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The Book of Arabella

Poetry by
Timothy Walsh



A Parallel Press Chapbook

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And to the great blue heron who greeted me so many mornings at dawn on Monona Bay.

Cover image: *Winter* by Kelli Hoppmann

For more information: <http://www.kellihoppmann.com/>

Dedicated with love
to my wife,
Barbara

“My soul would sing of metamorphoses.
But since, o gods, you were the source of these
bodies becoming other bodies, breathe
your breath into my book of changes: may
the song I sing be seamless as its way
weaves from the world’s beginning to our day.”

—Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*

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Arabella's Arsenal

Every morning, when she walked along the lake
just after dawn,
the great blue heron would be standing
on one of the docks,
unperturbed by pedestrians or passing cars.

She saw the heron as herself—
wary, long-legged, and solitary.

Back home, the kitchen was her arsenal—
potato masher, garlic press,
salt shaker, pepper mill,
knives, ladles, slotted spoons. . . .

In the basement, she hung her husband's shirts
from hangers like tender effigies.
She loved him best when she watched him sleep
or when she could make him eggs.
Sometimes, all alone, she longed to feel his weight
upon her,
but at night she longed for sleep.

Late at night, she'd awaken and wander
the moonlit house.
In the kitchen, the stove looked like a seated god.
Wooden spoons whispered among themselves.
Droplets dripped from faucets like pearls.

In the cutlery drawer, knives, forks, and spoons
lay in quiet collusion.
By the dim green light of the cold stove clock,
she'd lay out a line of spoons
and an opposing army of knives.

Sometimes a mouse would scurry across the floor,
and then the secret melody of time
seemed strung together of nursery rhymes,
her own life fleeting
as the quick glint of a knife.

Trivet, spatula, and wire whisk.
A wife is what they called her,
but a heron is what she was.

Webs and Nests

Arabella speaks with spiders,
not with words but with her knitting needles,
the yellow funnel spider on the apothecary rose,
the daddy longlegs striding across the sun-warmed
 planks of the back deck.

Why and for whom she knits this scarf
 she does not know,
the wingspan length wrapped so lightly around her neck,
 a plush noose, downy soft.

Some days, only a glass of Chardonnay
 can reconcile the way the gesturing trees
dance in the wind while she sits chained
 by gravity to her chair.

She has nearly forgotten the feel of wing feathers
 quivering in the air,
the lift of an updraft, a northern gale.

Later, she will snip the green shoots of thyme,
 a few leaves of marjoram, a few of sage,
her bare feet warmed by the red bricks
 of the herb garden.

She will place the herbs on her tongue,
crush them and grind them with her teeth,
 rekindling memories of flight.

Barefoot on the midnight lawn, her toes
 wet with dew,
she holds her arms spread wide to the moon,
beseeches the stars to restore her to what she was,
knowing she will never be able to knit a nest
 as satisfying as the sky.

Arabella at the Bird Mound

She nestles in the wing-curve
 of the effigy mound
as twilight falls,
still as death
while her husband calls.

She'll answer soon
 but not just yet.
Fireflies are flitting,
 the grass is wet,
evening dew settling equally
on the ground, the ancient mound,
 and on her.

If she could just drink a quench of dew,
salt her eyes with a sprinkle of stars,
inhale the exhalations of a mountain bog.

In her heart, the hubbub of the heronry
 at hatching time—
sea wrack and driftwood, frogs and toads,
voles and minnows,
dragonflies, jet-black crows.

She does not know why at dusk
the fibers of herself go so alarmingly slack.

Now he has a flashlight from the truck,
a beam of light piercing the dark,
a lighthouse beacon sweeping
 the saltwater cove.

She rises, preens her dress's folds,
answers at last,
striding barefoot across
 the cold, wet grass.

She is what he seeks;
he who she consoles,
confused and baffled in his bulk
 of bone and flesh.

His arm around her,
 a cloak, a curtain, a screen,
his muscles strong
 as rope.

