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# The Edge of Damage

POETRY BY

*Heather Swan*

PARALLEL PRESS



A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK



# The Edge of Damage

Poems by  
Heather Swan



PARALLEL PRESS 2009

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Note: The non-italicized lines in the “Relational” poems are based on a translation of the *Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* published by the Istituto Geografico de Agostini in 1956.

Namaste





## *Contents*

I. The Edge of Damage	
Leaving the Garden	10
Before Cartography	11
Disintegration	12
Polar	14
Exile	15
Leda	16
This World	17
Night Things	18
Cow, Rain, Bees	19
II. Flood	
The Words of Noah's Wife	22
III. Water Wanting Other Water	
Devotion	36
Upon Receiving a Book of Paintings	38
Water Wanting Other Water	39
Resurrection of the Body	40
Relational: Leonardo's Folio 3	41
Relational: Leonardo's Folio 14	42
Relational: Leonardo's Folio 53	43
IV. Where Beauty Is Honed	
Heiligschein	46
Metaphor	47
Boy	48
Bowl	49
Parkinson's	50
Non-Attachment	51



I.

## The Edge of Damage

## *Leaving the Garden*

*“Even in the Garden of Eden, no hint of paradise appears,  
just a few rocks and a tree, almost naked.”*

— *Linda Murray, Michelangelo*

Just as the snake said,  
when the woman tasted the apple  
a tree grew in her heart.  
Its branches spread  
into her fingers, her tongue;  
its roots into her belly, her calves.  
Things with wings came  
to reside in her—  
sparrows, moths, bats, doves—  
always fluttering.  
The branches had thorns, too,  
always poking.  
Her mouth remembered  
the tart, the sweet, and, esurient,  
she licked her own palm, then his.  
Later, leaving the garden,  
she knew they were not  
exiting paradise, but entering.

## *Before Cartography*

When my map was not a map,  
countries were not countries,  
but places with leaves of different shapes.  
Underfoot: sometimes moss, sometimes sand.

When my map was not a map,  
there was no need for passports,  
and movement mimicked wind.

When my map was not a map,  
but a pool reflecting the sky,  
even a falling leaf  
appeared to be rising.

When my map was not a map,  
there was no need for a compass,  
I studied stones, insects, eyes.

When my map was not a map,  
myth was my daughter,  
and there were no villains  
in our story.

When my map was not a map,  
every after was a doorway,  
and you were new  
    and new  
        and new.

## *Disintegration*

1.

A voice on the radio said  
to imagine Florida was a thumb  
shrinking slowly to the size  
of a little finger. The edges  
will change, the voice said. The edges  
will no longer be edges. They will be submerged  
and pulled in by the tide.  
The voice suggested moving inward  
meaning further away from what we knew as the edge.

I imagine sitting at a cafe table near the shore  
my hands warm around a cup of tea  
as I watch the ocean pawing its way up beach.  
How the intricate underpinnings of the fig tree  
its lattice of dark veins  
will be washed clean of soil  
and how tables will rise and float away white tablecloths  
undraping themselves  
until they undulate through the salt water opaque jellyfish.

II.

Disintegration is fundamental. For example, the half-life of  
carbon-14 is 5730 years.

The isotope decays, and what remains is a new element.

III.

Over time, the inaudible brush of enough shoes  
and the burgundy threads of the rug  
begin unbraiding themselves from the jute fraying  
so that bits of red fiber are swept into the air  
by the light wind of the broom.  
Some rugs are for sitting on, some rugs tell stories,  
others are only for prayer.

IV.

The therapist suggests moving inward  
with a kind of attention one gives the horizon  
when waiting for rain.  
Then redrawing your map.

V.

The voice on the radio said it will affect tourism. It will affect ports.  
And I imagine us in small glass-bottom boats on windless days  
going out to look down through the water at the walls of stone,  
the useless doors with ridiculous locks. All that we could not hold.  
  
And I imagine our hands weathered by then pressing together,  
the heat erasing the seam.

