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# SUNDOGS



POEMS BY JAMES SILAS ROGERS

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK









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



# Sundogs

Poems by  
James Silas Rogers



PARALLEL PRESS • 2006



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I wish to thank the editors of the following publications in which these poems originally appeared (sometimes in a slightly different form): *Briar Cliff Review*: “Summer Evening”; *Café Solo*: “My Grandmother’s Childhood”; *Crab Creek Review*: “Rutabagas: A Love Poem”; *Natural Bridge*: “Three Things Remembered From a Life of Georgia O’Keeffe”; *North Dakota Quarterly*: “Sundogs,” “In Early Spring,” and “On the Cannon River”; *South Dakota Review*: “Anemochory”; and *Spout*: “Butterfly in August.”

I also wish to thank the poet Tracy Youngblom, whose generosity and editorial judgments have been unfailing.

FIRST EDITION

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*For Jean*

## *At a Country Graveyard in Washington County*

A nesting chipping sparrow  
enters a juniper.  
Small insects hop  
underfoot in the drying sod.

The German farmers here  
died in their own language.  
On headstones,  
only the years make sense.

Along the road,  
a trail of snapped-off butterflies;  
like unmoored sailboats,  
their fading, ragged wings

draw tight  
and tilt in the breeze,  
shards of a summer prayer  
that never got heard.

## *Sundogs*

As I cross the river the radio says it's fourteen below.  
The defroster fan whines. Snow groans beneath car wheels.  
The morning puts me in mind of my fifth-grade reader  
and a Paul Bunyan tale of a lumbercamp so cold  
that when the loggers spoke the woods stayed silent except  
for the tinkle of frozen words breaking like dropped wineglasses  
on the forest floor. I glance toward the bridge  
that marks the other bracket of my summer cycling loop:  
great still plumes hang above smokestacks, fixed upon  
the windless winter sky. They erode like dry ice  
into the daylight. I think of the word *sundogs*,  
which is what my father called the parentheses of faint prism  
half-enclosing the hazed sun, and how he first heard the term  
from a Montana rancher maybe seventy years ago.  
Certain words pass hand to hand; knowing its descent,  
I hold the word *sundogs* in my mind, admiring it as I might  
admire the heft of a pocketwatch held in my palm—  
own it, as I can never own the knowledge, part-recalled  
from an anthropology text, that a folk belief somewhere  
demands a sudden gift whenever you spot a sundog.  
No. That's not my tribe. That's not my story.  
I wish, though, that I could make you a gift of these sundogs,  
or at least of the word that embraces them, names them,  
gives them a place in our lives. I wish that I could do more  
than throw words into the frozen air.

## *A Memory of Boxelder Bugs*

Everything around me is old:  
a stucco house, a wall that leans,  
the barn-sized convent across the street  
and an aged boxelder, the bark  
on its trunk splitting apart.

With a boy from down the block  
I watch a scab of insects  
move in waves across a concrete  
wall. They teem and stray,

chasing tiny bug-hungers  
I cannot name. The moving  
black and red patch seems to have a lewd  
insistent mind, outside the mind:  
I fear to look, and fear to look away.

## *My Grandmother's Childhood*

In each paintless Kentucky  
village of her youth,

she cried when wanton  
boys turned birds' nests

into litter. Bluebird chicks  
spilled as from a kicked bucket

and were left to squall, their helpless  
chirps lasting the afternoon.

Eggs splattered  
like tobacco-spit on a rock.

She wept and was told  
there was nothing to weep for.

The boys were only birding.

## *Summer Evening*

My daughter in the pool:  
I watch her splash.

A branch of unripe  
apples droops full; past

it, a summer sky,  
blue as the Virgin's dress.

The chimney swifts  
fly low, riding a hatch.

I will remember  
this night, will recall

unblemished apples  
that have not fallen,

that might not fall.



## *Rabbits at 7:00 A.M.*

When her Special Ed tutor  
suggested summer school,  
we doubted it would help,

though starting in mid-June  
she caught a bus each morning,  
and rode with the rowdy kids.

Once she came home disgusted  
because the teacher told her  
a penguin was not a bird.

In fact, the class was a waste—  
but Cardinals sang as we walked  
to the corner. She'd take my hand,

and we both looked for rabbits,  
in hedges and wet lawns  
along Iglehart Avenue:

still as dangling fruit,  
they waited in the morning sun,  
then burst away, faster than fear.