Chanterelles, Portabellas, and Morels

The very first day the ice left the lake,
two loons appeared on the wind-awakened water
as she walked the rocky shore.

Within herself, she felt ice
still encasing her soul—
or if not her soul, at least the place
her soul should be.

Weeks later, at the farmer's market on the square,
she held the enchanted horn of a giant morel,
thought of her husband that morning in bed,
remembered how the severed arms of the apple trees
bled.

At the kitchen window above the sink,
she cuts the stems from a box of chanterelles
while watching the backyard birds—
the plump mourning doves, always in pairs,
the peacock iridescence of the grackles
when they catch the sun.

Having known the lift of wings,
she feels her arms nearly useless things.

She takes a star anise pod from the sill,
the seeds still perfect in their astral case,
remembers how starfish littered the beach at Hatteras,
the red sands of Malpeque Bay with northern lights
quivering aloft.

For months, she was bewitched by human music,
the melodies seeming to offer a secret doorway back.
Now she wants no music, sits at dusk beneath
the front-door yews she no longer allows
her husband to trim.

Mushrooms are her music—
chanterelles, portabellas, and morels—
bloodless flesh feeding on rotted roots.

She sits in silence, waits for the stars,
looking up through the trees' wingspread limbs,
yew needles furrowing the dark, filtering
the moon.

She wonders if there's a way these evergreen combs
might remake her extravagance of hair—
some whispered spell or chant or curse—
or if she might best become a tree,
flying aloft in the breeze
while steadfastly rooted in the ground.

Arabella's Birthday

At the piano, scrunching her pecan toes
 in their little boats of shoes,
she presses the compliant pedal, allowing the vibrations
 to linger longer in the wood and in the air—
the case of mahogany, the soundboard
 of tight-grained spruce.

Lately, it is the scent of cedar and the resonance
 of brass-wound strings
that lift her spirit, grant momentary wings
vanishing as the scent dissipates or sound dies.

In the rocking chair, she sharpens pencils
 with a little sharpener made of brass.
The cedar shavings that curl on her fingers
 she saves in a muslin sack.

For her birthday, there was a frosted, candled cake,
a little choir of flames on spiraling stalks,
her name in florid, sugar-ice script,
frosting flowers forever frozen on the verge.

They sang, she wished, she blew,
 extinguishing the flickering motes of mystery.

They ate the wedges of cake, dismembering it
 slice by slice,
the angle of emptiness left by the vanishing cake
widening like clock hands flying farther apart.

People walked wineglasses around the house,
sat on the back deck where torches spewed
 citronella smoke,
spoke about work, the weather, and what
 they'd one day do.

Arabella slides into her shoes—slim canvas canoes—
and glides along the hall.

She sits on the bottom stair, curls her cashew toes,
scratches her walnut nose,
her body an assemblage of things that might one day
sprout into trees.

She leaves the house, walks up the hill,
sits beneath the gingko trees—
their scimitar leaves hanging like earrings
or axe heads
along upswept branches.

She thinks of the cake and sees a clock—
the cake a clock, the clock a face—
faces pierced in seven places to allow the air,
the light, sounds, scent, and food
to reach us in our lonely house of bone.

Wings Over Water

Tiller, rudder, toe rail, shrouds—
stepping aboard, she felt cowed by the tall
 reach of the mast
that scraped the soft underbellies of clouds.

Tell-tales, compass, cockpit, vang—
the wire stays were tuned so tight
 they sang in the white-horsed wind,
the boat cradle-rocking on the waves,
bags of sails brought up from below,
 light as bales of feathers or dandelion fluff.

Her lifejacket straps he pulled too tight,
 her body wrapped like a fragile vase—
frail bones that might snap,
flesh that would expire in moments
 if kept from a gasp of air.

As they raised the flapping sail, something came alive
 in her spine and quicksilver soul.
The cambered curve as the tall wing filled with air
transformed the sleek hull to a second house of bone.

