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A Poem Sequence by Diane Kerr

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



# One

A Poem Sequence by  
Diane Kerr



PARALLEL PRESS • 2006



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The following segments of this sequence, some in slightly altered forms, have appeared in these publications:

*Alaska Quarterly Review*: the segments beginning with the first lines:

“At thirty thousand feet, two moons”

“Halved and huge, a cut blood orange”

“I was at the clinic, between patients”

“It’s a mistake to believe”

“Banker one, still can’t balance”

*The Diagram*: all of Section III as well as the segment from Section I which begins:

“Early September: fall is proceeding”

*The Pittsburgh Post Gazette*: the segment from Section II which begins:

“Crouched under wrought-iron frets”

Grateful thanks to Ellen Bryant Voigt and Michael Ryan without whose help these poems would not have been realized, to my husband John for love and support throughout, to John Spiegel for ever wise counsel, and to Marv Solomon who first called me writer.

FIRST EDITION

## *Contents*

- I. Sistering · 7
- II. First · 16
- III. Little Thief · 27

In order to sing, sadness  
will have to drink black water.

—José Luis Hidalgo

"Shore of Night"

Translated by Hardie St. Martin

The one who can sing sings to the one who can't,  
who waits in the pit, like Procne among the slaves,  
as the gods decide how all such stories end,

—Ellen Bryant Voigt

"Song and Story"

*In memory of my brother, David H. Kerr*

## I. *Sistering*

Unsustainable silent weight  
on the cross-beams, deep fissures  
surfacing in the plaster.

The contractor said my house  
was falling slowly inward;  
some previous soul had removed  
a load-bearing wall, some joists  
were shorter than others, couldn't  
support what they weren't made to support.

So he *sistered* them, which means  
to splice, to add a sort of splint  
that connects each inadequate  
sagging side to the other, spanning  
the weakness in the middle, making  
the heaviness bearable again.

\*

At thirty thousand feet, two moons  
compete in the window view: one,  
a high August chrysanthemum, the other  
its wavering orange reflection  
on the long sack of lake Michigan.

Again I will arrive, uninvited,  
to visit my drunken brother,  
brother, from the Greek *phrater*—  
as in fraternity, as in fratricide.  
Always he swims away from me, always  
kicking away, I was the dark moon  
curled against him in the first sky  
of the first night, curled crescent,  
I was the always other.

How annoying another self  
shadowing the barely self, brother,  
as in brotherhood, next door  
to brothel, Old English Neighbor  
of *breothan* which means to waste away,  
to go to ruin. I mean to intrude.

The 737 slides its shadow  
across the calm evening lake  
and drones down to mild clear Milwaukee.  
He was the expected, hoped-for one;  
it was 1942, before sonograms.  
Sometimes the two hearts beat together

\*

She's had two weeks warning, and long before,  
she's had suspicions—eighty-pounds gained  
on her 5'2" frame, throbbing swollen breasts  
reaching down to her swollen belly bursting  
with double her plan. One plants two feet  
at the base of her spine, another  
kicks a persistent staccato, both heads  
press steadily up under her diaphragm—  
she can't get comfortable, can't  
even breathe lying down. So there she sits  
through this long night, propped up  
by pillows, sleeping husband young  
as she is, stretched out beside her,  
heedless as an animal, and the crib

in the corner—she refuses to buy  
another one, says we can learn to share.  
Second born herself of four in four years  
before TB took her mother, how much  
can she mother who wasn't much mothered?  
We're already fighting it out  
entangled inside her, elbows jabbing,  
back to back we push each other away.  
She fingers the itching stretch marks—  
purple streaked with tiny red veins,  
purred an inch wide down her sides—sighs,  
shifts her sagging bulk and aching backbone  
against the severe oak headboard—  
worry will keep her company, sit with her,  
little Buddha under her Bo tree, waiting for us.

\*

Shared initials but not a rhyme,  
no secret language, then nearly nothing

from him for years. After awhile  
I quit calling, quit sending cards.

Once, that pull of the moon,  
he left a message: *Happy Birthday*.

That was it, not his name,  
not *how are you, I love you too*.

