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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK



*Cicatrix*

POEMS BY CHARLES CANTRELL

CHARLES CANTRELL teaches English at Madison Area Technical College. His awards include grants from the Wisconsin Arts Board, fellowships from Ragdale, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and Ucross. He is also listed in a 1992 edition of *Who's Who in American and Canadian Poets, Editors, and Writers*. Poems have appeared in numerous publications, including *The Literary Review*, *Nimrod*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Yankee*. Charles Cantrell was nominated for a 2000 Pushcart Prize. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin with his wife and son.

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# *Cicatrix*

*Poems by*  
CHARLES CANTRELL



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*For my brother, James Cantrell*

## *Ball-Peen*

Because my father lost his job  
nailing boxes shut, drunk, he flung  
dish after dish against the wall.

The police came. After raising his club  
one cop got a hammer in the face.  
After they yanked my father toward their car

I retrieved the hammer. Recalling my father's  
arms waving, I went out under moonlight,  
hammer under my belt, handle down like a gun.

Jerking the hammer out, I yelled, "Ain't  
no way you fuckers gonna take me."  
Nearing a hill I slowed, then threw

the hammer up a slope.  
Days later my father made me tell him  
where the hammer was. Patting my back

on the way, he asked if I needed help  
with fractions. He stood by the fence  
while I climbed the hill and found the tool

at the foot of a blackberry bush—  
several stems split, berry stains  
mixed with dried blood on the head.

## *Blue Hammer*

I found it in the snow.

I'd use it for my shop project:  
a puppy box. I kept the hammer  
under my bed. My older brother  
thought everything I owned—bike,  
marbles, ball gloves—was his.

I took planks from an abandoned  
lumber yard. Dad had saws, nails and,  
of course, hammers, but I went  
into the garage with my hammer  
and buzz-rip, buzz-rip, pound,  
pound, pound...produced a square box.

My dog, Susie, was due any day.  
The box wasn't level. Bent nails—  
I hammered them in that way.  
So what if I got a "C."  
After the pups were born,  
I put the tool under my pillow.  
Watch out, intruders, even in  
dreams. My hammer, often on the sheet

beside me, caught moonlight on chrome,  
and the blue handle sometimes  
had a fist around it. I could  
size a body up fast. Even the molecules  
were dangerous in the blunt tip  
of my lovely hammer,  
saved from a white oblivion.

## *Chopping Wood*

Red mitten around a hatchet,  
the blade cuts through the frozen bark  
into the white meat of the wood.  
The farmer's arm swells and sweats  
in a tunnel of green wool, and he's  
racing the sun to chop the next cord—  
his breath coming in harsh puffs  
and he could use some coffee, hot  
and black in a clay mug,

the kind I brought my father,  
who chopped logs gracefully, almost  
dancing, not thanking me as I moaned  
about the telescope I wanted for Christmas.  
He said he didn't want to hear about  
the telescope, his words chopping  
into the dark, not stopping as his mittens  
stiffened with frost.

Above the odor of cedar, the farmer  
catches a chip in one eye  
and raises his free arm,  
frost dropping from the sleeve,  
and I leave, wondering if he,  
like my father, will finish  
the last cord in the dark.



## *Porch, Alcohol, and Stars*

“Existentialism, Dad,” I said, “what is it?”  
Hammering boards for the back porch,  
he spat a nail from his lips.  
“Existence, I guess, but fancy,  
boiling down to we’re here, that’s what’s real.  
What comes later, who the hell knows?  
I have to get this built before night fall.”

That’s not what my English teacher,  
who loved existentialism, would say.  
I watched Dad level the steps, green bubble  
floating off mid-point. More cement  
under the blocks would fix that, so I  
poured some into a pan and looked for the hose.

Dad had read Nietzsche and liked to quote him.  
“Your gift this Christmas,” Dad said once,  
“is the red box beneath the tree.  
By the way, the highest values devalue  
themselves, which means, and Nietzsche  
would concur, no matter how good I treat you  
it will never be enough.” I didn’t know  
the Nietzsche stuff, so tore into the box  
that held a microscope. I didn’t know if Dad  
put the onus on himself or on me.