All day, she sat on the spindrift rail, gazing up
 at the cloud-white sail, a tree's-length tall
flying through cerulean blue,
an escort of gulls or angels riding the crisp east wind.

I love you, he said, running his fingers through her hair.
Love you, too, she said as though she were handing him
 asked-for scissors or passing the salt.

The men said the same things over and over—
Ready about? Ready. Helm's over!
The boat leaned to starboard, leaned to port,
the boom slapping this way and that,
lines whirring in winches, spray flying as the bow nosed
through waves,
the boat a quivering, living thing.

They raised the spinnaker, hope ballooning
in a splash of color—
the soft downwind run to the west where the setting sun
showed the way to the other world.

That night, they dined by the lake, her spine
with the delicious ache of a thousand-mile flight.

Sibelius, he said to her, cracking open a crab claw,
Sibelius composed in a delirium of drink, then went dry
for the long desert years of his long and lonely life.

Sibelius, she whispered.
Abracadabra and candelabra—all names with their
particular magic—
the craggy shapes of sounds or letters toothed keys
opening some sought or unsought door.

They drank mugs of frothy beer, minds gone nautical,
a catalog of gear—
boom vang, reefing hook, spinnaker sheet, pulpit cleat,
gudgeon and pintel, threshold and lintel.

That night, white sails and gulls' wings angled
through her slumber,
their bed a boat afloat on an ink-dark sea,
something stirring in the sand of her soul.

Downstairs, the mice minded the house,
the fruit bowl lonely as Sibelius on the sideboard.
Abracadabra and candelabra. The kitchen cabinets
 alive with things—
the candle flames of words, spelled or said—
rhyme keeping the world from going dead—birdsong and
 coral bells, this sad carnival of hope,
the creeping thyme spilling over the lip of the red clay pot.
All that is is balanced by what is not.
Each world, each breath, each blink a teetering seesaw,
 a scissor cut leaving emptiness in its aftermath.

Beneath the sentinel yews, blue petunias leak
 the scent of eternity from choired lips.
In garden beds, daisy rays beg to be plucked,
each perfect petal a feather, a nascent quill.
Perhaps she won't.
 Perhaps she will.

Arabella Under Glass

She measures out vanilla in a teaspoon
the same way she measures her life
 in mirrors and clocks,
in window latches and door locks—
all those hours ransomed from eyeless faces,
 gazes lost in silvered glass.

All day, birds were flying into the window glass,
thumping against the invisible, falling
 stunned to the ground.

In April, the rains were so heavy
 the worms were drowning in the earth—
thousands of them squashed on sidewalks
 where they'd wriggled to safety,
the trample of feet mashing them flat
 to be dried by tomorrow's sun.

One Sunday walking by the bay, she spoke
 with a homeless man
who seemed to almost understand.
Fly away, he said. Just fly away.

She doesn't remember when she first realized
 she could see into other people,
but that other people can't.
Really, we are more transparent than opaque—
her husband's face, his skin a delicate lace,
 his cauldron of self showing through.

Ears of corn and tongues of shoes—
her purse a sack of symbols—coins, mascara,
 lipstick, keys—

her dreams held a few hours in a dripping net
encrusted in salt and seaweed.

Everywhere she walks, she finds hairpins
she hoards for luck,
the ocean surging and seething in her ear,
a tireless lover,
stirring the sand-silt of ancestors' bones.

On the edge of the reflecting pool, she stares down
at herself in the water—
a drowned suicide, gaudily dressed,
a pressed flower under glass.

She lights a cigarette to feel the smoke within her—
lungs buoying us up like floats
on this bobbing sea of air.
How curious it is, she thinks, this carrying
of food on forks to your mouth,
this house of teeth, the imperfect span of fingers,
these starfish hands.

She drops a coin into the reverse painted water,
watches the woman vanish,
a commotion of wings somewhere in her soul.