## *Revisiting Oak Hill*

Nights when worms came up  
from the saturated earth to breathe,  
my brother and I brought coffee cans  
and flashlights to this cemetery slope.  
We would sweep our feeble beams  
over the damp grass, looking for fat  
nightcrawlers drawn out like naked veins,  
and at a touch their forms became  
snatched-away ropes—tissue slipping  
through our fingers like water down a drain.

When I was twenty-one, we buried my father  
a hundred yards farther up this hill.  
After he'd died, I could not imagine  
that a day would come when I might stand  
beside his grave and not weep,  
but thirty years later, I can:  
though nothing, nothing, nothing  
has been forgotten. Today I remember  
sobbing for my father. Today I remember  
catching nightcrawlers in the rain.

## *Near Plainview*

On a day colder than it ought to have been,  
we diverted down a county road  
and pulled over to one side. There  
we walked among the hand-set  
stone foundation of a farmhouse,  
now open to the sky and filling in with  
sheet metal, ragweed stalks,  
and tallus. Then we crossed

to the Pleasant Prairie graveyard,  
a place of plastic flowers,  
too-blue and too-pink in the April snow.  
No matter. What I remember is this:  
that near the back fence, a loop  
of barbed wire—I'd say eighty  
or a hundred feet—hung on a post,  
its wire thorns rusted into a crude letter O,  
a wreath left in the rain long years.

## *In Early Spring*

Pond water remembers.  
It welcomes back Canadas  
coots, the redwings and their trill;  
it waits for the peepers in hope.  
It remembers the day each year  
when nothing remains to melt,  
remembers the half-life of ice  
splintering into honeycombs.  
Pond water remembers  
the shape of the shore,  
remembers to rise into the reeds.  
It knows that last year's green  
will be captured by mud  
and finds comfort in the triumph of rot.  
Pond water remembers the rain  
and is grateful when it falls,  
grateful like a runner  
drinking deep at the end of a race.  
Pond water surrenders to ripples,  
opens its palms to feel  
the winds and the breeze,  
the kisses of dragonflies.

## *Anemochory*

This was after the footpath  
at the Ford Bridge's end,  
where you come out  
on the gap of the river valley:

one of those mornings when  
sunlight clean as wine  
seems poured like a varnish  
over the suddenly

green world. A rush of leaves  
flashed in the treetops  
below. On the river,  
a buoy split the current

in a fishtail. It was the air  
that I most felt; warm now,  
alive with cottonwood seeds  
making idle trails

lifting and falling, like grains  
in a crystal colloid,  
drifting in fathoms of space,  
tugged and nudged by forces

too subtle to discern;  
riding the breath of morning,  
scarcely distinct from that  
in which they floated.

## *On the Cannon River*

*for Pat Coleman*

Hérons, attended only  
by their shadows,  
stand on low mud slopes,

wait among scuffed  
clamshells and gravel at points  
where the river bends,

birds alone.  
Our quiet, passing canoe  
untethers their blue-gray forms.

They lift  
and in solemn, slow strokes  
row the air, move downstream.

Without wanting,  
we chase a Great Blue for miles,  
in pursuit of solitude.

## *Feeding Geese*

Wadded bread crusts  
plunk into ripples.

The geese take note; one,  
half-timid, half-bold

paddles near.  
His black beak darts

and a message  
relays bird to bird;

in steady, silent  
vectors the flock

funnels itself to  
this swamp-edge dock

as if reeled in,  
drawn by strings.

The last to arrive  
steps ashore hissing.

His long neck  
reaches in hunger.

## *Dandelions*

*In memory of Larry McBride*

Only the day before I had hugged  
his wife and shared earnest handshakes  
with his two fine children. Now,  
returning from the wake on county roads  
flanked by dandelion-crowded ditches,  
for seventy miles or so I was talking  
aloud to myself, trying to describe  
those weeds in the morning sun.  
Mostly the metaphors sounded weak;  
salt grains cast across a plate, or seeds  
spread wide by a sower's hand. Then it struck  
me how, when a storm draws over a lake,  
ragged drifts of rain will dapple the surface;  
and it pleased me to think  
of these useless yellow flowers like that:  
numberless as raindrops.

That's how I spent much of the day,  
thinking of words to describe great splashes  
of passing weeds. Bound for home  
in the prodigal freshness of early May  
when plum trees daub the slopes,  
and every farmyard gives away a clump of lilacs,  
their lavender just barely breaking  
into the already overflowing morning,  
I drove further and further away from a life  
in which I'd had, I began to realize, only a small stake;  
driving across Wisconsin and needing to speak  
the right words about dandelions.