When he drank he loved to yell from bed,  
“Get me a glass of water. Hey, what doesn’t  
kill me will make me stronger.”  
I had read some Nietzsche by then  
and hated Dad’s words.  
The night he fell, sloshed, cracking his skull  
on the railroad, I was boxing a boy  
in a pal’s yard. Days later I stopped at Dad’s  
coffin, touched his callused knuckles  
and wondered what Nietzsche meant by fully  
conscious and how the spirit releases itself.

That fall I would lie on Dad's Army blanket  
in the frosted grass and watch the stars  
through my cardboard telescope and wonder  
how their harmonies mesh and why they burn out  
and if spirit figures in this.

*Between God and the Deep Black Grave*

My mother held a clothespin in her mouth.  
What was growing in her blood, I didn't know.  
Her smoky voice whirred like a fan.  
The aroma of blackberry pie through the kitchen window  
drew me away from her. As my parents cried  
about some kind of disease, I watched the clouds  
behind the moon a long time from my window.  
The sky cleared—my mother didn't die—  
I no longer counted my moons before they rose,  
full or curved like a smile, dissolving  
like the tiny white pills my mother took with every meal.

## *Winter Flashback*

Across blue ice she calls to her son,  
remembering his spitting at his brother  
for taking his skates, breaking a blade.  
Her mother had told her, if you  
spit on someone's shadow, your shadow  
will grow so heavy you can barely walk.  
She almost repeated that.

Her son, carving figure eights,  
appears a quarter mile out. His red  
sweater burns her eyes. His smile  
pulls her to the lake's edge.  
She doesn't worry about him being  
scarred by an old story. Ice is a scar  
he creates at her feet.

He lifts her from the icy grass,  
two deer on his chest leaping into wool,  
wool of his mother's weaving,  
an old story holding sweater to sweater,  
holding the rising and falling.

## *Undoing of Christmas Blues*

Mom's knitting a cardinal on an apron  
for Grandma. I'm reading ads inside *Batman*.  
How many coupons buy a telescope?  
Brother's in his room,  
swearing because math holds negative values  
of X and unknowns. Dad's under the house,  
dragging a ragged blanket for our pregnant cat,  
who refuses to come out. Tonight, it'll drop  
below freezing. Tomorrow's Christmas Eve.  
If we're quiet, we can hear Sasha mew,  
alternating gratitude and worry.  
Despite Dad's carpenter calluses, his palms  
are as soft as a kitten's belly.  
Mom's needles click, cross and back,  
loop stitch and around. I sigh,  
turn a page. Riddler cackles away on a secret  
motorcycle while Batman and Robin  
unravel a rope web that fell from a fire escape.  
Mom opens her Bible.  
Please, no reading aloud, I hope.  
I wonder about prayer for cats.  
Brother's quiet now, probably snapping  
fingers to Martha and the Vandellas.  
And here's Pop, blue-lipped,  
spider floss, thick and bright as piano wire,  
threading his hair. As Mom moves her finger  
down a page, I look up, a telescope  
dissolving in my head—spool of red yarn  
empty on a lap. If the stars are right,  
and the Wise Men, keen and clear,  
a child is sucking his thumb in the womb,  
about to enact a miracle again,  
and Dad's unsung tune is "Hey, good news."

## *Fire Truck*

I got socks for Christmas,  
Bazooka bubble gum, blew pink  
balloons and looked through them  
at gulls scavenging behind the gas station  
near the docks—our house beside the river  
where scum from the vaseline factory  
stirred the water blue to green.

After Christmas the teacher said,  
“Bring a toy and tell about it.”  
Walking to school, I kicked leaves  
then saw a red fire truck, hook and ladder  
and grabbed it from beside a bird bath.

In class I told about a boy who longed  
to fight fires and dreamt one night  
he was driving “Big Red” to a three-alarm,  
where he rescued a woman clutching a puppy.  
Walking home, I passed the house.  
Shades pulled, no one in the yard,  
I placed the truck in the exact spot

as before, then ran, leaves flying  
like broken flames behind my heels—  
ran like a hungry, but happy, dog  
after any old bone. A siren’s wail  
in my skull, a bell’s two-note  
clang in my chest.



