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A Parallel Press Chapbook

Now You See It

Poems by
Ron Wallace



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

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FIRST EDITION

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for Margaret

Trouble

How we think we abhor it:
crossing the street to
avoid meeting up with it,
pretending—if it knocks—
not to be home,
going out of our way to
disavow any knowledge,
preferring to go it alone.

Who, in their right mind,
would look for it,
ask for it? Who wouldn't do
their best to stay out of it?
And yet, who is it always we
bring to the table?
Who, besides misery,
provides better company?

Caution

Today, I go out determined
to step on a crack,
to run with scissors,
to cross my weary eyes,
because nothing has ever
happened! And, oh Lord,
I am stuck. So, whatever
I've been told not to do,
I'm doing: watch me
grow hair on my palms,
stunt my growth,
get zits all over my face.
No more, I say, playing it safe!
No more thinking twice about it!
No more looking before I leap!
I'm hailing cars full of strangers.
I'm throwing good money
after bad, coveting
my neighbor's wife,
taking the Lord's name
in vain. Goddammit!
So what if my plans don't hatch?
So what if I come unglued?
Stand back!
I'm taking my chances.

Mr. Malaprop

I know when I order
the veal couplet for lunch
all bets are off.
I've caught myself
picking sonnet out of my nose,
witnessing epileptic caesuras,
having peanut butter and enjambment
sandwiches. How many times
can I say
I am I am I am
before the quatrain leaves the station?
Where are the heroes and villanelles?
Anyone for a game of troché?
The worst thing is I rarely realize
I've made the substitution,
I who was a child prosody,
now suffering from anapestic shock,
writing poems with so many
aberrant lions, roaring
in anaphylactic tetrameter!

Pasta

Here I am at the dinner party I dreaded,
taking too much pasta from the blue ceramic bowl—
it sticks to the pasta fork and there's no way
I can separate it into reasonably smaller portions—
in line at the serving table in this elegant
house, as the man right behind me—a retired
brain researcher and electrical engineer—
is talking about neurons and synapses,
how monkeys can learn to categorize like humans,
can distinguish, say, dogs and cats, and you can
see it in the change in their brain cells, and he's
reaching now for the fork and it's too late and
the pasta on my plate is twice too much for the lone
chicken leg I've dredged up from the next bowl, and
so I dredge up yet another and think how, slow eater
that I am, I'll never make appropriate progress later
when everyone else is finished and drinking their
after-dinner coffee and tea and listening
to the fireman talking about arthritis and arson, and
the astrophysicist talking about how neutrinos in
the ice in Antarctica are sending us back to the
origins of the universe and the host's Irish Setter
has his nose in my crotch and his paw on the table
and the coffee- and tea-drinkers and dessert-eaters
are asking me a question I can't answer,
having not paid appropriate attention, and under
the dog's paw my pasta looks gray and brain-like
with its small cells of parmesan and salt, and all
eyes are on me now and I'm thinking
in what category—fire or ice—as the world ends,
should I put the dog, put the pasta?

The Cancer Fish

Amazing how one minute you can be
walking along, on top of the world,
all the world, as it were, your oyster,
and the next minute be a goner,
a lobster in somebody's pot. What
does the fish think, swimming along—
things going *swimmingly*—minding its
own business, when an innocent morsel,
the minnow or worm that had always
been just a pleasant lunch, suddenly
brings it up short, into the frantic air,
a parcel on somebody's plate. How one
word changes everything: *Malignancy. Luck.*

Jilted

He had no symptoms, no
burning sensation, no
retention problems, no
difficulties to speak of whatsoever, and so
when the doctors said
cancer in that solemn tone
that's reserved for consolation or
telling the one you loved so dearly
you don't love them anymore
(and we all know
how that must go),
he said, "No thank you."
Life wasn't going to jilt him now,
he wouldn't let it go, for how
could something he loved not love him?
Was it something he'd said or done?
Then he'd be good!
He'd bring it flowers and candy.
He'd write it silly love poems.
It would be his tootsie-wootsie
in the summertime again.

Off With Her Head!

*Can you keep yourself from crying
by considering things?*
was Alice's question to the Queen
and, as is often the case,
I remember only the question
and not the answer.

But consider this: it's curable,
just cut it out.
Which is what my father would say
when I was crying
about something or other.
Don't be a baby!

