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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

# SMALL ACTS



POEMS BY MARY MERCIER

MARY MERCIER, a native of Milwaukee, writes poems and essays which are derived from the land and those who inhabit it. Over the years her work has appeared in regional and national publications. She completed a master's degree in environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where her research explored the connections between poetry and a writer's sense of place. At various times and places in her life she has been gardener, teacher, farmer, and factory worker. She now advises students in environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin. *Small Acts* is her first collection of poems.

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# Small Acts



*Poems by*  
MARY MERCIER



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I wish to thank Ron Wallace and Kelly Cherry for their generosity of spirit, and Timothy Moermond for his generosity of heart. I also wish to thank my family, friends, and all those teachers, in times now and distant, who inspired and encouraged the writing of these words.

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*for my Mother and Father*

## *Signal Hill*

Not for the messages sent, bright  
with their triple-noted songs  
(Morse would have been impressed,  
his language plumbing the seas)

Not for anyone's name

Nor the warnings  
fired by cannon (those black throats opening now  
toward nothing but dawn)

Not even  
for the sparks of light  
cast out like a net every night

But for the heart.

This is where the women walked,  
skirts brushing rock, hands shading eyes, and their steps—  
pacing this summit split by fissures  
like the fault lines found in faces no one dared to read.  
The others, they could offer nothing  
except to go about their business in the town below  
as if life were as dependable as that. And when it was

the day would come  
when the sail of a ship appeared.  
Then the cloudwalkers rejoiced and raised a signal flag,  
breathing collectively at that prayer made visible, that  
white handkerchief  
snapping  
in the breeze.

## *Vespers*

The geese arrived with morning  
in a flock of sixty-two.  
Not like those paper-weight mallards  
who tumble from the sky,  
these are aviators who measure each decision.  
They circled twice.

And now they've settled down to study their reflections:  
long necks like black silk stockings,  
black bills framed in white. Who authored such a face-  
its day and night laid side by side?

These geese are ships at anchor, sails  
tucked carefully away.  
Their voices rise and linger,  
notes of music pressed in air.  
Is it their timetable they discuss?  
At least they do not laugh  
at their own jokes (like ducks).  
Perhaps they are trading secrets,  
like feathers, like prayers.

At dusk they leave  
much as they came:  
with trumpets, with flair.  
The pond is silent then but grace  
still shatters  
the air.

*Wintermouse*

The deer  
mouse  
(with its  
deer-  
footed  
fawn-  
colored  
deer-  
likely  
ways)

has mapped its mornings  
in  
conspicuously  
drawn  
and  
dear-  
hearted  
days  
across my path.

Who  
could intersect  
such a life?

## *Turkeys in the Snow*

All night they roosted in the trees above the house,  
black hoods huddled as if against the very hill,  
a steaming cup held close. Quiet all night.

When sunlight called them forth, their heaviness  
skimmed the sky. Over trees, over  
even the rooftop, they glided swiftly down,  
down to the field below the house.

*That* would have been enough for me,  
that one glimpse of wonder  
clearing the roof.

But now they are walking back up to the house,  
winding their way through the woods—  
dark nuns in a line—  
faith which defies  
even gravity.

Little wonder their prayers  
are heard before mine.

## *The Silence of Morning*

Morning fires the north ridge; its trees  
glow but at its feet the valley is still folded  
in shadow. That furrowed ground is wearing still  
the crumpled coat of a fallen deer.

For some reason  
I see myself in that deer,  
married now in blood and bone and fur  
to corn and earth.

The crows take more each day, soon  
I shall be feathers  
and my feet shall have wings.  
Death brings many things, and the silence of morning  
is only one of them.



## *Incongruity*

The cranes are in Florida now, sleeping  
in a southern marsh  
while winter and I  
are left in a silence  
that is deeper  
without them.

Are they home there,  
or is *this* home?  
Or do they  
even care?

