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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

SINGING
to the
GARDEN

POEMS BY ROGER PFINGSTON

A retired teacher of English and photography, ROGER PFINGSTON published some of his first poems in the *New York Times* while still in the navy in the early '60s. Since that time his work has appeared in a wide range of magazines and anthologies as well as ten chapbooks and one full-length collection. He is the recipient of a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and two PEN Syndicated Fiction Awards.

Parallel Press is an imprint of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries.

ISBN 1-893311-32-5

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

*Singing to
the Garden*

Poems by
ROGER PFINGSTON



PARALLEL PRESS • 2003

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ISBN 1-893311-32-5

Thanks to the editors of the following magazines and anthologies where some of these poems first appeared: *Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry* (1986–1988 Edition), *Arts Indiana Literary Supplement*, *Down the River*, *5 AM*, *The Flying Island*, *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Hopewell Review*, *Intimate Kisses: The Poetry of Sexual Pleasure* (New World Library, 2000), *The Laurel Review*, *The Ledge*, *Mediphors*, *Paragraph*, *PoetryMagazine* (online), *The Poet's Canvas* (online), *Rafters*, *Since Feeling Is First* (Scott, Foresman & Co., 1971), *Snowy Egret*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review*.

Published by Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin – Madison Libraries

FIRST EDITION

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For the Lender of Rooms

. . . poetry feeds on silence.

—Louis Simpson

Today, in a borrowed room,
I write myself in the middle
of a field, the one framed
by the window that lights my desk.
Overhead, silent hunger spirals
out of the sun, down to a target
of flies. A horse appears,
a rippling sorrel that feeds
or follows as she wishes.
I turn in the waist-high grass
and wave a truck forward.
It lurches through the gate,
the driver grinning, gearing
for speed, his face a birthmark.
I twist a fistful of mane
and half jump, pulling myself up.
When the truck slams into the horse
her eyes glaze, enlarge and merge,
becoming the pond in which I fall
naked, shivering, letting the
water take me. Floating on my back
I drown in the pleasure of my
buoyancy, my hands swimming away
like slow fish, between my legs
the pale stem of a dark
inverted flower. I turn and dive,
slicing deeper still to a thin
milk-light, glide and touch
belly down in the silken mud
where the feeding begins.

Cicadas

Spring, 1987

Bloomington, Indiana

After seventeen years
in the mineral dark
cicadas do not whisper.
Around the maple, the redbud,
their holes honeycomb
the ground, the air a stink
of molted skin and spent adult.
Even after the worst of storms
their shells still cling
to bark and leaf
like tiny metal sculptures.

*

Having tossed the plastic bag
into his dripping truck,
the garbage man grins and says
the dogs don't like them.
Says, too, that a W on the wing
means seventeen years of war;
a P on the wing, seventeen years
of peace. And then, with sleight
of hand, he plucks one out
of the air, holds it up—red-eyed,
its body thick as a thumb—and points,
still grinning, to nature's
little joke: the perfectly etched W.

*

Out early, the new neighbor
from Chicago ponders his yard,
perturbed by the nature of things.
He brushes them off *his* trees,
his bushes, squashing them
with a twisting stomp and a curse
that the girl next door repeats
for her friends on the bus,
her hand cupped over her mouth.

In the dark of her locker, deep
in her book bag, one crawls
toward the slatted light,
a male that fills the empty hall
with a train of pulses,
singing his one desire.

Sunday Drive

In the spring, when rivers rise, I return
to where the river rose in southern Indiana
as we drove the backroads after Sunday dinner,
sightseeing in our blue Chevy. Among derelict
houses, men and women sat in boats half sunk
with the weight of their lives: tables, chairs,
machinery salvaged from barns and porches,
quilts stacked or strewn, their frayed edges
dragging in the muddy water, animals gathered
oddly quiet (*with trust*, my father said,
remembering the flood of '37). And we stopped
and pointed, awed by the power of rain
become river patiently lapping at the road's
edge as I danced back, a child laughing,
unable to imagine tractors plowing bottom land,
dust rising sun-shot with the planting of corn.
At the end of the road we found again
the run-down filling station, only a hard rain
from going under, where I drank my mother's
promised treat, an Orange Crush, *and nothing more*,
she said, recalling the shock of chocolate bars
alive with worms the year before. And then,
on higher ground, I slept the highway home.

