorder we can name it, and some cure  
for how we lay us down, for how we sleep.

## *Preparations*

*for Janice*

Thirty-six and not a son  
or daughter to her name.  
Does she want one?  
Her mother told her  
angels bring us babies.  
In her dreams they flew through sunrise,  
pink and blue tufts streaming  
from their icy morning wings.  
Aunt Jenny had no children.  
Didn't the angels like her?

She lifts crystal angels  
from a tissue paper cradle,  
arranges them under this year's  
Christmas tree—a tumbleweed.  
Yes, she is tumbling, drifting . . .  
Wasn't there something  
she wanted to ask for?  
She sets up the papier-mâché crèche  
next to the angels, like dolls  
under the tree, a new baby each year,  
the way she thinks it must be  
for women without choices.

Has she made a choice?  
Or is she waiting for someone  
with a beautiful name like Gabriel  
to tap her on the shoulder?  
She wraps the tree in white  
lights and tinsel like a bride.  
All night it will say "O"  
in the black window.

## *Papier-mâché Crèche*

Mary and Joseph are doll actors  
in a pageant, solemn in the spotlight,  
pudgy cheeks flushed with the import  
of this moment. The wise men grasp  
like birthday guests the gifts  
they'd rather not relinquish: vials  
of frankincense and chests of gold.

They don't know how fragile they are:  
just flour-paste and paper.  
Don't know they're only children  
trying to do the work of grown-ups.  
In early days a husband brought these  
figures to me when I was round with child.  
We didn't know it's not enough to kneel  
before the mystery, to feel delight.  
Now our sons fly back and forth between us  
trying to heal what has been broken.

Maybe if Mary keeps her eyes closed  
her child won't grow  
out of his straw-filled cradle,  
and she won't wear regret  
like a veil over her halo.  
Maybe she and Joseph won't  
snarl at one another, or if  
they lose their heads, God's super  
glue will put them back together.

Maybe she will never  
doubt God's mercy.  
Maybe if she keeps  
her plump palms pressed  
together, none of us will  
have to know the future.  
Maybe a child will save us.

## *If She Could*

*from Christ Resurrected by Fra Angelico and helper, Cell 8,  
in the Cloister of San Marco*

Of course she wants to believe  
what the angel perching on the edge  
of the sarcophagus is saying.

But first let her lean into the darkness,  
shading her eyes from the glare above.  
Let her search for the body she gave birth to.

Any moment she will give up,  
see the angel pointing to the gleaming  
bubble overhead where he is floating.

Angelico, I hear what you are saying.  
I know sooner or later she must look up.  
But right now leave her to her human grieving.

Let choirs and priests in some distant basilica rejoice.  
I'll stay here with her, gripping  
the marble's cold lip till it warms us.

## *Mother-in-law*

*for Hilma*

She calls his visits *coming home*.  
Each time he enters her kitchen  
she loves him and remembers  
she will never have a daughter.  
In marrying, he thought to give her one.  
He is a good son.

We are more like separated sisters,  
lone women living among men:  
both two-sonned and daughterless.  
Something our mothers wouldn't understand.  
I see her as a daughter never could,  
see her nuances, her tiny ministrations  
matched by not another in her household,  
see the secrets—once bright seeds—  
turn to stone inside her.

There's no word for this loneliness,  
this loss. Nothing like *widow*:  
what you're supposed to get when  
you add *loss* and *woman* together.  
Sometimes there's a code, though:  
via her son she sends me peach-  
colored panties, flowered anklets,  
and—to make certain I read their message—  
her copy of *My Mother/Myself*.

Whose story am I reading  
trying to arrange these objects  
into a syntax? In this story  
a woman needs a daughter  
who knows her favorite flavor,  
who will plant it in her honor,  
not over her mother's body,  
but in her own garden.



*For Four-year-old Bevan Who Gave Me Her Swan*

My children have flown  
the country of my care.  
Some days my hands  
are strangers who have  
lost their ways.

So when I, a stranger  
to your River Corrib and its swans,  
see you, the two boys,  
and your bearded teacher  
modeling clay creatures on a park bench,  
I approach with care.

Ask for the gift of a picture.  
The boys grin, hold up clay dolphins.  
Your hands hide, shy cygnets  
in the rushes of your skirt.