Babies, I might point out,
were my father still around,
don't have to worry
about cancer. Though my daughter
tells me a baby in her nursery
story group has brain cancer,

but that's another story,
and not the kind of thing
you'd consider to stop crying.
Perhaps Lewis Carroll was
considering such things as
mathematics or photography, or how

Alice Liddell looked up at him
that afternoon as the sun shone
on that little boat that sailed
through his own mad imaginings.
I'll give you something to cry about,
my father would have said.

And that's a far cry
from any answer
I might have hoped for.
In a world of
hedgehogs, dormice, hatters,
that's only half the story.

He died, but not of cancer.
Consider that the next time
you're crying about a question.

Obituary

for Marty

Just once, you say,
you'd like to see
an obituary in which
the deceased didn't succumb
after "a heroic struggle" with cancer,
or heart disease, or Alzheimer's or
whatever it was
that finally took him down.

Just once, you say,
couldn't the obit read:

He got sick and quit.

He gave up the ghost.

He put up no fight at all.

Rolled over. Bailed out.

Got out while the getting was good.

Excused himself from life's feast.

You're making a joke and

I laugh, though you can't know

I'm considering exactly that:

no radical prostatectomy for me,

no matter what General Practitioner

and Major Oncologist may say.

I think, let that walnut-sized

pipsqueak have its way with me,

that pebble in cancer's slingshot

that brings dim Goliath down.

So, old friend, before I go

and take all the wide world with me,

I want you to know

I picked up the tip.

I skipped the main course.

I'm here in the punch line.

Old friend, the joke's on me.

The Planning Session

I didn't look at
the grim hypodermic,
the Foley catheter
or the rectal balloon.
Flat on the sterile pallet
in my gown and ridiculous
shoes, I barely looked at
the prim young nurse
who must have been
chipper, attractive,
a quick hand at
the business of bladder
and quip. Instead, I went
as far from that place
as I could, out of
the moment, out of
the province of the prostate,
its sick joke, to
the remembered old
country of health,
where my mind could be
free of all apprehension,
my body—back
in the treatment room—
no more than a line drawing,
a regret, a cartoon in
The New Yorker
I didn't get.

Abracadabra

Enter through the door marked “Linac 4.”
Take the tiny towel, for false
modesty is always better than none. Now
drop your trousers, mount the table,
bring your bony knees
upward to your chest while they
tie your feet together and give
you the rubber ring to squeeze
what little comfort you can from misdirection.
Let them levitate you and then
apply the ultrasound gel, the prescient probe,
adjusting the planning parameters
with the computer’s sleight-of-hand.
Ah, the indignity of it! You
feel like such a rube,
caught with your proverbial pants down
as they vanish from the room.
Let Linac 4 begin to hum
its cool, dispassionate hum, the classic
apparatus with its obligatory patter
moving its mesmeric armature
over your rigid body.
And if finally it all comes down to mathematics—
how the cells divide and multiply—
and the physics of how the trick’s done,
who’s to say that there could be
no alchemy in the 21st century,
no magic, no necromancy?
All you want is just to be
a stage prop in the act of Linac 4,
your cancer but a coin, a card, a key, a rope,
a rabbit in the top hat of the prostate:
Now you see it, now you don’t.

What It's Like

Rate your pain on a scale from 1 to 10.

A razor in the anus,
cutworms squirming,
a bass drum of pain.
I'm not one, ordinarily,
to complain, but, Jesus!
where are the miracles
of modern medicine, now?
Shit! Yes, shit
is the culprit. Deposit it
and you can produce
intense blossoms of pain,
such a crop of discomfort
that you'll despair
of the too-bountiful harvest.
Can you market this?
Are there consumers of,
an audience for, your pain?
And when you find yourself in it
do you buy the idea
that pain has its seasons,
tells its cautionary tales,
nails up its warning signs,
makes its own atonal music?
Or does it seem that the notion
that pain has its uses
is more like the chief
among God's great excuses?

On Your Own Terms

At least you meet new words—
adipose, ischemia, proctitis,
cystitis, fistula, tenesmus—
those Greek and Latinate poseurs,
purveyors of what passes for
intelligence and class. Who
would have thought that
you would be
intimate with that crowd,
intermingling with such foreigners
as *ureter* and *sphincter*,
rectum and *urethra*,
at this cocktail party of
the pompous and obsequious.

Me, I'd rather be
monosyllabic, dumb,
outside in the garden,
hobnobbing with the common folk,
gabbing with the simple words
like *good*, and *health*, and *hope*.