## *Polar*

The eye of the white bear punctures  
the landscape of white  
like a porthole to a vast blackness  
an archaic knowing an encryption.  
His body lumbers forth ghostlike  
over what is still frozen  
but is becoming water rivulets  
carving the ice like so many tears.  
When he closes his eyes  
he'll disappear.



## *Exile*

The whale who,  
having swum too far away  
from what startled her,  
from a sound that pierced  
like an ending,  
finds herself now  
in the grip of sand,  
her body once lithe  
in the ocean,  
now, like drying cement.  
For a time, she writhes  
against the grit, writhes  
with each slap of the tide,  
but then there is only  
the sound of waves  
receding. She thinks,  
how different the air is,  
how curious and probing,  
but how incapable  
of holding.  
And she gazes  
with her enormous eye  
at the schools of clouds,  
endlessly new above her  
until the burn of dryness  
overcomes her.  
So hot here, and the flies,  
and then the why  
of so many hands.  
She remembers then  
the kaleidoscope of coral,  
the ribbons of light,  
how at night  
the sea turned black.

## *Leda*

Years later, she'd awaken  
from nightmares about birds:  
sparrows, hawks, crows,  
and of course, swans;  
the great confusion of feathers  
and claws, the tearings amid  
all of the softness. How  
the fullness of wind that had  
come with wings was erased  
and replaced with closings  
and anchorings. How  
the mind could never  
be clear again to fathom  
soar or glide.

Always then, even  
waking, the place of never—  
never tenderness,  
never thawing,  
never silk,  
only unravelings,  
the alertness to flutterings,  
watchfulness,  
even sun-dappled days  
at the lake were stippled  
with the dark lurk of  
never trust.

## *This World*

Again: rubble buildings ravaged  
glass shattered asphalt broken  
gutters torn fabric forgotten  
upheaval so much dust

what were living rooms  
what were stairs  
what were sidewalks leading to and from  
what were stores to buy olives and bread  
what were cafes where two could meet  
what were chairs

and then the quiet after the stumbling through

the texture of night unfolding velvet  
the rain made into columns by wind the rinsing  
the trying to find the holding

eventually on the horizon a crease of vermillion  
bright pierce resurgence of light

somewhere a child asks questions  
somewhere the table is righted  
somewhere the gun is put down  
somewhere a woman sees the ginkgo's radii reaching  
somewhere a handful of seeds  
somewhere a voice saying

*I'm sorry*

*I'm so sorry*

*I'm so sorry it had to be like this*

## *Night Things*

He died quietly, like a small bird landing,  
lightly, a tiny flutter, and then was still.  
She was there with him in bed  
as she had been for two years of nights  
getting up sometimes for three changes  
of the bedding. She made no bed on the floor  
for herself, nor did she sleep in the chair,  
but slept with him, his wife of 33 years.  
She changed half the bed at a time.  
They did not speak.  
She moved him carefully, his skeleton  
draped in papery skin, his arm,  
a tired hinge, limp around her neck.  
After removing the damp things, she pulled  
the clean sheet over the corners of the mattress,  
and then billowed the top sheet so that for a moment  
a perfect white wing floated above him  
before it fell and settled over his body.

In the months after, when she was alone,  
often she rose in the moonlight, drifted  
to the closet for fresh linens, carried them  
like a baby back. Then billowed that top sheet,  
watching it descend lightly on an empty bed.

## *Cows, Rain, Bees*

Once again, rain  
eliminates boundaries.  
Where once there was sidewalk  
edged with street,  
now there is only water.  
In the same way, pain  
can seem larger than the body,  
passing through the boundaries,  
emanating outward  
until everything aches:  
the trees, the grass,  
the solitary cow  
lagging behind the homeward herd,  
glancing back and back  
to the valley of bees.  
Bees, who labor  
toward a sweetness  
which is taken from them  
again and again,  
but keep returning  
from the fields of clover.



II.