Sleepless in bed, she's consoled by the mermaid
nightlight's lunar glow.
The neighbor's wind chimes clink like cutlery,
brittle and bright—
once upon a time, over and over, all night long—
the tongues of bells reciting their chain metal spell
uniting with the wishing-coin's radiating ripple.

Arabella in Autumn

Where milkweed pods and wildflowers offer
 gifts of silk,
she walks the railroad right-of-way,
pinching fingerfulls of thistledown, broadcasting
 milkweed sylphs.
She watches the seeds ride the wind,
the little hairs along her arms likewise rising
 in the breeze.

By the creosote bridge, a stand of blue asters
 vies with the sapphire waters of the bay,
wasps and bees courting the rayed flowers,
 a bouquet of rooted hours
rising from soil that once was and will again
 be flesh.

Arabella looks at the pair of snow-white swans.
It would be better to be a solitary stone
than to walk this world, sentient but alone.

That night, the smell of his wet suede coat
 made him seem some other kind of beast.
She gathered together all his things of leather
 and burned them in a pit.
She spared her handbags, gloves, and shoes—
the flayed flocks she's adopted as her own.

He made her talk to a man who smoothed
 his mustache as he wrote,
kidnapping her words to cage like birds
 in his wire-bound notebook,
his mind a churning thing,
flood stage eyes blinking like warning lights.

He snared each bird—fluttering wings caught
in the mist net of notebook lines.
He nodded whenever she crossed or uncrossed
her legs,
stroked his mustache as if making wishes,
his watery gaze wet as unwanted kisses.

Back home, she swept the floors,
vacuumed carpets,
washed the windows and the walls.
She did laundry till the basement hummed,
washer and dryer, dehumidifier wringing the invisible
dampness from the air.

She showered for an easeful hour, shampooed
her hair with rosemary, lemon balm, and sage,
the scent restoring her wakefulness, calming the raging
horses trampling the frail grasses of her out-island shores.

If the winged seeds of maple can whirligig away,
then surely she can someday?
Somewhere, the black swan floats on black waters,
a dark angel guarding orphaned daughters.

As evening falls, she arranges the milkweed pods in a vase,
sprays of sea holly, bundles of miscanthus grass.
In the yard, she releases her pocketfuls of thistle-down,
seeding the soil, untethering her soul,
blowing an offering upward to the moon.

Soon, she whispers. Soon.

Phantom Limbs at the Antique Mall

She rummages through jam-packed stalls,
scours cluttered walls,
hallways packed high with the leavings
 of reef-wrecked lives,
wives and husbands wandering, two by two,
she happily husbandless on this cold October day.

There is a stall of guns and one of clocks,
a room packed with commemorative spoons
 arranged in racks,
on the walls, faded flour sacks ragged with wear.

A shelf of ruby glass catches her eye,
a mirror-backed sideboard big as a house.
She runs a finger along a marble-topped commode,
peers into oversize armoires sheltering desolate ghosts.

She tries a camelback loveseat,
stretches out on a fainting couch,
discovers the resident cat, her fur musty
with the decades' dust, a century of shadows,
a soft and whiskered thing sentenced to a life
 haunting hutches, stalking midnight mice.

Then, the little statue on a pedestal
 stood in an island of light—
a sister shorn of wings, shorn of arms,
the twist of her torso her yearnings' gist.

Venus di Milo, the nameplate said,
the keyed edge of the letters sliding perfectly
 in the keyhole sockets of her eyes,
unlocking the tumblers of her jumbled quest.

She cradled her lost sister on her sweated arm,
bought her at the silver bell counter,
carried her like a ransomed daughter,
and walked the long lake way home.

Last Wednesday, the radio spoke of phantom limbs—
amputees who still feel missing arms and legs,
who have an itch with nowhere to scratch.

Do you scratch an itch or itch a scratch?
Which is the itch and which is the scratch?
Fingers match the shape of the itch,
 flesh and air, emptiness everywhere,
the air infiltrating ourselves,
our lungs buoying us up like lifejackets.