In the Blink of an Eye

for Tom

And when a friend says that
in one hundred years
all 5.5 billion people alive
now on earth will be dead,
I think *plague*, think *nuclear accident*.
I think *the unthinkable war*.
Of course, it's kind of a trick
only a sap like me would fall for,
gullible liberal that I am,
always coming up with the worst-
case scenario. *Of course*
all of us will be dead, but
there will be more and more
and more to take our place.
And yet, it does give me pause,
as I find myself sweating the small
stuff, while the universe blinks
its eye on the whole human race.

Limited Time Offer

I guess God knew what he was doing
when he set up his earthly economy—
what choice did we have but to buy into it?—
though it seems we're getting short shrift,
always losing the shirt off our back,
going bankrupt, being brought low.
Even Adam was reduced to barter—
What do I hear for this rib?—
& kicked out of bliss for shop-lifting
into a world well-stocked with woe.
It seems life is finally a close-out,
a clearance, a liquidation,
with God up there hawking his wares.
The bottom line: Everything Must Go!

It Happens

And who is ever ready
when it does? On the deck,
for instance, at Turtle's Restaurant,
Siesta Key, just down
from Crescent Beach.
Sunset. The pelicans and egrets
roosting under the inlet moon.
At the next table, the breeze,
seated between Messrs. Gentle and Waft,
talks of his dear wife, Hush.
We sit dreamy in the aftermath
of salmon and red snapper,
in the light of the key lime pie,
when, sudden as a dropped
dish in the kitchen, your
startled face shatters, and
the moment we will all live with
the rest of our lives, sidles up
unexpectedly, and presents the check.

Finally, Completely

In a way, athletes die twice. We die the day our careers end; we are usually young men when that happens. Then we die again, finally, completely.

—Lou Pinella

And we die again when
our grandparents die, and then
when our fathers and mothers,
our best friends, our lovers, are
knocked off the roster by
whatever the world has to offer:
breast cancer, heart attacks, drunk
drivers—those players that take us
in our last days, at the ends
of our various seasons.
It's the way Death plays: the lope
under our long fly ball; the throw
that cuts us off at the plate; the pitch
that retires the side; the hand
that blocks our shot; the fake
that fouls us out; the stall
that runs down the clock; the blitz,
the sack, the hit, as we
buttonhook, down and out,
or fall back into the pocket.
It finds us time after time—
on the court, on the field, in the park;
on the bench, in the crowd, on the street.
You don't have to be an athlete.

In Slow Motion

even disaster is graceful, the flat
hand to the face floating slowly back
from the slow blush hovering up
on the cheek, the look
of astonishment or wonder
before the pain betrays, belatedly,
the pleasure of surprise;
the way the flames exfoliate
from the luxuriant bright explosion,
the weightless stray of debris
trailing its pyrotechnical light;
the splash of glass in the car crash,
cascading, a waterfall of spray.
How we play it over and over,
the moment before whatever it was
we did or said accelerated—
hand, flame, glass—disaster
its old self again, speeding up,
faster, faster . . .

The Spirit

Sometimes it's got you
packing your bags,
loading the U Haul,
and driving to Cleveland or
Paris. Though you, left to
your own devices, would just
as soon have stayed
at home on the sofa
with your old friend, inertia,
your caretaker, inactivity.
There's something about knowing
your place, you argue,
something about being
a rock. But just when
you think you're dead
on, just when you're feeling
comfy, the spirit shows up,
with its strapping tape,
boxes and dollies,
its muscles and pickup truck.
And (thank God!) it moves you,
it moves you.

Cured

Like a ham, or bacon! Irradiated,
preserved, a foodstuff that will never
go bad! I'm saved, as by salting,
or smoking, or aging. I'm
hardtack, I'm salt-pork, I'm
beef jerky. The cancer's
been remedied, eradicated, as if
it were just a bad habit. It's been
vulcanized, subjected to chemical
action or heat, rendered
infusible or chemically inert.
I'm rubber, I'm plastic, let death
try to mess with me now!
I'll stick in his craw!



RON WALLACE was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. He has lived in Wisconsin since 1972, dividing his time between Madison and a forty-acre farm in Bear Valley. He is the author of twelve books of poetry, fiction, and criticism, the most recent of which is *Long for This World: New and Selected Poems* (University of Pittsburgh Press). He is co-director of the creative writing program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and editor of the University of Wisconsin Press poetry series.

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