## *My Brother, the Fisherman*

He would scout waste lots by day,  
planning to come back late that night

at midnight or one A.M., flashlight  
in hand, to turn over the cooling leaves

of goldenrod, milkweed, or weeds  
without names, and under them, pluck

dozing grasshoppers from their sleep.  
I suspect he enjoyed being stopped

in his eccentric guileless act:  
faced with a cruiser's accusatory beam

he'd produce a rag-stoppered 7-Up bottle  
filled with splinter-legged insects

and deliver his madly innocent answer:  
"I'm catching grasshoppers, officer."

Never mind that any bait store sold the same  
for sixty cents a dozen, no, never mind;

never mind, either, that in spite of frequent  
requests he neither kept nor ate a single fish,

nor gave them to someone who might like  
a mess of sunnies. The officer would shrug

and drive away with a story to tell. Mike,  
guilty only of wasting his time,

went back to the weeds. In the dark,  
his hands stained brown with grasshopper bile.

## *Rutabagas: A Love Poem*

Rutabagas were new to me  
when I first paired with Jean.  
At Thanksgiving and Easter dinners  
her grandpa Frank, her spinster cousin,  
mom, dad, and a tribe of handsome  
brothers dined in near silence  
at a great green table  
with fierce griffins underneath.  
I would wonder if their quiet  
was about secrets or something wrong  
but now I think it was  
just how they gathered.

Rutabagas were on the table.  
I had to ask Jean what they were.  
My first mouthful tasted  
like something in a gunny sack;  
nothing like a wine  
from which an epicure, or would-be epicure,  
might claim to read the soils  
in which the grapes were grown.  
She said she loved their dug-up texture,  
the hint of dirt  
that couldn't be baked away,  
how they left the tongue  
with a rumor of something  
underground and dark.

Autumn vegetables suit her,  
I think, and none more than rutabagas,  
so reluctant to have left the ground.

## *The River Road, Again*

Dandelion crowns  
have gone to seed.  
The road sketches a ragged line  
along the bluff tops.

The river has crested. It runs  
as it ran ten thousand years past—  
a ladder warblers climb  
up the spine of North America.

It is a season for thinking of cycles:  
the stop-and-go circling  
of the heart turns again.

Leaves not two weeks old  
are made new a second time  
in the evening sun.

## *The Lost Wax of Geology*

I lug stones  
and load the car trunk.

Springs drop low  
under the weight.

Lifted rocks  
show the soil here holds

a trace of clay.  
It shapes the stones' nests:

lost wax  
cast by geology.

Absence makes  
a fresh and secret socket,

Brown and black  
domes etched by dark

slow probings  
of earthworms, or ants' nests

busy with eggs  
and drones, teeming

like a bloodstream.

*Three Things Remembered from a  
Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*

I.

She tells her friends  
she has begun to think  
in colors instead of words.

Not so hard to imagine;  
no more than to admit  
of invented codes between twins,

or even to accept that a dog,  
ears cocked and back  
bristled by a scent

is in that moment alert,  
as much or more in the world  
as any of us.

Or to think about  
Blake's blade of grass:  
color coextensive

with the life  
that brings the color forth,  
a pulse, a current in green.

Sixty years among paints,  
she and her work  
fall into their own language

or, rather, find a language  
already there  
outside the eyes of the world.

II.

At eighty-five or so this cross  
and often selfish old lady  
said she could live in prison  
if she had a window  
through which to see the sky;

the bursting buzzing world  
reduced to the breeze above it,  
pared down to that.  
Just light, falling through  
the thousand strata of the air.

III.

*We hiked the dry riverbeds  
evaluating stones,  
holding them in our palms  
and asking if geology and time  
had brought about perfection.*

*You found a faultless stone,  
or so you thought.  
I found it again on your coffee table.  
You tested me by turning your back,  
invited me to whisk it into my pocket  
like a hungry man stealing a loaf.*

*You seemed to think this differed.*

*I say,  
when Satan stretched out his arm  
to unfurl the whole world  
as a jeweler might roll out a cloth,  
where was the temptation?  
It was already Christ's in the first place.*

## *Old St. Vincent's, Houston*

The parish now locks the gates  
against boys with spray paint,  
boys with too much liquor,  
boys on dirt bikes, all the empty  
mischiefs that hate a cemetery,  
but the priest who answers our knock  
shows us in gladly, pointing  
with pride to his roses  
in the graveyard corner,  
heavy with pastel blooms.