Science would say  
home is where they came from  
eons ago—  
that they spread north from a warmer nest  
looking only for more space,  
and that home is where they fly to  
when our summer clock runs out.

But I say home  
is where you hurry to in spring  
when every living cell feels something pull  
and pull until you give it  
what it wants—  
sprout wings if you have to—  
*anything*  
to get you there.

## *Not Blue Enough*

I am standing at the edge of the walk, verging  
on April. Snowdrops  
crowd the corner of the house  
and a stellar blue is emerging  
from winter's shadow.

The Siberian squills,  
whose name I would change if I could,  
are pushing their green blades into spring  
and unfolding their blue-is-not-enough petals  
like exclamatory splashes of an ink whose depths of blue  
are a hue no other flower quite approaches. It is the indigo  
of buntings and the ultramarine of northern lights.  
And it is a light if it is anything,  
though even that word  
is not blue enough  
for me.

*Release*

If summer is the chimney swift's deft wing,  
pressed like a leaf into sky's blue clay—

If autumn calls such leaves to earth  
in a shower of stars—

If winter folds these stars  
into metamorphic grace—

Then spring must be  
the split rock,  
the snapped coil

(winter's iron  
rusting

in the hay).

## *Reformation*

It starts with sand  
and gravel, two-by-fours,  
and stacks of prickled bricks; their holes  
become a spider's best retreat.

Roofing nails with collars—silver coins  
I cannot name—and tar paper  
in heavy, quiet rolls.

Then lumber builds like thunderheads,  
we launch it forth—  
smooth boards, rough, long boards, knotty,  
boards with eyes.  
And nails:  
long nails, strong nails, thin nails and headless,  
all with points like arrows,  
they wait on tools.

Like hammers, heavy-headed,  
and saws with teeth rubbed clean,  
and hard drills fallen among curls  
of wood whose scent unfurls  
like leaves.

And after wood and nail join, there comes  
the clank of cans  
whose velvet, creamy paints and suntanned stains  
must have their lids removed by  
screwdriver. Its handle wears  
three signatures of paint.

Masonry begins and on the second try  
a fireplace ascends; it has the touch,  
the wet, damp, grainy smell of stone  
embracing stone.

And then this reformation ends. We celebrate  
with paint and papered walls.  
I think it will be mine forever, this house  
whose wooden floors  
are dotted with the heads of fancy pegs  
so dark they look like scattered buttons.

I spend my childhood trying  
to retrieve them.

*The Piano in My Mother's Garden*

She opens the earth like a fluted fan  
and scatters the seeds in their rows.  
Still there are those which, planted,  
never rise—even seeds fat with summer  
(like the burlled acorns heavy on our tree)  
may not find what they need. And so...  
And so, she intercedes.

My mother's garden is a small "Monet"  
of corn poppies a deep claret. Over the fence  
the morning glories climb  
to see what happened yesterday. They find  
that life is short. Sometimes it leaves the best  
until they furl their leaves and rest. If it doesn't rain,  
if it's too hot or cold—  
What shade of rose did the world miss because—?

At five, my mother gardens deep inside  
where seeds begin.  
No flowers anywhere reside  
except next door. No piano either  
yet she plays. She plays inside her head,  
mixing music on a window sill  
with fingers finding notes that matter  
till the sunlight fails or hunger gnaws.  
What bit of music did the world miss because—?

*A Day in June*

*—for Tina and Douglas*

Open the soul's door,  
let in some rain.  
Do not think  
about tomorrow. Listen:  
Summer is singing in the here and now,  
its dotted lilies  
drafting poems,  
its skies  
trailing clouds like fishing lines.

Seek love before wisdom.  
Be patient. Remember,  
some things only the catbird  
understands.  
Thorns rake the hand. Try not  
to take this personally. Look  
for berries. Eat what you can.  
Follow sleep  
like a bear.