The May chorus of frogs,
the dense November fogs off Newfoundland,
the holiness of the heronry as twilight drops,
muskrats veeing across the night-calm sound—
all this began to come dimly, dimly back.

Above her as she walked, trees loosed their leaves
 to skitter along the pavement
and feed the street sweeper's ravenous mouth.

The shape of the leaf is the shape of the tree's desire.
Human hands grasp only what will fit our fingers' span.
Pocket knives and alphabets are the two most useful things.
Structure is desire—wings and wishes,
 feathers and flight.

On the long way back, she stepped on no ants
 and stepped on no cracks,
reciting her wishes silently, each whispered syllable
 rising on a flutter of wings,
her little sister quiet in the crook of her arm.

Snow Feathers and the Stuff of Love

When he comes into her,
 she is soft and moist as a peach,
soft as the unguent insides of a shellfish.

He is so distraught, even at the height of happiness,
haunting himself with the inescapable aftermath
 of ecstasy.

Later, she drifts, a wraith of smoke
 wiping through the keyholes of doors
hung ingeniously on hinges throughout the old house.

There are rooms for eating, for sleeping,
the witchery of cooking—
chairs, tables, hutches, rugs—
the slant-roofed attic,
the burrowed basement,
the crawlspace beneath the porch,
 an empire of bugs.

When the tall clock strikes twelve,
dragonflies hover a hair's breadth above her soul,
each chime with the promise of power
 to change her back,
the last chime lingering like scent,
her moment's self still as a wilderness pool.

Walking, she weaves a rubber band
 through the fingers of her hand,
testing the tensioned spring,
her limbs the pinioned splints of a doll.

At night, the mandibles of termites
and skittering mice
resonate through the wood-frame house—
the plaster lathe, oak floors, walnut trim—
this shell of trees a separate self—
the painted shutters outside
dabs of mascara adorning window-eyes.

He settles into her as winged things
settle on flowers.
She opens to him as a day scatters hours,
her legs the widening hands of a clock.

When the first snows fell, each flake
a wonder, feather-light,
she could not account for her delight.

She pulled him into her to see the snow
falling in his eyes,
unroofing the house in her eagerness,
snow feathers falling on the bedclothes,
the delicate crystals living an instant
before melting in beaded droplets on their skin.

This stuff of love—she could see its shape
clearly limned in snow,
not a circle or a sphere, but a nested egg,
tended and fussed over but destined to crack,
the hatchling within the undoing of the perfect shell.

He gasps, thrusts, comes.
She rubs the melted snowflakes on his back,
listens as the world fills softly with feathers,
their love, eggshell thin, a canopy arching over them,
the rainbows in the room escaped
from their iris-eyes.

Arabella at the Opera

She spent all day in the poison garden,
blue plumes of monkshood brushing against her elbows,
the feathery foliage of hemlock soft against her fingertips,
enormous flaring flowers of jimsonweed broadcasting
scented melodies
imperceptible to these curiously enfolded ears.

The tingling sting of nettles will stay with her all day
where she flailed them against her white-skinned arms,
seeking lost sensations, some semblance of flight.

Now the garden is her reed-hidden bay.
She chews apple seeds for the cyanide in them,
knows each foxglove spire as a changeling child,
walks at midnight through stands of valerian,
beds of feverfew,
her moonlit gown trailing over worms and snails,
collecting burrs and barbed seeds she'll bring back
to her marriage bed.

Mornings, she walks to the lake to watch
the tasting tongues of reaching waves,
hear the lip and lap and slap of water,
watch fingerling fish flit in the sunlit shallows
of the cove.

At dinner, she lights six candles.
Her husband thinks it a quaintly feminine trait,
but she needs these living tongues of flame
to awaken the moth-flutter of her eyes
and bait the human hungers oppressing her heron's heart.

This ritual of fork, knife, and spoon
is a strange delight—
plate and napkin, the machinery of teeth,
the metallic coin-clink of cutlery summoning
listening metals interlacing the earth.