My guide knows the stories  
below us: the Civil War hero  
whose grave was lost and found;  
his merchant son-in-law,  
whose family's still in business  
at the mall; the milliner  
who adopted two sons  
as a widow, and died rich  
in spite of her reckless charity;  
thirteen-year-old Fritz, who died  
in a seminary: at his stone  
I wonder aloud, *Sweet Jesus,*  
*what sort of life was that?*

It has to be a source  
of gladness that roses grow  
here now, behind a fence,  
across from the glass-  
littered basketball courts  
of a housing project.  
The shadeless towers  
of Houston loom a mile away.  
Thank God for rose beds.  
Oh, by all means, rejoice.

## *For my Wife, Driving Back from Ohio*

I imagine you now,  
still crossing Wisconsin  
fifty or so miles east from here.  
You are watching exit ramps vanish  
in the rear-view mirror.

I do the waiting tasks,  
dishes and day-old newspapers.  
At sunset I take out the trash.

Darkness tints the evening,  
leeches into the sky  
like paint off a brush rinsed  
in a water glass.  
From near the backyard fence,

and surprising, so late in the Fall,  
a cricket starts its slow song  
that is no song at all,

a record of seconds before dark.  
I imagine you now, counting  
mileposts the same way,  
driving west on 94, each  
a tired step nearer your end of day.

A ragged hour, shapeless as fear,  
the wasting October light.  
I need you here.



## *Student Driver, Waiting to Enter Traffic*

As soon as she sits down  
my daughter twists the radio dial  
and—thinking it my job to scold—  
I bark, too quickly and too harsh,  
*Leave the radio alone*  
*for once*. She balks, but yields  
to her place as student,

adjusts her seat and draws  
so near the wheel she looks  
like a moth on a stickpin,  
then aligns the side mirrors,  
tilts the rearview to her height,  
crafting a net of reflection  
with herself at the hub.

Driving teaches the later  
uses of mirrors. Hereafter  
they point behind her and away;  
let her peer into deepening  
wells of risk, yet hold it afar.  
The passing cars clip by  
like windmill blades.

## *Butterfly in August*

Yesterday, cycling down  
the east shore of Green Lake  
I watched as a Monarch  
descended through the whims  
of summer air  
in that stretch where  
Indian Beach Road makes  
a furrow in the trees—  
where ashes, oaks, and popples  
grown over with wild cucumber  
and who knows  
what other vegetation  
leave only a narrow carpet of sky.

The Monarch was falling the way  
a mantra slips from the mind,  
with the grace of resignation;  
tracing the slow arc you see  
when, say, a plate  
is dropped in the lake—  
the way it flashes, rocks, and maybe  
turns over for no reason  
before it passes, irresistibly,  
into the blackness of deep water.  
Its wings stroked ineptly  
as it rode down in semicurves,  
a halting pendulum.

## *Past Guessing*

Thirty years on, she still  
pulls out an occasional rabbit,

lets it slip that she can hear  
a music others never do

or will reach into a place  
not just hidden but unlearnable.

I am thinking of a day  
when I came home at five P.M.

and my wife told me  
she'd lain on the linoleum

since noon beside our dog,  
who could barely lift his head

and who shook for some reason  
past our guessing.

Sunlight filled the kitchen. She'd run  
her hands along his ribs, saying

*you've been a good dog  
and can give yourself back to God,*

until, like ripples losing themselves  
in a pond, the tremors stopped

and he slept at ease  
there on the white linoleum.

It seems right to me now  
that her first word was "light."

## *Translation*

Flat granite stones and sodded-over  
ruts from a back-hoe  
mark recent graves,  
but this land best embraces  
those who plowed it first.  
Their white marble monuments  
stand still, though unevenly,  
stained by a century of rain and snow.

I walk among the stones  
and guess at German phrases.  
*Geliebter Mutter. Tochter. Sohn.*  
The family slots? Long quotes  
that must be Scripture,  
and strange words that often reappear:  
*Gebet? Errinern? Glaube?*  
*Liebe*, love; the one word I know.





JAMES SILAS ROGERS is a lifelong resident of Minnesota. He lives in a 120-year-old home in St. Paul, from which he walks to work at the University of St. Thomas, where he is managing director of the university's Center for Irish Studies and editor of the journal *New Hibernia Review*. In addition to poetry, he has been working on a collection of essays involving burial places and sacred spaces. Portions of that work have appeared in *New Letters*, *South Dakota Review*, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, and elsewhere.