Flood

## *The Words of Noah's Wife*

### *Day 1*

The rain begins.  
Inside the pitch  
walls we breathe  
quietly, animals  
and humans,  
exhausted from the labor  
of preparation,  
waiting. The sound  
of the rain is a comb  
which untangles  
any knots remaining,  
and we slip into sleep  
until the ark shifts  
finally lifting,  
leaving a world,  
heaving us into  
an ending.



*Day 5*

With a candle I go  
to feed the birds.  
Today a sparrow flew  
to me and landed  
on my forearm.  
Her tiny feet, like  
the hands of a feverish child,  
gripped my skin  
as she drew near the flame.  
I saw quickly she believed  
the bit of light to be  
a way back to the world  
she knew—of trees, of branches,  
the corridors of leaves,  
the fluttering walls which  
at anytime she chose  
she could pass through,  
and then dive into deep blue.  
I could not tell her,  
there are no more trees.  
She blinked in confusion  
at the heat of the candle,  
and eventually resignation  
settled over her body  
like muslin.  
I carried her  
back to her mate.

*Day 7*

In my dreams, I see  
chairs rising and tipping  
in the water, wooden spoons  
floating and ridiculous, and then  
the empty dress of a child filled  
for a moment, with air,  
as smooth and round  
as a mother's belly  
before it twists in an eddy  
and disappears. At least  
the storm is deafening,  
but even the wind wails.  
As children we teased the waves—  
the ocean's lapping tongue—  
squealing when it licked our toes  
or standing defiant as  
beneath our feet  
it sucked the sand  
and pebbles away.

*Day 10*

There are seeds  
in the hems  
of my dresses  
which I gathered  
before the rain.  
I opened each seam  
and filled each furrow  
with thick rows  
of promise.  
I feel them now  
brushing my ankles:  
melon, amaranth, almond,  
thistle, cypress, lime.  
Are they aware  
of their potential?  
Does the tomato seed  
know of its kinship  
with blood?

*Day 13*

By now, fish are flying  
over mountains, circling  
the crowns of alpine flowers.  
Up here in the darkness  
in a place without edges,  
when the weeping begins,  
the source is uncertain.  
At first, it seems to come  
from my children, perhaps  
my daughter-in-law; or  
is it an animal dreaming?  
Soon I realize  
the sound is married  
to the ache in my own  
body. Whose cry is this  
that shakes my shoulders?  
What is a river  
out of its banks,  
but water?

*Day 17*

From the window today,  
I saw the world:  
ash, the water,  
ash, the sky.  
The horizon line  
has disappeared  
like a line of charcoal  
brushed away by a hand.  
All day, I tried  
to remember yellow:  
wild mustard,  
dandelion, daffodil—  
just one daffodil  
glowing like an ember  
against the winter soil.  
I know there must be  
a yellow place  
hidden deep in my body.  
And to think there were  
days in that house  
when whole hillsides  
went unnoticed.

*Day 21*

The smell of fresh dung  
mingles with the sweet breath  
of the gentle beasts. The yaks  
sleep close to me. I found  
some forgotten basil  
folded into cloth;  
the freshness lingers  
on my hands. We measure  
our days with the tasks  
of feeding ourselves,  
feeding the creatures,  
and carrying our waste  
to the upper deck  
where we empty it  
into the sea.

*Day 23*

The man  
whose children  
I carried  
comes to me  
in the night.  
He shudders  
on my breast  
like a cottonwood  
in the wind.  
Such a weight  
to be chosen.  
Our withered bodies,  
once as supple  
as the leopards  
sleeping nearby,  
rock slowly  
without words  
in the arms  
of the ocean.

*Day 28*

The dusty wings  
of the moths are fraying,  
their fragile veins exposed  
like roots exposed by winds  
in a dry season.

They are so determined  
to destroy themselves,  
dizzily flirting  
with flames.

Only now do  
I understand them;  
I've seen madness  
open a door and  
invite me  
to step through.

How much damage  
can we sustain?  
How long will  
the bees survive  
without nectar?



