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Target Practice

POETRY BY

Jan Chronister



PARALLEL PRESS

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

Target Practice

Poems by
Jan Chronister



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I gratefully acknowledge the following journals and publications in which these poems were previously published: “At St. Mary’s After the Accident,” *Dust & Fire*; “At the Table,” *Wisconsin Academy Review* and *Family Gathering*; “Aunt Martha,” *Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Poetry Quilt*; “Backfilling,” *Dust & Fire*; “Body of Work,” *Verbal-Visual*; “Blue Bowl in Late October Sun,” *Mush*; “Dreamboat,” *Gypsy Cab*; “Effect of Sleeping Children,” *Dust & Fire*; “Farmhouse Steps,” *Dust & Fire*; “French Lilacs,” *Dust & Fire*; “Grandfather’s Arms,” *Shared Visions*; “Hidden Stuff,” *Mother Superior*, *Vacations*, and *Trail Guide*; “Life in Oulu,” *Wisconsin Academy Conference Anthology*, and *Trail Guide*; “Lull,” *Wisconsin Poets’ Calendar*, 2001; “Making Beds in North Dakota,” *New Review*; “Morning Meal,” *Dust & Fire*; “Opening Night,” *North Coast Review*; “Playing Marbles,” *Dust & Fire*; “Radium Girl,” *Dust & Fire*; “Raking Leaves,” *Open Water* and *Trail Guide*; “Ruby’s Amaryllis,” *Dust & Fire*; “Sitting on the Septic Tank,” *Wisconsin Poets’ Calendar*, 2002; “Steel Hearts,” *Between Stone and Flesh* (Lake Superior Writers); “Target Practice,” *Dust & Fire*; and “The Price of Milk,” *Dust & Fire*.

To Micki, who always wanted a book of my poems

Contents

Dreamboat	9
Playing Marbles	10
Radium Girl	11
Steel Hearts	12
The Price of Milk	13
Ruby's Amaryllis	14
Divorce	15
Aunt Martha	16
Blue Bowl in Late October Sun	17
Life in Oulu	18
Grandfather's Arms	19
Hidden Stuff	20
Opening Night	21
Lull	22
Raking Leaves	23
At the Table	24
Making Beds in North Dakota	25
Farmhouse Steps	26
The Effect of Sleeping Children	27
Workhorse	28
Sitting on the Septic Tank	29
Backfilling	30
At St. Mary's After the Accident	31
Body of Work	32
War Story	33
Addicted to Roads	34
French Lilacs	35
Morning Meal	36
Target Practice	37

Dreamboat

Wynken, Blynken, and Nod
was a Milwaukee motel
where high school Romeos
took their dates.
My boyfriend gondoliered me there
one Saturday night.

All I remember
are three neon heads
and feeling awfully sick.

Sunday morning
my cargo of guilt
almost sank me.

Playing Marbles

In grade school
at recess time
we ran outside,
dug holes in the playground,
drew rings around them
twelve inches out,
circle within a circle,
target of all our ambitions.

We'd shoot marbles;
spit and sweat
mixing with dust,
flicking dirty fingers
against shiny spheres of glass and steel,
colors bright against dull sand.

At the bell
we declared a truce,
returned marble bags to
pockets and desks,
miniature worlds
at rest from war.

I outgrew playground games,
pigtails and plaid dresses,
watched real battles in Vietnam,
wounds deeper than bandaged knees.

My father keeps my marbles in a flower pot,
discarded planets of a lost universe,
pearls of a forgotten peace.

Radium Girl

Painting clock faces
with radium,
sharpening the brush tip
between her lips,
she gets the idea
to paint her teeth
so lovers can see her smile
glowing in the dark.

She died a long time ago,
right after the second war,
her mouth a miniature Hiroshima.

Steel Hearts

She wears steel hearts
hanging from her ears,
glistening like the hood
of her daughter's gray car
buckled around a pole.

Steely like
dentist's tools touching teeth,
a cold mailbox
holding bills.

Love is not red and soft
and chocolate,
it is marcasite and salt and ice,
frozen waves of Superior
on the freighter deck
her father went down on,
broken hull
lying stiff in dark depths.

Love is wet hands on
aluminum doors at
twenty below,
digging out tires
embedded in snow
with nothing but a cardboard box.

A bell tolls,
a lock turns.
She hammers an unforgiving nail
and steels her heart.

The Price of Milk

Bonnie never had to buy milk before.
Her husband worked in a dairy,
bringing home more than enough.

At first the price shocked her.
Maybe she should have worked something out,
some kind of joint custody for quarts.