*“The Shadow’s” Shadow*

The radio’s amber eye blinks as the storm  
outside cracks lightning, breaking  
“the Shadow’s” voice—dark shapes  
he describes along an oily dock  
sometimes giving me, leaning close,  
the chills. Mom and Dad on the sofa  
sipping red wine from thimbles to prove  
they can—both fighting last night  
loud enough, wall to wall with my bedroom,  
about bills. I couldn’t fall asleep  
and kept balling up the edge  
of the sheet with my fists.

I picture myself as “The Shadow,”  
pistol beneath my trench coat,  
fog stippling my cap. Bell buoy’s two-note  
chime, gull cry. A tug’s yellow light  
breaks a moon across black water.  
The thimbles make Mom and Dad foolish.  
They could be shadow puppets cast  
by the floor lamp. I shake hands with  
“the Shadow.” Storm clouds open.  
Handcuffs clink their resonating steel  
certainty on a crook’s wrists.  
I tag along, “the Shadow’s” sidekick,  
even if he doesn’t know I’m there.

## *Memory's Hard Way Out*

I thought I had forgotten about the girl  
who touched herself with a feather  
under the shadows while I watched her silk sheets  
ripple and ate the cup of orange sherbert  
she had given me to keep me quiet  
while she stared at my face.  
She closed her eyes, as if she were playing a game  
I couldn't join. She moaned,  
I wanted to leave. Staring into the empty cup,  
I sucked the spoon, bland metal—teeth on steel.  
I remember reading her *True Romances* aloud,  
saying she was every girl in every story,  
like the one a boy fondled beneath an oak  
while the Valentine's dance droned in the gym.

Reading a book of poems, I smell gin-ridden  
pines in the grove, wind coming on  
as subtle as the girl rustling her nightgown.  
I've held her name for 34 years,  
held her voice behind the lipstick  
she pressed to my forehead. A little red halo,  
she said. I can walk to the pines and hold  
fallen needles, look at my own moon-lit oak,  
but there's really no way I can reach  
across the vista and touch that girl.

## *Snake Handling*

“If I die, I die,”  
he says. Diamondback, copperhead, cottonmouth,  
water moccasin—he’s handled them all.  
“Been bit 116 times. Got a little weak,  
was low for a few days.”  
The men in this shack of a church  
dance a jig in dungarees and white  
shirts to guitars and tinny drums.  
Some hold a snake at arm’s length.  
One manic tap dancer spins  
barefoot on a rattler.  
Women sing choruses of “Ring Them  
Bells of Love” while men swig  
strychnine from a mason jar.  
I tug at my father’s cuff,  
wanting to go home. *Sweet Jesus,*  
*sweet Jesus* — women twirl, skirts  
swirl. A man gags, grows weak-  
kneed. Two men help him outside  
under the pines and needling stars.  
If they wiped his brow with a cool cloth  
or just let him sit on the steps,  
I don’t know. *Sweet Jesus* with his swooning  
joy clear to the diluted marrow.

## *Shrimp*

A hump of rope darkens the shrimp boat's bow.

*Shrump-shrump*, the engine turns.

Brine teases my nostrils—dripping  
nets piled deck-side. My father waves  
from the rail—thousands of shrimp  
for canneries, restaurants, but I don't care,  
don't particularly like shrimp  
and often balk at the fishy scent  
woven to Dad's shirt, hands, under  
his nails. "It's a job," he said, "and I love it.  
If you don't eat shrimp, you don't like me."  
So I try to see those near translucent

wigglers as creatures, human size,  
from outer space, in movies I love.

The sauce, blood red and vinegary, helps.

The more I eat the more Pop smiles.

*Shrimp, shrump, hump of hemp:*

sounds I love. If I rolled those words  
across my tongue, I bet I could taste them.

The jellied flesh, followed by a French fry  
or sip of orangeade, isn't so bad,  
and who hasn't lied for love?