*Day 31*

Dear sweet mother,  
I've remembered  
your face, floating  
above your loom  
as we sat spinning  
nearby. Today  
I laid my hand  
on the head  
of a lion.  
His forehead was  
warm like mine.  
He had no interest  
in me. This is the end  
of our world, Mama,  
but they let me  
stay on. I will  
teach the children  
the secret to keeping  
the right tension between  
warp and weft.  
I will sing to them.  
I will teach them  
about seeds—  
if there is a place  
for us, Mama,  
I will.

*Day 38*

He's let the white bird  
go. The black one  
returned, its small  
exhausted body  
unwilling to fly again.  
He believes  
the words he heard.  
I confess I did not  
when he began  
the felling,  
the dragging  
of all the great trees,  
the building  
of this ark.  
I could not.  
But I have risen  
and fed all  
of us each day.  
We will wait.

*Day 47*

Oh sun  
oh happy light  
oh green!  
The sound  
of no rain.  
And in the mouth  
of the dove,  
the tiny branch  
of an olive.  
I am breaking  
open, at last,  
a lilac  
in April.



III.

Water Wanting Other Water

*Devotion*  
*for R.W.*

Tracking coyote at 3 a.m.  
in the wind of a Wyoming winter,  
she stood in the bed of the pick-up  
sweeping the antennae along the horizon  
for signals the collars made.  
Gloves were too clumsy  
for the necessary quickness,  
and her hands grew so cold,  
they seemed to separate  
from her body.

The animals moved as secretly as blood,  
and the signals came in a shower of beats,  
dancing off the mountains. Pinpointing  
their source was as difficult as trying  
to locate the heart in the body, with touch  
your only guide: first a throbbing in the neck,  
now the temple, now the wrist.

For fourteen months she followed them.  
She washed their scat in white cotton bags  
and discovered the stuff of medicine bundles:  
bird bones, rabbit claws, mice teeth.  
Once she looked one in the eye.  
There was no trace of recognition.

Today she steers my canoe.  
The creases we leave in the water's surface  
soon disappear  
like lines on the face of a child.  
Trees whisk a cup of blue.  
Insects and frogs, antiphonal.

We struggle to name the birds:  
kingfisher, cormorant, wren,  
and then laugh at the need to name them.  
She confesses sometimes she hears ghosts at night  
and laments love's hollow corridors.  
And when I read to her the Neruda ode,  
in which he rescues a bee from a web,  
she tells me she feels sad for the spider  
who's left hungry after all of her work.

*Upon Receiving a Book of Paintings*  
*for Gregory Manchess*

This is your light, this honey light,  
this late afternoon in October light.  
The clouds—dollops of melon and fresh cream—  
languor in a periwinkle sky, the blades  
of grass are swords of gold, the eastern slopes  
are bruising, and the milkweed is hosting a ballet.  
This is the life of your canvas.

Me, I've learned to set my jaw.  
I've learned not to talk of the gathering dusk,  
not to wear too many scarves,  
not to wish on dandelions.  
I've been tumbled smooth, hard and slick,  
with no rough spots, no knots. But today  
my surface was scarred.

You've found me with your paintbrush  
the way a geologist finds a fossilized shell  
hiding in the limestone—  
a patient, gentle breaking.



## *Water Wanting Other Water*

What is it  
that makes us want so much  
to collapse  
one into another?

Birds  
seem so satisfied  
in their separateness  
as they sweep  
through the many colors  
of sky.  
Even the mourning doves  
who wrap themselves  
in the sound of the other,  
never straying too far.

But we—  
like water wanting  
other water.  
Watch as the meniscus holds  
and holds,  
not wanting to be separate.

The longing that pulls us  
and pours out of us  
like water:  
the chords in a concerto,  
the words, you and I,  
grapes gathered for wine.  
How when cutting  
an avocado in half  
we want to say, *Look*,  
to someone, *Come, see*.