It's my brother, I said.  
How did I know? Ask the babies,

those preemie twins who survive better  
in the same cramped incubator. Ask

what settles them, what calms  
the small heaving lungs.

\*

Thick fog and our headlights gone,  
we're crossing the marshland  
outside Pewaukee. Roy has already  
leapt from galloping Trigger  
onto the driverless stagecoach,  
saving everyone.

Here, my uncle Jim,  
newly graduated from high school,  
is hanging far out the window into  
the moist air, aiming a flashlight  
onto the median for my mother.  
She still believes and so do I.  
Before we lost our lights  
we were singing *Rock of Ages*,  
*A Mighty Fortress, Come Thou*  
*Almighty King*, and the one  
I'm learning in Children's Choir,  
*Now the Day is over*.

1949,  
the big square station wagon,  
wooden trim, worn leather seats,  
sounds of the low motor  
and a host of jubilant spring peepers.  
My brother and I are keeping watch  
out the back window, staring  
at the black of where we've been.  
In three weeks Uncle Jim's seizures  
will begin; now he leans further  
into the fog, yells back,  
*We're okay, Pat, just keep her coming!*



\*

Halved and huge, a cut blood orange,  
against the navy-blue sky the harvest moon  
rose bruised, cross-hatched, flecked  
with starlings swirling down to roost  
on the wire veins of the city.

The earth and moon love each other  
only once a year this way. Your life,  
your only life, it was the moment I knew  
your life was emptying from you.

Stub-tailed, speckled, ecstatic,  
the starlings sang the world's beautiful song.

I stood in the parking lot and wept,  
wept that you lay 600 miles away,  
wept that you could neither hear  
nor see the evening's old orange opera,  
and that you could no longer want to.

Nothing was garnered, gathered in,  
and nothing was stored by.  
They said you bled from every pore  
and nothing, nothing could stanch it.

\*

I was at the clinic, between patients  
when the receptionist buzzed me  
and I went to the waiting room  
and got my husband just as if  
he were one of the children  
and we walked back to my office  
and I closed the door and I said  
*he's gone, isn't he?* and my husband  
nodded and kissed me and I said  
*he's lost his life, he's lost his life*  
and sat down on the little orange chair  
by the game shelf and the art shelf  
and the people shelf of soldiers  
and a clown and cowboys and a ballerina  
and a bride and groom and a baseball team  
by the sturdy wooden dollhouse where babies  
have been eaten by starving dinosaurs  
and stupid mean grown-ups have jumped  
out windows into a deep lake of poop  
and a giant tornado has come  
and sucked out a whole family  
and every stick of sturdy wooden furniture  
and it's all fallen on top of them  
in a big pile on the floor.

\*

Hard white plaster helplessness—  
the rest of that summer sullen  
together—twins must be always  
leaving and returning to a mirror.

I can't remember if I smashed  
my elbow before or after he dove,  
arms forward, through the hay chute  
straight down. He must have seen  
the milking-parlor floor coming:  
lime-whitewashed, bare cement.

It must have been after.  
I was walking on a rolling barrel,  
playing circus. I fell suddenly.  
He didn't fall. He dove. Then  
came walking slowly across the barnyard,  
sleepwalker arms held out front, wrists  
dangling limp, two hung things.  
He came up the back steps as slowly  
as in last night's nightmare.

But I fell quickly, backwards, surprised,  
surprised as I was when the doctor  
set the elbow—his sweet fruited  
whiskey breath—and when he placed it,  
the piercing inside crack of pain—

like that, it was like that  
when they told me he was dead.

\*

Early September: fall is proceeding  
as it is supposed to; the only purple,  
asters in their appointed place  
next to the only yellow, goldenrod,  
claiming the ditches.  
Sumac is the only red—seeping  
as it should, down the open hillsides.

If Spike were alive, expensive  
dopey Spike, your big golden  
who never got it right—  
his one hunting season retrieving  
lily-pad after lily-pad,  
gleaming green tortillas  
dripping from his big dumb mouth—  
if Spike still lived, he would sniff  
and get up for that family of geese  
hustling south on schedule.