She felt guilty paying for it,
watching it move down the slick, black conveyor,
a public admission of failure.

It was a high price to pay
considering she never had a job
except keeping corners and cabinets clean,
watching beer come and go,
the walls fill up with taxidermy.

Bonnie's kids grew tall,
standing in the back in photographs
of basketball and confirmation.

Now they come and go on weekends,
reminding her to buy milk.

Ruby's Amaryllis

On a table
in her Florida living room
sits the amaryllis
we gave my mother-in-law for Christmas.

Four cocooned blooms
pose ready to burst,
tempting her with visions
of scarlet glory.

But they are not red,
they're "candy-striped,"
a variation,
something different to amuse her.

They refuse to open
during our visit,
heavy arms of a crucifix
pregnant with mystery.

Ruby's lived in the South
for forty years,
moves slowly in thick air,
still says "colored."

As we drive north through Georgia,
the buds open,
white sheet petals streaked with blood,
screaming at us like a burning cross.

Divorce

For twenty years she carried
fragile panes of window glass
up the fire tower steps.
Why was she surprised to find
she had nothing to show;
her life sucked into the vacuum cleaner
with lost buttons, stray pins, single earrings.

Surprised,
as if she didn't know
that a bag of broken glass,
when dropped from the tower's top,
becomes a mound of crystal dust.

Aunt Martha

She lived up narrow side stairs
over Edgerton's theater,
curtained her cupboards
with flour sacks hung on wires.

Her husband was a heavy smoking truck driver
who filled skinny legged fuel tank bellies.

She was grandma's solid sister,
bulging tulips bulbs side by side.

The wallpaper surrounding her bedroom switchplate
was brown and torn
from years of searching for the light.

When she died
they found uncle's Standard Oil stock
under the peeling paper,
covering all four walls.

Blue Bowl in Late October Sun

On the braided rug
the glass bowl casts a luminescent shadow,
capturing time in its circle.

Outside on trees
single leaves sway
in a metronome rhythm,
heartbeat of death.
They fall fast to the ground;
cold gold coins dumped
from a pirate's chest.

Sunlit bowl
reminds me of New Year's Lake Superior,
mystery of blue ice
rising and folding like mountains,
jagged broken edges
sharp as glass.

If I fill the bowl with water
will it sing like a flute
or howl like the beast below?

Life in Oulu

In 1926

every forty acres a homestead;
mailboxes read like
Finland's map,
Wentala
Yrjanainen
Rantala
Suihkonnen,
neighbors offering
placenta pudding
pickle recipes
over strong coffee
in the basement of the Lutheran Church.

Before they closed the co-op
you could buy big boxes of matches
cheesecloth by the yard
milk filters
aluminum funnels
kerosene,
listen to Reino's bobbing conversation
with first generation settlers.

Elm trees that once roofed pastures
are gone,
anguished limbs piled like Holocaust bones.
Hayfields surrender to popple,
orchards retreat to weeds.

Tall frame houses close their eyes,
fall down in sleep,
sweet-filled barns and midsummer fires
a forgotten dream.

Grandfather's Arms

In summer
at his Lone Rock kitchen table
my grandfather would eat next to me,
wearing a sleeveless shirt.
I tried not to look at bright red arms and neck
abruptly ending where a moth-like whiteness
spread its wings.
On parchment arms
blackberry pens had scratched delicate crosses,
stars of far-off constellations
I was forbidden to visit.

Every morning
he injected insulin into blue-veined marble skin
like a quarry blaster drilling dynamite.

While planting potatoes,
his arms shovel pumping, he told me,
“Some things have to be cut before they grow.”

They brought my mother to him,
orphaned by fever and falling trees.

His arms answered the question
before it was even asked.

Hidden Stuff

Just once I'd like to have a day
to do nothing but watch hawks
and treetop eagles.

Stand by a river when winter melts
and Spring flexes her muscles,
the Embarrass or Brule
would do just fine.

Feel the weight of frozen months
rise with the boiling sap steam,
my feet once more anchored
to brown, soft ground,
soup stock where ancient elements swim,
hidden stuff of Emerson.

Opening Night

Cowslips in ditches
ready to bloom,
crisp new currency of Spring.

Amphibians jam,
frogs tune up
on fern frond French horns.

Slim glimmer of moon,
edge of silver sequin
on evening's gown.

Stage curtained
with Northern Lights,
a limited engagement.

Lull

I drive slowly up Wildcat Mountain
following serpentine golden signs.

At the summit
hawks float motionless,
a mobile suspended on invisible wires.