Love what may not  
love you back  
like the swallow who hugs the invisible weight of air,  
feeling—not knowing—that  
resistance makes flight possible.

Open the soul's door,  
let in some rain.  
Love is that bird singing  
on the distant shore.

## *Patience*

She is standing in the last of day's light,  
hooves deeply planted in this pasture white  
with summer snow: Queen Anne's Lace,  
nodding in the breeze (its stars dappled  
like these which fall across her back).

Surely she was meant  
to find a place in this field  
as I was meant to find her here.  
Is this why those great eyes search me out?  
What is she saying to me?  
Is it her name?

She stands apart from the other horses.  
Those who know her say that this  
is because she is the youngest.  
But I (who know nothing and less  
every day), I think  
she is a contemplative.

Once  
she had wings, once she also  
could sing.  
Only now is she a mortal, lost  
among machines. Yet wings  
can be a disadvantage; her name tells me,  
no one really learns to fly  
until they are without them.



## *Small Acts*

The fern, uncurling its tongue of leaves  
slowly, with every expectation  
of sunlight  
and rain.

The sparrow, house-named,  
small, brown, unsung,  
despised. Gathering everything, anything,  
even our refuse, taking in  
even our sins.

The woman, white-haired and bent  
like the walking stick she plants  
so deliberately.  
Afternoons, she gardens from a chair.  
Weeding, planting, still riding  
the earth.

## *The Doppler Effect*

Years ago  
before the radar screen told all, think  
what was missed! Like today,  
all these possibilities for catastrophe:  
tornadoes emerging unexpectedly,  
crossing the lake, the isthmus, crossing  
the avenue even as we listen,  
or so the radio says. Though the heavy metal group next door  
plays on without pause. And the pizza car  
pulling out of the drive  
does not care. And that taxi  
slowly turning the corner, it drives  
through the potentiality of death  
as in a movie, noticing nothing.

Sirens scream all evening, calling us home.  
We behave inversely. The clouds  
are too beautiful. They drag white feet on rooftops while  
their tops evolve like cotton candy. Heaven  
is that space between the clouds, blue  
as the wild yonder.

*Take shelter*, the radio howls.

We lean out the door.

*To the basement, immediately!*

We move onto the porch. *Or find  
an interior room.* We join our neighbors  
in the street, examining skies.

This storm could reach its curled hand to earth  
right now and shake our own.

We are enthralled.

One has to be out here if one wants to see  
the second coming. The basement  
is no place  
for revelation.

## *Faith*

As we turn the key, the attic door  
swings back into a time before

the roofers came. We wade into darkness  
searching for more than success.

Sadness interrupts. This room remembers  
when the snows of all Decembers

slid softly from its black estate.  
Remembers shingles made of slate,

remembers '87 when its roof  
reflected sunlight, rain, and the looks

of birds who spun their threads of flight  
around its chimneys, tall in the bright

blue sky, but empty now. This  
is an age of expediency. Wishing

for smoke is unwise. Even fire  
has been banished to a tired

room. So we should not be surprised  
to see this attic with its eyes

so empty and its walls so dead.  
There are no rosebuds here, no sled.

No things of any value. But more  
than relics, this is what we mourn:

that summer which became a stage  
(a time of rain, a glacier age)

when leaves of slate were torn and shed  
deciduously, or stacked instead

like antique glass too old or rare  
to give back to the roof its heir.

So now this attic cries alone  
and tries pretending that its stone

is still intact. Its iron rods  
reach out like parents, lesser gods,

supporting that which isn't there  
as if such faith could turn the air

itself back into slate. I wish we had  
such faith. The world is mad

that goes on living now without it.

## *Rosebud*

*—for Jerry*

It was our garden that she loved the most—  
but not its leafy greens or vibrant fruits,  
or even silken ears, protruding corn.

She loved the roses.