Leaves just begin to rust; green still holds.  
A full month before Small Game begins,  
the road-kill doe lies skewed, bloated  
and tolerable; overhead the necessary ravens  
scroll a black mandala on blue sky.  
But on the shoulder of the road  
sits a true vulture; sunlight slicks  
the wine-red corrugated head—  
too far north, it is too far north. Never,  
I've never seen one here before—  
David, too soon.

*How to bear the beak of disorder.*

## II. *First*

Our mother's house,  
in the dream someone,  
a noise, at the door.  
Huge snarling great dane  
rearing up, mouth open.  
I slam the door, know  
it's going around  
to the back yard where  
the new puppy is playing  
under the blooming lilacs.  
It has the puppy,  
snapping its neck again  
and again. Then the puppy  
is asleep on the summer lawn.  
I grab him, I'm almost  
to the back door, the dane  
is charging up the steps.  
I grab the hose, turn it on,  
fill the great mouth,  
its deep gullet. Enraged,  
it vomits, lunges for us.  
I see the dark ridged pink  
roof of its mouth,  
I wake up.

Again you are dead.

\*

The main rule is everybody has to look  
in a different direction: the father  
looks at the map flapping and blowing,  
figures how many miles to Tucson; the mother  
sits in the car, looks at the blackness

of her hands pressed hard on her eyes,  
relives her mother's final faint, cries.  
The boy lies on his belly, four feet  
beyond the guard rail at the very edge  
of the canyon rim, leans over, looks down

to the canyon floor, the quicksilver  
river cutting its slender way out.  
And the girl? Oh that drippy girl,  
she can't find her own place to look—  
that cheater looks at them all.

\*

We didn't look alike.  
Breech babies. *Two perfectly  
round little heads*, our mother said,  
though I outweighed him by a pound,  
which worried her; she believed  
only girls should be frail.  
Her firstborn, both colicky,  
he wasn't gaining. The doctor  
gave him B-12 shots. The needle  
so long, when it plunged  
into his small bottom  
she could hardly bear it.  
When he died at fifty-four  
she said, *Now my tiniest baby is gone.*

Only sometimes dressed alike,  
blue sailor suit and sailor dress  
the first day of kindergarten;  
I was the frail one then.  
*Aren't they darling?* the teachers mewed.  
One put her thumb and index finger  
around my wrist. *So thin! But she's  
the smart one.* Another smiled, *Yes,  
but he's the handsome one.*

We didn't look alike except  
our eyes, the same hazel-green eyes.  
When he appeared in the vision,  
come back from eternal blackness  
in the same piss-soaked bathrobe,  
the same soft-clapping slippers  
stuffed with his swollen, mottled  
ankles, ice cubes still rattling  
in his glass, his face the same  
yellow bruise, I looked into his eyes;  
they were tear-filled, pleading.  
They were my eyes.



\*

Crouched under wrought-iron frets  
of our wooden desks, we wait  
through grade school, practicing  
disaster, the giant mushroom  
that would foreclose our future.  
Calamity has already come

to claim my brother,  
held back in second grade.  
When he isn't sitting  
in the principal's office, he sits  
scowling at the happy children  
in the impossible reader.

I have gone on to third.  
Regular drills down the rickety  
iron fire escapes, each class a place  
on the graveled playground, each child  
a partner. Always I look for him,  
always I make sure he's out.

We didn't say held back;  
*failed*, we said *failed*.

\*

I always put Walter  
in his cage when I go out.  
He's useless as a guard dog,  
but his steel cage might fool  
a thief into thinking he's vicious.  
Thieves want the gentle ones  
to sell as minnows  
for pit bulls. Small dogs  
get torn to bits in minutes,  
but Walter would be just right—  
big, gullible, curious, mystified  
in the face of snarling evil—  
before he realized the monster could kill him  
he'd lie down in submission before it,  
as you did.

\*

When he outweighed me,  
he had to move farther in.  
I had to sit at the very end.

Up and down up and down

the idea wasn't to balance—  
Then where would we have gone?  
Dangling your feet mid-air

you couldn't go anywhere—  
the idea was to use your feet  
to push up hard, make the other

come back down. But it was mean,  
if you were the down one, to just  
jump off—then the up one drops down

in a tailbone-cracking crash  
to the hard mud ground.  
And then what? And then who?

\*

It's a mistake to believe  
one twin always knows  
what the other is doing.