At least the ruby glow of candlelit wine
renders this imprisonment less a crime.

For the opera, she wears her blue satin gown,
her sapphire tiara,
long white gloves cocooning fingers.
She wraps a feather boa around her neck,
studies herself in the mirror,
wishes she could step into this pool of tranquil water
on the wall.

Then, the diamond glitter of the concert hall,
tiers of plush velvet seats,
curves as graceful as a nautilus shell.
During the overture, he caresses her gloved hand,
the orchestra far below, a colony of seabirds
on an ice floe.

When Rusalka sings her “Song to the Moon,”
it is an arrow, a knife, a shard of ice.
Arabella rises and runs, runs from the spiraling
seashell hall.
She loses a shoe on the winding stair,
stands out on the curb,
the whoosh of traffic rushing by,
one bare foot on the stone-cold walk,
stocking already worn through,
dumbstruck doorman standing aside.

She kicks off the second shoe, wades out
 into the dark waters of the street,
hails a cab, is whisked away,
her mind a clatter of coins and cutlery.

Arsenic, valerian, and feverfew.
In the bedroom closet, she reassembles
 her repertoire of shoes,
the tidal pull of the moon dismembering her pentacle
 of neck and limbs.
She feels the nettle-tingle of nascent wings,
the pin-cushion prick of quills
 piercing her skin,
until the night calls of owls and cranes
 lull her back to the loon-haunted lake.

Loss and Evergreens

Every morning, when he walks along the lake
 just after dawn,
the great blue heron is standing in the shallows
 among tall reeds,
long-legged and graceful,
the crook of its neck the essence of beauty.

He has not slept in their bedroom since,
unable to bear the shadows and silks alone.

In the kitchen, the cutlery drawer was her own—
the clink of metal and kitchen sounds sadly silent now.
He feels an alien in his own home—
 has not touched the row of ironed shirts
hanging from the basement pipe
or rewound the spent spring of the hallway clock.

When he found the hoard of hairpins,
 plainly not her own—
some rusted, some bent—
he scattered them carefully through the yard.

He walks at midnight through stands of valerian,
 beds of feverfew,
feeling the seals of his senses drop away.

On still days, the mirrored surface of the bay
 reflects the purpling clouds,
the candle-flame sun transforming the tranquil waters
 to abundant wine,
the awakening lozenge of the sky
repeated in small in the heron's eye.

He feels his humanity hanging heavily on his bones,
this ballast of flesh, this weight of clothes.

Overhead, a commotion of crows, a ballet of gulls,
light as released souls,
the rune-patterns of geese and cranes
scrawling across the cloud-white blue.

Walking the world, evergreens are now his consolation—
cedar, juniper, and yew—
their beseeching branches feathered like wings,
the redemption of all land-fast things.

At Christmas, he brings the balsam fir
into the house
and fills the room with song,
her perfume and sex in the resinous sap.

Swirling brandy in a glass, he watches
the fire consume a log,
sad music on the stereo,
the cyst of emptiness becoming
a kind of fullness in his soul.



Timothy Walsh's most recent poetry collection is *When the World Was Rear-Wheel Drive: New Jersey Poems* (Main Street Rag Publishing). His awards include the Grand Prize in the *Atlanta Review* International Poetry Competition, the Kurt Vonnegut Fiction Prize from *North American Review*, and the Wisconsin Academy Fiction Prize. He is the author of a book of literary criticism, *The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing, and Emptiness in Literature* (Southern Illinois University Press) and two other poetry collections, *Wild Apples* (Parallel Press) and *Blue Lace Colander* (Marsh River Editions).

Walsh was born in New York, grew up in New Jersey, but has lived for the past thirty years in Wisconsin. When he is not writing, he spends a lot of time on the water, sailing, canoeing, and kayaking. He is the Director of the Cross-College Advising Service at the University of Wisconsin–Madison where he is also the Associate Director of the Office of Undergraduate Advising.

Find more at: <http://timothyawalsh.com/>

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