Poem at Dusk

Silent except the soft thrust
of the trowel as you work
the ground around the flowers.

Reading here an hour now,
a dry windless evening
near the maple, I slant the book

toward the light that keeps
the shrill nightsongs tight
under the wings of things

just beginning to stir
in tiny rooms of bark
and earth. On the limb above

a bee slips in one end
of a bamboo chime.
The action of humming in

plinks the chime against
another. In the garden,
you turn and smile

as if I had said your name.

To Make the Evening Mine

Purple-faced pansies sing
a cappella this evening,
their one note soft and yellow
unlike the two Dalmatians
and a German shepherd that race
a boy into the woods and out again,
their strident play enough to raise
the fur on a moon-white cat.

And now the boy's father shreds
the air with his mower, will not
give up the grass until it's smooth
as a pool table's green.

If I had a wish it would be bats . . .
flying foxes . . . their faces glazed
with juice and pollen,
a ragged darkness meant
to frighten home this intrusive brood
of pets and neighbors while I
pour yet another glass . . . little bells
of ice . . . the music of fireflies.

Spring Appointment

Pregnant, eight months,
maybe a full-blown nine,
wind whipping her blouse up
and what does she care,
standing there with that smile,
and for whom? Not me,
just pulling in, who can't even
find a parking place in this
doctors' mall on a sunny pink
dogwood day while this mother
of a woman, peach skinned
and gloriously round, stands
at the edge of the curb
and smiles straight at me
or through me or maybe it's
the wind she sees,
a corporal shape equally round
and tossing blossoms,
so beside herself with smiling
that I just sit there watching her
even though I'm already late
and know the office is wall
to wall, men mostly, sitting
on their enlarged prostates,
maybe leaning a little as they stare
or flip through December's *People*,
waiting to pee in a cup.

Darwin's Mimosa

When it started raining this morning I woke from a dream of something I'd read years ago, an experiment of Darwin's in which he played his bassoon to a mimosa plant to see if he could stimulate the feathery leaflets into movement.

It was warm and humid and my wife lay naked beside me with the sheets crumpled around her ankles. It was the beginning of what I knew would be one of those slow, sibilant, day-long rains, the gray threads nearly invisible unless looked at against dark foliage.

At seven a.m., under a black umbrella, I walked out to my backyard garden, a modest act of horticulture, nothing but potato plants, rows of lush green made greener still by the light of an overcast sky. As I stood at the edge of the garden I began to weep for no reason I could think of, and then for all the reasons I could think of. I felt for a moment like the Chinese poets who nurtured their sadness, usually with a little wine to help them along.

When I got back to the house my wife and I made love and then we made breakfast together. While we ate I told her about my dream and what a failure Darwin's experiment had been. She asked if my singing had produced any noticeable results.

"Singing?" I asked.

"I could've sworn I heard you singing to the garden early this morning," she said.

Under Mid-American Stars

That time again, we drive past the stadium
where thousands jam at dusk to see up close
what we will see while spread leisurely
on blankets like other families on the hill
below the carillon. Among fireworks
of children we wait to be thrilled by sky-
divers poised at the open door of a plane
that climbs a wide spiral, unlike the swarm
of bugs above us. I light a Muriel Coronella,
as much for the sound as the protective smoke,
the final syllable flicking at the roof of my mouth.
In nervous numbers they shape their humming
elsewhere, propelled by tiny engines
that do not stall like the plane signaling
the dive, ribbons of red, white and blue
trailing a triple plunge like patriotic
suicides until they pop their silk pods
over a target of grass, one only moments
from losing air support and falling into
the crowd . . . but that's tomorrow's headlines.
Just now the first rocket whistles up the sky,
freezing the hillside like a flash photo
in a spidery burst of fiery, slow descending
segments. A good audience, we oooh
and aaah, rising to point out our favorites,
then lie back under a stoic moon with cold
drinks and popcorn still warm in Tupperware,
mid-American stars burning like an afterglow.