When I return to the river,  
scatter cracker crumbs  
to draw the swans,  
you creep near, holding  
the hand of your teacher  
whose eyes are kindly as the sun  
on the water's face.

*Bevan would like*  
*to give you her swan,* he says.  
Just hatched from your hands,  
still wet, the swan's narrow  
neck is a long seeking.  
For a moment I think  
I have passed some human test.

But it is grace passing  
from your palm to mine  
and I want to be worthy  
of such trust, to mold myself  
once more into a bowl  
of still water, safe harbor.

Galway, Ireland, 1997

*If I Loved a Woman, It Would Be the Platte River*

As though she were myself in liquid movement,  
changing who I am at every turn, reenacting history  
with every undulation. Myself the bestower  
of mists. Myself the Sandhill Crane's  
six million year old mother. Myself washing  
the feet of Russian olives.

I would make my voice a rivulet, court her  
with the songs her body teaches, twist myself  
to fit her curves and urges. I'd dive into her hair,  
swirl my hair through her slow fingers. Who can resist  
her when she wears the moon in her midnight tresses,  
a prairie poppy tucked behind one ear?

I'd learn to move the way she likes it,  
drink from the spring where her legs meet,  
slow my heart to meet her soul's meandering.  
To stay inside her I'd grow fins,  
gills to pull her through me  
thousands of times daily.  
I'd love her like an acolyte loves Jesus,  
kiss pebbles she leaves behind as relics,  
worship her wide brow and broad wisdom.

I'd love her as a star loves—  
watch her so long, I'd know which creatures grew  
extinct before they'd swallowed all her sweetness.  
I'd count the footprints of her lovers in the sand,  
watch her rise up and erase them.  
I'd never touch her, spend all my life burning.

## *North Country Fair*

Staying on the road is what matters,  
spiraling down the mountain  
through the easy weather past  
pine-sycamore-river blurring  
into a green tunnel.

Country is all the airwaves  
will permit here, so I pop in  
vintage Dylan, chuckle:  
Dad would have banned  
“Lay, Lady, Lay” if only  
he had listened. It’s summer.  
Even grief is easy listening,  
like a vista you can choose  
to bypass.

Then “North Country Fair,”  
and Johnny Cash—Dad’s favorite—  
cuts in. I’d forgotten he was here,  
his clean baritone surging  
from a cold and truer season,  
slicing open a new channel:  
*See for me that she’s wearing  
a coat so warm. . . .*

Tears hit head-on like a semi  
going eighty. I pull over,  
but the voices keep on coming,  
a duet now, melting our feuding  
tastes into one river.  
Finally, I walk toward it,  
wade into its icy arms,  
and nothing keeps me  
from the howling wind.

## *Double Monument*

She just wishes she could  
smoke another cigarette with him.  
I can't abide the odor in my car,  
though I'm trying to quit  
giving her grief about smoking.  
But, damn it, I don't want her  
joining him under the hokey rose  
and "together forever"  
any sooner than she has to.

Still, when we arrive I say, why  
don't you have a cigarette with him?  
It's sunny, mercifully temperate for July.  
She settles in the shade, pats the almost  
grassed-over mound beside her, lights up,  
inhaling deeply, as though taking the first  
breath in months, and lets go slowly.

The next part is too perfect,  
so don't believe it if you don't want to.  
A dove swoops into the elm above her,  
stands there on his short legs, calling  
and calling in such cool, aching tones,  
we feel the throbbing deep in our own throats.  
Then the gray wife comes to perch beside him.

## *My Mother in the Suit that Holds All Colors*

Thirty years after he'd snapped her  
giggling in the white swimsuit,  
the guy she'd known in high school  
showed my father he still carried  
her curves and long legs in his wallet.  
She kept her figure longer than her less  
slender girlfriends could forgive.

But mostly, she still owned the laughing  
heart that, along with several margaritas,  
had fueled her famous flamenco across  
the hotel lobby in Majorca, Dad grinning  
at his wild girl, still staccatoing her heels at forty.

Now Dad's heart is silent as the tiles  
of that lobby after he'd guided her,  
suddenly dizzy, up to bed.  
She covers her body in gray and black,  
looks in mirrors when she has to,  
calls herself too skinny.