## *Resurrection of the Body*

After a long numbness  
the slippery soul glides in,  
and the tingling of return begins  
like so many needles pricking  
at once and everywhere,  
the nerve endings exploding,  
like roots sending tendrils  
creeping beneath the surface,  
wanting, and the air  
interrogates my skin:  
*Where have you been?*  
*Where were you hidden?*  
*Did you think you could get away with that here?*  
The terrified pulse leaps  
to the fingers that found it  
and this body, all mouth, begins to move,  
shift out of stiffness, grasping and melting  
into this April air, air of velvet, air of scent.  
Hunger hungers. Oh God, I remember:  
breath, breath of others,  
sand and blood,  
apples and salt,  
oh yes, I remember now  
this torture,  
this gift.

*Relational: Leonardo's Folio 3*

Every body that moves with velocity  
*each of us*  
appears to tint its path  
*with light*  
with the likeness of its color  
*as currency*  
for when a lightning bolt moves  
*there is glancing*  
among dark clouds  
*in the place of not looking*  
with the speed of its flight  
*opening*  
its entire path appears  
*from a darkness*  
like a luminous snake  
*entering*  
and if you move a burning coal  
*what is burning*  
in a circular movement  
*eyes returning eyes*  
the entire path will seem  
*only this*  
to be a burning circle.

*Relational: Leonardo's Folio 14*

The hand of the bird is that which causes the impetus  
*and we rise*  
and the elbow is then placed edgewise  
*situating angles*  
so as not to impede the motion that produces the impetus.  
*and then*  
And then when this impetus has been produced  
*the questions of keep*  
the elbow sinks and assumes a slanting position  
*the problems of glide*  
and the air on which it rests becomes slanting  
*what we seek*  
as if in the form of a wedge on which the wing  
*is not falling but*  
tends to rise and if the motion of the bird did not  
*if the motion did not*  
occur in this way, the bird would tend to descend  
*the falling which feels*  
toward the exhaustion of the impetus  
*which feels a bit*  
during the time when the wing is returning forward  
*like joy*  
but it cannot fall because as the impetus gives out  
*we readjust*  
the percussion of the elbow resists this descent  
*to catch ourselves from falling*  
in the same proportion  
*you and I*  
and raises the bird up again.

*Relational: Leonardo's Folio 53*

And if the eye that looks at the star  
    *or you*  
turns swiftly in an opposite direction  
    *away*  
it will appear to it that  
    *from here*  
this star forms in its stead  
    *still making*  
a curving line of fire  
    *in the absence*  
and this occurs because the eye  
    *what kindles*  
preserves for a time  
    *what is held*  
the image of the thing  
    *it sees*  
this thing that shines  
    *your eyes*  
and the impression  
    *your eyes*  
the radiance  
    *your eyes*  
is what endures.



## IV.

### Where Beauty Is Honed

## *Heiligschein*

“I write this to testify. . .”

— *Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571)*

Always, she remained open  
because on examining the bones of a wren  
she saw that wings are just hands, so open  
they’ve invited air to be an equal,  
one who will reciprocate as faithfully  
as a partner on a trapeze— carry and be carried.

And although she doubted that dewy morning,  
when she walked with her son and turned  
to see their two-headed shadow  
emanating a celadon glow, a halo in the grass,  
she changed position and looked again,  
and still the transparent gleam.

Like a bee in the sapphire cathedral of the iris,  
whose ecstasy is belied by his somnolent buzz,  
she stored this sweetness quietly.

And until the book, it tethered her  
as junipers on a mountainside are tethered  
by spiders’ elusive filaments to the rock.

But in the book she discovered an explanation,  
and that the goldsmith, Cellini, had been duped too.  
What they saw was no sign of some great gondolier,  
no proof of the divine, but *heiligschein*,  
a simple trick of radiance, water bending light.

Only then did she see that, of course, it is this  
to which she must cling, and the way  
the child’s body sinks back into hers in sleep,  
the existence of birds, dew.



## *Metaphor*

Beneath the maple, the child lifts  
her hands and becomes gossamer  
while a stream of air comes through her lips.