## *Dark Art*

I began to color everything black.  
My teacher, Mr. Lock, pipe-cleaner  
arms and legs, voice like a jay,  
shrilled, "Aren't those black roses a bit much  
even in, what do you call this, hard bitten  
realism?" I couldn't answer. Charred clouds hung

like umbrellas over houses. I loved houses.  
Sometimes I chalked a dog in the yard,  
black lab after a black bone. Jet rain  
drenching black trees, black summer leaves.  
The blacker my work the lower my grade.

Dad drank, clutched the blanket on his bed  
the way he clawed sand on Omaha Beach,  
hallucinating Nazis from D.T.'s.  
Mom cried, threw his shirts out to keep him  
from leaving to buy more wine, but he said  
"To hell with it" and left shirtless.

He died that spring on the railroad tracks,  
drunk, smashing his skull on a rail.  
My paintings grew blacker. Creeks, cows in a field,  
hawk on a stump. . . all black  
except for a gray sky topped with purple cirrus.  
Mr. Lock stopped yelling at me, though I

turned in another black drawing  
despite a silver hangnail moon in the upper left.  
"At least there's some light in this," he said  
and gave me a C. In May I drew some flowers, red,  
yellow, violet, near houses, almost  
smiling, with shutter-like white teeth.

## *Always, My Father*

Always, for me, pinball nickels, lint-  
pinched, in his pocket. Bar-top pretzels  
and Friday night fights by Gillette.  
Walking home, Dad didn't hold my hand.  
The litany of rounds buzzed my head.  
Gene Fullmer, flattened, bloody nose,  
slumped in the corner. "Fullmer beat Webb,"  
Dad shouted. "Webb kept dancing away."

A little drunk, Dad staggered toward the curb.  
Woozy on smoke, I fantasized being a boxer—  
jab jab toward the shadows between hedges.  
Later, still confused about Fullmer  
being the loser and the winner, I rolled lint  
from my blanket between my thumb and finger  
into tiny balls, then clenched my fists  
and waited for the bell and waited.



## *Breaking Icicles*

Putting off the love poem assigned  
for class, I watched the broken  
face of the moon through my telescope.  
The Everly Brothers crooned through my earphones  
their love problems, lovers breaking  
like icicles Dad knocked from the eaves  
with a shovel. But the ice always formed again,  
recurrent as my dream of Susie Galloway.  
I leaned close behind her in algebra and  
inhaled the floral scent from her neck.  
I knew nothing about love,  
and I'm sure the poem I'd write would bleed  
from my sleeve some girl like Susie.

After giving her a valentine as big  
as a notebook, cherry sucker piercing the heart  
like an arrow, I tried to kiss her,  
but she stepped back. Love is a mystery  
is easy to say but not wrong.  
I picture icicles that hung  
from the garage's down spout. Like Dad  
I wanted them as large as spears.  
I broke them, then hurled them toward snow-  
drifts to watch them plunge to the hilt  
and not break, or sometimes misjudge  
and watch one hit the trash can and shatter  
like a pearl necklace. Ice broke  
as easily as love, but the way water  
and that special degree formed ice  
is another matter I wouldn't touch.

## *Mirror to the Stars*

Brushing glue  
to the stabilizer of a Messerschmidt,  
I heard glass smash—my parents at it again.  
My book on Fokker lay open on my bed  
to something about bullets firing  
through a spinning propeller  
without hitting the blades.

I grabbed my hand mirror  
and sneaked down the back stairs  
to a vacant lot, held the mirror  
to the stars, then propped it on my shoulder  
and aimed it down the street,

remembering my science teacher, who said,  
“A Chinese box is four opposing mirrors  
inside a box. What would they reflect?”  
I guessed nothing. “Right,” he said.  
Like the space, I guess, between my mirror  
and the heavens.

Checking zits when I got home,  
I squeezed my nose till it hurt,  
looked at a drop of blood  
then stared at my face and wondered  
who or what might reflect some answers.