An Ordinary Man

He sat for a while on the back porch
finishing his coffee, letting the breeze
pleasure his skin like the hands
of a woman holding his face.

The birdfeeder that he'd filled only
yesterday hung empty in the maple,
seed scattered bright as jewels
in the dark mulch of the flower garden,
the work of a clever raccoon. He laughed,
marveling at such enterprise, then placed
the pad of paper on his knee and began,
"Scatter my ashes where they will do
the least harm. . . ." The cat in the tree
jumped from a low limb and landed
in a palette of poppies and daylilies,
his wife's perennial gift.

At the far end of the septic field
seepage glistened in the tall grass,
a watery sludge feeding a green
worth singing about, a lush growth
of back-lit blades in the morning sun.
Before going into the house he leaned
forward and spoke his name aloud,
addressing the backyard as though his voice
might carve the silence in some memorable way.

Fallen Apples

Such a waste, we thought,
to let the apples fall
and rot from green to amber.

Last evening on the mower
I could not cut the grass
within ten feet of the trunk,
so thick the living carpet
of wasps and honeybees,
the easy-angered yellow jackets.

Instead, I watched them work
the sweet, white meat
in the low light that painted
the grass, the tree, the garden
squared off and bright with pumpkins,
butternut and turban squash,
tomatoes red enough to split.

With the motor off
I could hear them,
a distant sawing,
a drunken, midair stumbling
to try yet another
as if it might be sweeter
than the one before.

Some burrowed sticky tunnels.
Others flew straight off,
their tiny traffic in and out
a thrumming that diminished
to the silence of dusk,
apples glowing in the tall grass.

Art Fair

At exactly two p.m. the rains came
with hardly a bruised cloud,
not even a distant drumming,
so that most, both patrons and artists,
were caught unawares, some their work undone,
others their latent art becoming apparent
as t-shirts, blouses (some defined by bras,
some not) seemed to melt away
or merge with skin
till a joyful measure of breasts
revealed itself, darkly tipped,
and I was there to see it all,
the ladies wet but unabashed,
their upper torsos rhythmic as the rain
that sent them running for the cover of trees,
cars, awnings, and I was there,
drenched under a vendor's tent,
a patron of the arts still grinning
with gratitude when the sun broke through
like a jealous painter, slowing the day
to a stroll, a nod, a casual purchase.

Haiti, Iraq, Bosnia

The backyard a church of sorts,
maple leaves dying a brilliant death,
sky the blue of my mother's Sunday dress.
When she called last night my wife and I
had just sat down to watch the news
after catching a tree frog crawling up
the living room wall, no doubt from one
of the plants brought in from the cold.

My mother had news of her own about
a deer that leapt the fence to eat pears,
how raccoons raided the garden behind
the garage and cleaned out the last of the corn.
Just called to talk, she said, and we did
until the news was over and rain began,
pouring a lovely sound like a rush
of wings, or a timpani of brushed leaves.

The Old Woman Jane Found

We didn't even know her name,
a widow newly moved to the only
rental on the block, one side
of a peeling duplex, her porch light
burning on a bright autumn day.
Jane, a good neighbor, had gone
to tell her so. That's when
the sheriff came, no siren, stopped
with a squeal, blue light flashing,
luring neighbors, kids on bikes,
even Nikki Wray from down the street
who cheers for the high school.

Having called our paperboy back
to deliver no doubt the hottest news
of his ten years, we asked what
was going on. He was quick to tell
how the rug was twisted under her legs,
how her face was all scary and how
the cat might've done it, still eating
from the spilt box of 9 Lives
when the sheriff broke the glass,
reached in and opened the door.
"Eighty-eight and dead," the boy said,
"the old woman Jane found."