I descend,
ears popping,
hay drying on rounded fields
surrounded by stoic farmhouses
holding secrets—
families torn apart,
sons killed in war,
daughters married to milking.

My grandmother lived in such a place,
photographed outside by the clothesline,
standing in long skirt and apron
lifting high my infant mother,
smiles on both faces
before her third childbirth killed her.

This day is a timeless space
between August and October,
caught in a bell jar,
a perfectly balanced vacuum.

Sumac bruises and dry grass
betray summer's age.
My tires thud on mudless roads,
a lullaby before winter's night.

Raking Leaves

Hurried by a warm all-hallow's wind
I comb grass like a mortician.

Dry leaves embalmed on damp moss
have said good-bye to their birthtree.

Last rites of raking
bury them
in a windless grave,
to be reborn
in bird bellies and April buds.

Small brown fragments
like pottery shards
stick to my socks
and fall inside my shoes.

I find them at night
on my bedroom rug,
pieces of eternity's
parchment map.

At the Table

Saffron crocus stamen threads
color bread Buddhist yellow,
moor me like salt-encrusted ropes
to the pedestal my grandmother served from
on holidays.

From that table
silken cords of conversation
connected me to eastern islands
where traveling aunts
trod ancestral graves.

In my veins I feel the kitestring tug
that pulled hardy Welsh
to Wisconsin's Wyoming valley,
where bands of ancient limestone,
unscoured by ice,
wrinkle horizon's shining brow.

Muffin hills frame towns hopefully named—
Richland Center, Black Earth, Spring Green.
Minds never far from footfelt goodness,
reins in hand, ready to plant.

My aunts work in factories now,
beat down by corporate farms.
They drive past brown city snowbanks
like crumbs on grandma's white cloth.

Making Beds in North Dakota

Ancient Turtle Mountains
whisper lullabies,
tales of floods and buffalo.

Hills furcoated with wheatheads,
silo turrets,
fortress farms
surrounded by miles of golden moat.

White granaries and steeples
cluster on tic-tac-toe board towns,
namesakes of Scandinavian settlers
who pieced the old quilt
that conceals the sleeping history
of another people
kept warm by their own
blanket of names.

Farmhouse Steps

Grandma walks in flat-soled shoes
up her back door steps,
one solid block of Wisconsin limestone
smooth from countless sweepings,
sun-bleached,
with boot-worn grooves where water gathers.

Age has weathered her powder-soft skin,
wrinkles washed away by rain
like sedimentary veins in rock.

Only fossil thoughts
disturb the pale surface
of puddles.

The Effect of Sleeping Children

Exploding white chrysanthemums,
fireworks of falling snow
seen through the windshield
at fifty-five miles per hour
comes close to hypnosis.

In the back seat
our sleeping children trust us
with surveillance of storms,
conquering cold,
fighting fire.

We feed them our profits,
keep projects closeted,
cultivate patience
and pay bills.

Sleeping children keep us
from drinking daydreams,
from hypnotic bombardments of light.

Workhorse

At the end of her shift
at the taco plant,
Patty loads her Pinto
with broken shells
to feed her pigs and chickens.

She's worked there long enough
to freckle her arms with grease burns
clear up to the elbows.
Long enough to wreck her marriage
and move back in with ma.

Silent wealth of cordwood
sits in the yard,
giant rug wings flap on the line,
snapping at air,
going nowhere.
A cosmic whip
flicking a nonexistent team.

Patty leaves her husband's name on the mailbox
hanging over the highway;
a wooden horse with reflector eyes,
waiting to be fed.

Sitting on the Septic Tank

9:00 a.m.

country Sunday morning,
once proud marigolds are
deflated balloons.

I think of blankets, soup,
buying new tires
and it's only September.

Tomatoes, peppers, cukes,
crowd windowsills,
refugees from frost.

Woodpiles grow,
everything driven
by the urge to gather.

Even the cat has left her
doormat offering,
mousetails
curled like shepherds' crooks,
question marks
at the end of summer.

Backfilling

Sentenced to a rare respite by surgery,
I dig through drawers,
uncover old photographs,
scribbled poems,
and recipes of promise.

Artifacts saved
because someday
I am going to do something with them.

But today memories are anesthesia
and early darkness drugs my mind.

Like an archeologist who has
unearthed and catalogued a site,
I bulldoze backfill over the cache,
preserving it for future digs.

At St. Mary's After the Accident

—*For Dagny*

IV drips,
slowly dispensing clear fluid
through tubes and
angel-shaped pouches.