## *My Father's Hobo Jungle Dirge*

Match flare in the strawberry light  
                                    of a Georgia sunrise.  
You're flaming canned heat in the cinder-blackened underbrush.

You brew the heat for juice, what you call "strawberry pop"  
to strain through bread and later pass out  
among sowbugs, spiders, slugs...  
I'm up for my paper route.

                                    The sky, dark and still starred,  
is as blue as the rag you carry in your back pocket.  
The stream I speed by before hitting my paper drag  
is as dark as your hair, and probably clotted  
with twigs and creepers.

                                    But the water runs on, resisting  
rocks, fallen timber, tires, with a resolve  
you don't have, a *yes*, and a *go*,  
                                    a swirling tenacity

you lost years ago.

I could pedal the long way across town  
to check on you but would lose time.

The one time I did that you swore at me.  
Those bugs or spiders, maybe copperheads,  
                                    could die

from your blood, so much poison  
courses you veins.

                                    But you never sleep long in the weeds—  
raindrops, train whistle wake you, ready for a cigarette.  
Quick fire in the downcast shadows of honeysuckle,  
and the angel of death whispers

                                    A shortcut to the sky  
is strawberry light you can walk with ease,  
an invisible plank.

## *Fueled by Bottles*

With his hammer  
that smashes rusty nails  
sparking miniature stars  
visible in daylight

With his level  
and the sliding yellow eye  
that wants to bob true  
but the board is warped  
or the ground's not right

With his rage  
fueled by bottles  
I don't understand and stay  
clear of his breath  
of rotting apples

With his kindness  
that comes with a black coat  
he hangs on my bedpost—  
my first peacoat, and I will dare  
the snow to find an opening

With his fear of losing  
a job while my mother  
wipes his hung-over brow  
with a yellow washcloth  
as I watch for the school bus

With his spine  
rogue cells begin to devour  
and he can't shake enough salt  
and cayenne on his beans

And his regret  
like a tough weed  
growing beside a knotty fence post  
that will take no nail  
without bending it

## *Final Dream of the Dead*

His bones 25 years in the ground,  
in sleep, my father hands me a tomato  
from our garden and smiles. I hand him  
hammer and nails for the new back porch.

Years back he watched me pouring his wine  
down the drain, grabbed my collar  
and shoved me out the door.  
The grass was waves that washed over me.  
I swam toward a stump.

In the last dream he's digging a hole  
with a spoon. He seems absurd,  
kneeling, tossing spoonfuls of earth  
over his shoulder. "Gimme a dollar," I say.

"I don't have a dollar," he shouts.  
"Help me up from here." Snow  
falls on his eyelashes, and he blinks.  
My bones soften, my body sinks  
to the ground as I reach for his hand.

## *Gravestone*

On my way to a creek I cut through a graveyard  
and stop by a tombstone  
eroded to soft edges. I picture my father's grave,  
black, earth-bound, flat as a book cover.  
He bore scars—fights, steel mill burns—  
but read few books. "Books land you in trouble,"  
he said. I didn't know what that meant.

I walk through wildflowers—blue, red, yellow,  
gold—nameless to me, as if the landscape,  
like a paint-by numbers, is complete  
without me. I watch for briars,  
snakes, wasps... the way out.

1510 Talleyrand Avenue

Drunk, my father picked up a skillet  
and lunged at my mother. She ducked  
into my room and called the police.

Two burly men threw my father, swinging,  
down the stairs. A week later  
he lifted his bandage and showed me the stitches,

like a tiny railroad atop his scalp.  
I stared at that catgut,  
wanted to unravel it, make it go away;

make the wound come clean,  
white as the window pane weeks back  
when my father taught me to draw my name.

Now watch it disappear, he said,  
blowing enough breath to hide *Charles*.  
He watched my lip turn down.

But you can write it again, he said,  
like this, his finger poised like a pencil.  
He exhaled, then drew the half moon

of my first letter so wide I saw the night:  
street lights on palm-lined curbs,  
tugboats and dock lights dancing on the river

in the distance. Refocusing, I saw my father  
smiling. Now you write the rest, he said.  
He held my hand and I wrote.









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