Occasion

We wake entangled,
leg over leg,
frightened out
of darkness by light
that would not burn
an hour ago in wind
and storm. Five a.m.
tolls like a buoy.
Naked, I rise
grotesquely shadowed
to kill the glare.
Something remembered
(the promise of
morning love?)
brings me down again,
my hand between
your thighs carving a
sweet red wound.
Your breasts float up
to meet my hands
and lips. We crawl
through each other
and back again
guided by our blood-
electric fingertips.
I swim in you,
you in me until we
drift down, slowly
settling in anemone
of pillowed hair,
entangled leg and arm,
beneath our tongues
a dream of fruit,
tide of sunlight
inching over the dark
planetary coast.

The Man

A one-legged, Great War doughboy,
you wept night after night
in your wife's arms with the pain
of the missing limb while year
after year you worked your ground
with mules and plow, a farmer
fifty years out of synch
with the world. And always,
as insects droned like biplanes
around your sweat-stained hat,
you took your lunch under a hard
maple at the edge of the field,
beside you the greasy sack filled
with chicken fried that morning,
buttered bread, a tomato big
as a softball, a wedge of cake
wrapped in wax paper, and for
your thirst a gallon jar of tea.

In the final years your name
meant no more to you than the names
of those who sat up nights wondering
how much had burnt away in the slow
fire of disease, wondering too
what the ashes retained behind eyes
that stared like a stranger. When you
thrashed your arms, determined
to rise, they held the hand
that reached out, and kissed your
stubbled cheek back to the pillow.

At the funeral home your wife
stood by, still holding your hand,
as your son, drunk, swore no
doctor ever legalized your death
and he would sue. A daughter
from Kansas arrived too late
to see you into the earth and left
the same day, *her job*, she said.

Twice the pastor's words
were lost to low-flying jets
and a string of cattle cars
rumbling south of the cemetery.
On the narrow road winding among
the stones the mule-drawn wagon
stood empty, the wooden bed
freshly scarred by your flag-
draped coffin. It was summer. Hot.

Septicus Interruptus

No doubt about it, we had a serious
back-up: seepage at the surface,
the riding mower sinking, slipping
in the telltale sludge, the grass gone sci-fi.

Having called Dan the Sewer Man
(small type in the Yellow Pages,
surely a man of modest rates),
I found myself standing at the edge
of a round abyss, staring at condoms
floating like jellyfish in the black dregs
of the septic tank, others tangled
with roots in the drain pipe.

"Your stoppage," Dan said with a nod,
a reprimand that left me wondering
which of our overnight friends
had flushed with such abandon.

At first I was puzzled by the milky blobs
(not having used one for twenty years myself),
truly bewildered as Dan instructed me
on how the septic system deals with waste
but cannot tolerate such inorganic matter.

I wanted to explain my wife's
tubal ligation, apologize for the "friends"
it might've been, but stepped back instead,
revelation's mud clinging to my shoes,
and made some excuse about my checkbook,
still in the house, hoping even Dan might be
silenced by the prospect of quick payment.

The Possum

Who ever thought he'd raise
such a stink, the possum
I shoveled off the road
and into the woods. Together
we left a smear of blood
that I covered with sand
as I might a spillage of oil
on the garage floor.
When he reappeared I thought
at first it was some plaything
of the cat's left to crawl away
and rot in who knows what
unreachable darkness.
It took two days of coming
home to that rancid corridor
of air to realize the source.
Shovel in hand and masked
with a red bandana, I found it
moving, or so it seemed,
under a swarm of maggots,
and as I shoveled fresh dirt
over the bloated carcass
I cursed it with every breath
I took. The next day it rained,
and the next, and for days after
there was a thin trace until
I forgot about it, the offensive
flesh reduced to a wrack
of bones for some kid to find
and marvel over playing
one day in the woods as I
might've done forty years ago,
dropping to my knees in awe.