Outside,
Lake Superior's waves writhe
like bodies in a painting by Bosch.

My x-rays are clear and strong,
ribs sweeping out from
a Viking ship prow.

Yours are cloudy and broken,
like the windshield of the car
we rode in,
collided at 65 miles per hour.

You lay silent and still,
an old vessel in drydock,
waiting for repairs.

Christened long ago with holy water,
you will sail again.

*Dagny died three days after this poem was written, one month before her
86th birthday.*

Body of Work

My Montana aunt pieces huge Hawaiian quilts
reminiscent of paper snowflakes joined at the hip.

On this monotonous land,
snowdrifts window-high,
she is a tropical flower draped in bright cloth petals.

She takes us to Lame Deer where tiny round beads
are stitched shoulder to shoulder,
seeds of Little Bighorn.

Linda Littlewolf rolls shining globes
between her fingers,
remembers buffalo hunts
and slain Cheyenne warriors;
looks with hope at quarterback sons
and powwow dancing daughters.

War Story

Eating, finally,
after a horrific day of
bombs and battle,
rough edges of first world war,
you pull out dry bread,
sit down under a tree,
an oak
though all its leaves
are blasted off.

About to eat,
a drop falls on your meal
from that wiry nest,
and then another.

Looking up you see a Prussian
caught in branches
like puree in a sieve.

Before you bite,
his helmet drops at your side,
its spike a giant thorn.

Like a burr stuck to a shirt,
you carry it home,
hang it on the living room wall,
a trophy of your survival.

Addicted to Roads

They're four-laning Highway 29,
laying the lines.

I drive by picture perfect farms
framed in gardens,
rock walls winding up hills along
edges of forests where trilliums bloom
like stars in cool shade.

Who supports this highway habit,
decides which towns to tie off,
whose fields to ruin?

Cement truck syringes spit out smooth white concrete,
inject their drug into roadbeds.

Now the four-lane runs unimpeded,
tracks in an addict's arm,
and contractors look for the next road to fix.

French Lilacs

In my yard the lilac bush waits,
late as usual
being the French type with deep-veined leaves.
Rain comes down in torrents
but soon bugle-like buds
will burst open in a reveille of blossoms.

Steam rises from the sun-heated road,
blown by warm wind into wishful billows.

I'm studying the Holocaust,
appalled as the world ignores
warning trumpets,
lulled on both sides of the wall
into repeating wait and see,
be patient,
don't think about the unthinkable.

Somewhere in Warsaw lies a buried cache of
diaries recounting hardships: a daily diet of 220 calories,
one egg a month.

It's Spring, 1945.
At the camps children are fed poisoned soup,
wheelbarrows dump still-plump babies onto fires fueled
by their mothers' fat.
Smoke rises from chimneys and outdoor pits
in a frantic rush to destroy corpses.
Survivors see their kin in the clouds.

When the Allies liberated Auschwitz, the lilacs finally bloomed.

Morning Meal

Sleek crows
line roadsides
like black-suited men
at a breakfast counter,
wait for traffic to clear
so they can get down to business.

Calendars and caffeine
fill my mind,
mouth tearing a bagel.

A bird flies up, hits my windshield.
I'm going too fast to react
but slow enough to hear wing bones crack
and a quiet universal gasp
before the dark swallowing of death.

Target Practice

Zinnia seeds fill my quiver,
flat flakes of flint,
tiny arrowheads with
pale petal shafts still attached.

I shoot them into furrows toward August
where they explode in fireworks
of gold and fuchsia.

I kneel to the power
of something so small and hard,
magnets attracting moon messages,
germinating,
magically emerging in vibrant blooms.

As I plant
I feel a wound in my heart,
as if some well-aimed ammunition
has found its mark.



Jan Chronister has been writing poetry for over forty years. She has been published in state, regional, and national anthologies and is a two-time winner of the Lake Superior Writers Contest. She has also won awards in contests sponsored by the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, the Tallgrass Writers Guild (IN), and the Brainerd (MN) Writers Alliance.

Jan is a contributor to *Dust & Fire*, an anthology of women's writing published annually by Bemidji State University, and received their 2008 Diane Glancy Award for Poetry. Her poetry also frequently appears in the *Wisconsin Poets' Calendar*. Twelve of her poems have been published as collaborations with printmakers by the Northern Printmakers Alliance in Duluth, Minnesota.

Jan currently teaches college-level English as an adjunct instructor. She has a son and daughter, both graduates of UW–Madison, and two grandchildren. She lives with her husband in the woods near Maple, Wisconsin.

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