“Breeze,” someone says.

Then her fingers press  
a green flatness with ridges  
first to her palm, then to her cheek.

“Leaf,” someone says.

Above, watch as the trees articulate wind,  
allowing it wholly in,  
and how birds so easily navigate  
the chaos of branch and leaf.

How unequipped we are,  
intent on naming things,  
making maps. And how small  
our window, how very small.

But look, the child  
has discovered a nectarine  
in a bowl by the open door,  
and through its sweetness  
spills glossolalia.

## *Boy*

He bursts from the cattails  
clutching a bullfrog—  
the glabrous body slick with mud,  
thick legs outstretched,  
but somehow tranquil.  
His hands could easily crush  
this creature whose soft belly  
is the color of milk,  
who can breathe through her skin,  
whose only protections  
are a transparent eyelid  
and quickness.

This is the child who,  
in the darkness, unable  
to sleep, curls into  
the body he came from and asks,  
*But who invented war?* and  
*Can a bullet go through brick?*  
*Can a bullet go through steel?*

Now, at the water's edge,  
filled with a wild holiness,  
he navigates the balance,  
then lets the frog go.

*Bowl*  
*for my mother*

From the mud in her hands,  
the bowl was born.  
Opening like a flower  
in an arch of petals,  
then becoming a vessel  
both empty and full.

Later, in the kiln  
it was ravaged by fire,  
its surface etched and vitrified,  
searing the glaze into glass  
as its body turned  
to stone.

It is at the edge of damage  
that beauty is honed.  
And in Japan,  
the potter tells me,  
when a tea bowl  
cracks in the fire,  
that crack is filled  
with gold.

## *Parkinson's*

That which is known  
so quickly can be shattered.  
A splinter of insight,  
and the certain is cracked open,  
leaving behind it something  
as amorphous as light.

The way the words of Copernicus  
yanked the earth from stasis,  
and thrust it into rotation,  
sent it spinning wildly  
into the black.

Or how when I learned  
that my father was not invincible,  
my world tipped  
like a table set for dinner  
which is suddenly lifted from one end—  
everything sliding.  
Panic sets in,  
the scramble to catch  
what is not yet broken,  
then the search for a place  
that seems solid  
where you can sit down, hold  
your favorite teacup in your hands.

*Non-Attachment*  
*for A*

For months now, I've been practicing  
non-attachment,  
thinking about the once-only  
of the maple leaf drifting down.  
Trying not to cling too tightly  
when the five-year-old girl—  
who came from my body,  
who is going to kindergarten soon—  
takes my hand.

And how the land full of footpaths  
and deer tracks, home to the hawk I was sure  
understood me, land that belonged to my mother,  
was never really hers anyway, never mine,  
and how my sadness when she sold it  
was unenlightened.

And even when a friendship  
made of curry and dancing,  
the Himalayas and Virginia Woolf  
and oh, so many dandelions,  
suddenly shifted to include  
mouths and hands,  
still I was trying so hard  
to keep a distance.

But then last night,  
in a neighbor's darkening yard,

amid squeals of children on swings  
and plates piled high with  
bratwurst, tortilla chips and melon,  
my friend began telling me  
about her recovery  
from her brain tumor,  
about the terrible hallucinations,  
how last year she didn't think  
she would see her son  
graduate from high school.  
And when I uttered those words—  
ephemeral and non-attachment—  
she said, no, that I had it all wrong.  
She said it with tears in her eyes.  
“No,” she said, “You have to attach.  
You have to attach  
to everything.”





Heather Swan has an MFA from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and has been the recipient of The Wisconsin Center for the Book Bookmark Award, the August Derleth Award, a Martha Meier Renk Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship Finalist Award. Her poems have appeared in *The Cream City Review*, *Iris*, *Mothering Magazine*, *Dossier Journal*, *Outlet*, *Forward*, *Wisconsin People and Ideas*, *The Wisconsin Poets Calendar*, and *The Comstock Review*, among others.







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