Is it too late to bring back the blazing  
colors of that country? Or to revisit  
the one trip she took without him?  
When the taxi let them off in Mazatlan,  
her mom and sister checked in  
while she swept down to the beach,  
heart drumming a rumba  
against the white shore of her blouse.

Slipping off her sandals like an eager bride,  
she nestled her toes into hot sand,  
so held by waves plunging toward her,  
she didn't see the man approaching.

He must have spied the girl in the white maillot,  
the woman seized by the rhythm of an evening.  
He asked her name, then said, *Roberta,*  
*let's hold hands and run into that water.*

Did she smile that he'd spotted her thoughts  
as though they were bright fishes  
darting through clear water?  
When she demurred, he shook his head:  
*You used to be a lot more fun, Roberta.*

May she one day find her way  
back to that shore, feel again the fire  
in her feet. And, if he asks her,  
may she reconsider.

## *Bones of Light*

I know no greater beauty than bones  
reunited for the story of the body.  
Tusks of mastodon, ribs of saber-toothed.  
I want to take my tongue along  
their contours, reinvent their glisten,  
tickling the smooth secrets of sockets.  
To climb into the cave of ribs and breathe.

I want to release them from their friezes,  
this tableau of no-season. Lead a  
clattering stampede into the winter morning.  
Watch the vertebrae grin back the sun's light.  
I don't want to do anything after this life  
but join the herd of bones, add my light  
to theirs under the snow.



## Van Gogh's Pieta

"In a picture I want to say something comforting." (Van Gogh)

More *pas de deux* than *pieta*,  
they hold the pose  
ancient as the repertoire  
of son and mother.

Limp as any fish, he flops  
into the waiting blue  
waves of her raiment,  
his chest green, gold,  
cerise—a rippled sunset.

The sad part is how far  
he is beyond her comfort.  
Even if he could feel  
the cool cave of her body,  
dip his hand into the tonic  
of her sorrow, the punctured  
palm would come up empty.

I came to the exhibit expecting  
the dark shudder of crows' wings,  
an orange sun that shows no mercy,  
an indigo so deep I could stop seeing  
my own grown son's face twisted  
in the turbulence I drown in.

All I want to do now  
is fall back into the arms  
of a child's faith, let myself  
be lulled past the horizon  
by a sunset so beautiful  
it must be true.

## *The Bumblebee Bird*

*for Jamie*

The last day of his visit, you drive  
your son through mountains of magpie,  
juniper and lupine when a black and gold bird,  
scarlet-capped, signals you to stop.  
You could become roadkill, hopping  
from the car where there's no shoulder,  
on a curve sharp as the bird's colors.

But you two have known too many seasons  
of depression's dark wings coming for him,  
too few of following a single beauty.  
And now you fear you won't see it,  
that it's flitted away like too many wishes.

Suddenly, the cottonwood opens her hands,  
a sorceress delighted by her own trick,  
releases the bird that vanishes again  
behind the scrim of leaves, reappearing now  
and now and now until it seems  
there is no end to hoping.

Back at the cabin you still need to find it  
in your book, as though saying *western tanager*,  
you'll taste again its magic colors,  
and something in you will be released.  
Your son sticks to the name he dubbed it.  
But there is no argument between you—  
only two names for that startled recognition,  
for this one love.

## *When She Asks You to Say Hello*

If she worships anyone, it is the ocean, so  
how can you pretend she doesn't mean it?  
Still, isn't it enough to stroll  
among the Rollerblades and Walkmans  
on the esplanade, whispering  
her greeting in your head?

A prayer mumbled in the tongue of pale intention—  
is that the way she raised you?  
You think of what she's lost in the last year—  
her husband, way of life, their travel plans.  
You walk out on the jetty, teeter over boulders,  
slip on guano and imagine yourself falling,  
going down in the daughter hall of fame.

But you make it to the pointing finger's tip,  
and giving yourself over to the ludicrous,  
call your name into the salt spray, say who sent you.  
You recall how Hopi mothers lift each newborn  
to the sun, and now yours holds you before what's holy.  
Of course, the ocean laughs all the way to shore,  
revealing row by row its ancient, ageless teeth.





BONES OF LIGHT

by Judith Sornberger

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