I don't know why  
he drank himself to death  
anymore than I know

what he was building  
or destroying when he raised  
that claw-foot hammer too far back.

We were ten, he had a Mohawk,  
he was barefoot, shirtless.  
From the back porch steps

I was watching him straddle  
a two-by-four. He was yelling—  
in a rage over what?—

when the claw-foot,  
as if it had changed  
its mind mid-swing,

swooped suddenly down  
onto his skull,  
then raked forward and up.

Why did he just stand there  
silent, warm red rivers  
already to his shoulders?

How was it I was watching?  
That part I know—my job  
was to run inside and tell.

\*

Banker one; still can't balance  
a checkbook one. Beautiful  
wavy-haired one; your grandmother's  
miserable hair one. Sturdy never  
sick one; asthma eczema earache  
high-fever bleeder always-got-  
something one. Good sleeper one;  
bed wetter. Pellet-gun pigeon  
squirrel hunter one; stray runt  
of the litter reject rescuer one.  
Lots of friends one; loner.  
Sharp dresser has girl friends  
goes to the prom knows  
better than to argue with adults one;  
little commie pinko reads too many books  
for her own good one. Never left  
town or us one; leaver. David  
named for your grandfather one;  
Diane sounds good with David one.  
First born male child; female.  
Heart's pride; problem.  
One who drank; one who didn't,  
one who died; one who should have.

\*

November: our birthday.  
I would have you think  
of me, if you could still  
think, me outside at 3am  
waiting for the puppy to pee.

I would have you know, if you could  
still know, how he's a golden,  
a good one, how already  
he wants to retrieve everything,  
even the moonlight silvering him  
as he snuffles in the dry leaves.

And if you could still hear,  
I would have you hear him  
when I leave him  
alone in his kitchen cage;  
he whimpers, then howls—  
for all the world like something human.

\*

Finally you are first  
and first forever,  
who were ever second—  
ever delivered one hot half-hour after—  
now you have surpassed me one full year:

first to lie alone stone still,  
first to wear a mound of wilting bloom,  
first to sink under the sour leaves,  
first to freeze under the frozen snow,  
first to molder, first to be mourned

### III. *Little Thief*

White winter sky blurring into white land,  
heading home, west from Pittsburgh  
on the flat track of the Ohio turnpike.  
Aftermath of last week's blizzard:  
still-buried corn fields, highway  
wearing blinders of plowed drifts,  
ice-crusts, cinder-splattered,  
gray, slow to recede as grief.

Sunshine, road turning silver,  
thin twinned electric tracks,  
my brother's Lionel chugging  
endless circles through cotton-batting,  
the ever-winter of our childhood,  
circle after circle, like the giant  
*windmachers* sprinkled over wheat fields  
in Denmark, huge white pylons topped  
with huge white pinwheels turning  
endless cartwheels, spinning  
from the nothingness of wind  
the strange current, fierce, underground  
in cables stretching as far as Copenhagen.

A red Peterbilt blasts his horn, points  
at my ridiculous pup sleeping  
sprawled, paws up, sun-gold on the back seat,  
sleeping the deep sleep all babies sleep.  
Rumple of northern Indiana, car drawn  
in the wake of the trucks: Angola,  
Elkhart, South Bend, the complication  
of Chicago, 100 miles north to Milwaukee  
and what is still home, last hour of daylight  
throbbing tangerine sunset on my left shoulder.



\*

Once, a gladness.  
Perhaps turning your head  
your smile when you saw me,

perhaps you were hunting,  
when you came home,  
when you set down your gun.

I've looked everywhere,  
as if mislaid, but mine,  
as something lost in my house

is mine. Delight,  
a place, a time, once,  
perhaps we were fishing,

perhaps in a hushed voice  
you told me where the trout lay,  
or walking silently in the woods

you touched my arm,  
pointed to where quail sleep  
in the deepest bracken. Memory,

from the Greek *mermera*,  
to care for, which is to mourn,  
to look for, to go down

underneath, to dive  
as the sunken treasure hunter,  
inside the barnacled tangle

for a gleam. Or to dig,  
by feel to dig down, to ferret  
inside the dark warren (ferret:

*furittus*, Latin, little thief),  
by sound, by scent, finding once  
a quivering, a softness.