Emmett's Decision

after a photograph by Sally Mann

The last time Emmett modeled nude he was nine years old. It was at the lake, late one afternoon. As he emerged from the water, still waist deep, his dark hair pasted against his forehead, his ribbed chest glistening, I asked him to please let me photograph him. He stood glaring at me. I asked him to come forward just a step or two and let his outspread hands hover over the glassy surface. His waist tapered to the groin where his small penis floated under a few inches of liquid light. He said this would be the last time, that he was too old to be photographed naked. If this was to be the last time, I said, could I have a smile? He refused. Take the picture, he said, so I can go back. Go back where? I asked. Back there, he said, pointing to that part of the lake in deep shadow where a stand of trees grew at the edge, their roots emerging twisted and gnarled in the lower bank. I had seen him there often, sitting and leaning back on one root that extended like an arm. What's so important over there? Besides, it'll be dark soon, I said, focusing the camera. As soon as I pressed the shutter release Emmett smiled and asked what we were having for dinner. You rascal, I said. Let me take just one more. No, he said, and then he turned and swam away, his thin body suddenly a presence of power in the lake.

Two Boys/1952

From Pigeon Creek we entered the river
in a rough crosscurrent,
our rowboat powered by a motor
much too small for such waters,
a summer afternoon of dangerous play
catching the waves of barges
making their way down the wide Ohio
between Kentucky and Indiana.

We rode the boat, pitching,
our bare skin pink under a
cloudless sky, spray lashing our
faces, drowning our cries, two boys
twelve years old and scared ecstatic
in the wake of a coal barge,
river sailors at the stern
shaking their heads in disbelief.

At times, on either side
of our quest for waves, sleek
pleasure boats pulled up. What luck,
we thought, girls in bright bikinis,
their skin liquid brown though what
they flashed was white as the moon,
laughing with their stud boyfriends
who fingered the air and left us

besieged by waters breaking bow
and crosswise, one steering,
the other bailing with Tupperware
that earlier held bologna and cookies,
all of this happening so fast
we thought surely we would capsize,
drown with no I.D., our parents
angry, sick with worry . . . grief.

In the lull of waiting for barges
we took to the bank in the shade
of a sycamore, Kentucky side,
and slaked our thirst with Coke-
filled canteens as the water lapped
muddy at our green boat, the dull
traffic of downtown Evansville obscured
by the glare of mile-wide river

that we tried to imagine frozen over
thick enough to drive a car across,
this in the 1920's, according to stories
our fathers told. Or the great flood
of '37, streets surreal with boats
floating over the tops of cars,
livestock entangled in the limbs
of trees after the water receded.

Late afternoon, we set out again,
steering for the dark speck up river,
figuring one last thrill before
heading home, a slow ten miles
of Pigeon Creek: houseboats, hobo fires
under bridges, fishermen cursing our
presence, kids like us knee-deep
in shallow water hunting crayfish.

Running from bow to stern, waving,
shouting, they tried to turn us back
as we aimed for the starboard side,
angling for the killer waves,
the rise and fall, the hard smack
of wood pounded by water, foolish boys
under a June sun, not long
for this life even then . . . even now.

Fidelity

The invented person, borrowed from the real. . . .

—Stephen Dunn

With a shrug he walks out of one story
and into another, his voice having been
a taunting presence, a daily bargaining
with himself. Summer lightning flickers

in the distance like a silent movie in which
he imagines himself a minor character but
happy nonetheless at this magical juncture,
perhaps the gardener of a large estate

whose owner he never sees as he works among
the dahlias, the roses, poppies and larkspur,
the garden his to tend and shape as he pleases,
it being his one desire, his notion of fidelity.

Sweet Void

Alone and doing my morning mile
in the half dark, I quick time down
a street still new though poured
two years ago, empty fields on either side
where lot numbers lie among the weeds,
streetlamps lighting cul-de-sacs devoid
of traffic, the sum of this addition
being zero.

Skirting the woods, the creek
gurgles August dry below the quarry
that never stops—a developer's nightmare—
the stone-cutting blade repeating itself
like soldiers marching double time
to a tinny music of crows and hawks,

one of which slides down its own cry
into a white vat of moon so full
I slow my stride, not believing the tears
brimming for this gift, this common
thing rising over Stoutes Creek Road
and the sweet void of unsold lots.



SINGING TO THE GARDEN

by Roger Pfingston

is the twenty-third publication of the Parallel Press,
an imprint of the University of Wisconsin – Madison Libraries.

Series design by Tracy Honn.

Typeset in Scala by Greg Britton.

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