But so did we,  
especially the fragrant buds  
that swelled with spice and color.  
But so did she. In fact,

she loved the rosebuds most.  
And her taste for roses made her bold—  
or was she just too old to hear  
our steps behind her? Or maybe,  
was she blind?

We spent the summer caught between  
our admiration for the rose, the deer.  
We had to choose.  
We couldn't seem to keep them both  
intact. But roses we could grow another year.  
When would we meet another deer  
so indiscreet?

One day at home with silence  
deep around me,  
I saw the deer, her brown feet stepping  
from the garden's edge.

Inside, I followed, room to room,  
one window to the next,  
until she paused beneath the plated oak.  
I watched her from our picture window. She was  
so close.

And then she raised her head and looked at me. She stepped  
up to the glass, gazing  
into places undisturbed. I looked  
beyond her graying nose, I saw the garden  
in her eyes. I knew

if she no longer saw with eyes,  
she still could see  
inside.

*A Queen's Lace*

Her summer is a white field  
of creamy stars sprung from a wheel

which turns upon her dark ruby eye.  
She dances in a blue sky

with blue sailors all  
like herself. Until fall.

It's only then with romance spent  
that her pale arms reach out, are bent

around an umber nest.  
Motherhood is just another test

for her when spiny seeds abound;  
they hurry off to join the underground.

Winter finds her solitary  
with a grief too deep to bury.

She will wait for longer days,  
for summer like a field of stars

where last year's children grace  
her bones again, this time with lace.

## *Sycamore*

They say  
a man once climbed a sycamore tree  
to see eternity.  
Looking now into its autumn soul,  
I can almost see why.  
This sycamore is large,  
large and far-reaching.  
I could imagine much  
from such a tree.  
Just look at those branches,  
that spool of bark—  
you and I could fit our lives  
into the stories drawn  
on that smooth empty page.  
And those leaves like hands!  
Think of the prayers we could say  
and the grace we could dispense,  
dropping our leaves all at once.  
I've always wanted  
to do that. Let go of everything  
I hold too dear. Become an empty tree.  
They say  
a man once climbed a sycamore  
to see eternity.



## *In Your Hands*

When we watched him net  
the wild cranes, banding them  
in colors, ringing them in,

I celebrated their closeness even  
as I mourned their capture.  
To save them

must we know them so well?  
And when we unhooded that head  
and its great sienna eye

looked us over, and when  
its wings rested  
in your hands,

did you see the wild sky  
unfold beneath you? Was flight itself  
in your hands?

Having never been so near  
to heaven, I tried  
to memorize those feathers, that

surprising lightness, that *closeness*  
to not being there  
at all.

But I could not. Wildness retreats  
when we insist on capture.  
If we want it at all,

we must go to its marsh,  
sit quietly for one or two  
lifetimes, and wait

until the cranes  
hear our silence singing  
and return the call.

*Descent*

Dusk creeps in like fall,  
I never see the change at all, not  
in the beginning.

Not until the chimney swifts grow silent,  
their chatter fading with the light—  
not until they too descend with night,

falling like dark leaves  
into the chimney's cave.  
Not until they take the twilight

with them, do I notice that the day is gone  
and that every  
thing,

like swifts,  
descends  
to night.

*And It Is Snowing Still*

and you are walking down that soft lane, whiteness  
only whiteness where you were before.

And I am watching as evening snow  
collects in your footprints.

Years from now  
you will be the stranger  
in that glass-domed paperweight,  
content to wander off  
into a solitary future,  
your hand (that once touched mine?)  
still holding tightly to the possibility  
of spring.

Winter is long and your step so sure, so dear, so far  
ahead of mine. And even in that blinding snow  
and at this distance I can see you stopping  
to scoop up the words of another.  
You pick up words as if they were feathers  
fallen. You shake the snow and a softness  
from a softness falls until you can see  
beneath the words. And you have that look that follows  
the soul long afterwards,

though it be snowing  
still.



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by Mary Mercier

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