\*

World champions: he holds  
his sister above his head  
with one hand, twirling her,

her slender backbone in his palm,  
her full weight pressing into  
his muscled arm, as she lets him

whirl her faster, lower her lower,  
lower, eyes closed, her head  
four inches from the ice. Once:

in Wisconsin-cold moonlight  
we followed a black ribbon  
of frozen river, skating out

onto Kellogg's swamp—windswept  
ice so clear we were suspended  
between two mirrored skies.

Scarves flying we are playing  
crack the whip. I'm the one  
on the end; the stars, the moon

are whirling, the world whirling,  
do you understand, we're whirling  
in wild cursive this little story

within our story. My brother holds  
onto me with one hand. We're laughing,  
he's yelling, *Hold on! Hold onto me!*

\*

Last night I dreamed him prancing in the aquamarine,  
my pup, who yesterday rolled frantically in the yard;  
lined up on his back three ticks, guts swollen  
the size of grapes. I poisoned them; still

I had to turn, pull hard with tweezers  
to get the embedded heads out  
as the pup sat shivering in the sudsy insecticide.  
He's a palomino now, honey-colored;

in the exuberant Caribbean surf  
his extravagant tail flies it's feathered sail  
luffed by the sea breeze. Honey-colored,  
honey shot with sunlight.

\*

Morning was sunning the deck.  
I was minding my own business,  
pondering the idea of the soul,

when two hummingbirds whizzed  
out of nowhere and staged  
a miniature dogfight.

My daughter once saw a ruby-throat  
peck another one to death—  
she took down her feeder,

but this time the loser  
just buzzed back to base,  
whatever base might be

for such a minute feathered engine.  
It was the winner who surprised me—  
fresh from his tiny victory,

he turned on me, *me*,  
a sun-glassed Goliath! He whirred  
straight over, eyed me steadily

(a cruel green eye in a slick green  
helmet) as he throttled up  
and threatened to lunge.

I wondered if he thought  
I was a huge honeysuckle—  
the mother-of-all fuchsias—

or whether it was folly, blind  
compunction to puncture a giant  
unknowable. It scared me—

that much I knew, and I jerked  
my knee away from the menace,  
real or imagined, I couldn't tell.

It was his presumption  
I admired. In two seconds he was gone.  
Whether it was two seconds

or someone's lifetime, your lifetime,  
beyond goldenrod, gone.

\*

Some poets want their tercets  
to stay triplets, not expand  
to quatrains, contract to couplets,

which might feel as if in the end  
there was too much, too little,  
a few too many, or too few words,

an uneasy imbalance that topples  
the pyramid of a three-part  
harmony. But I live twinned, unable

from conception to be apart  
too far from some close half-other.  
Think of how every heart

divides, needs each hollow chamber,  
one side to fill, one to empty.  
A missing line is my missing brother;

not until he was gone could I see  
I was his not him, he was my not me.

*for Michael Ryan*

\*

Shack of hair and bone—  
where will I find you now?  
DNA would say you are still  
you, as a place is still a place  
even abandoned into ghost town.  
Shall I say the soul leaves behind  
the body's company house, say sorrow  
makes a nightly round, rattles  
the doors, says no one, no one  
ever really believes the gold  
will give out, and how long,  
how long you've already been gone.



\*

Inside of her  
I could not tell  
where he, one soft side,

left off, and I,  
the other half, began.  
Curled back to back

we made a butterfly.  
There was never a picture  
of it; with her body

she grew that picture  
inside each of us.  
After she found him

where he had fallen,  
and after he died,  
she taped the first photo

by the phone,  
the hospital snapshot  
of her propped up,

young face tentative,  
smiling, a sleeping full moon  
on each winged arm.

Long ago she wrote my name  
with an arrow to one  
dark-haired circle,

his name on a thin line  
to the other. Now,  
she hasn't taped it well;

again it's fallen  
to the kitchen floor—  
She's not smiling at either

of us in the snapshot,  
she's smiling straight ahead  
saying, *Look,*

*this one is you, this one is your brother.*



DIANE KERR is a retired child and family therapist who also holds a M.F.A. from The Warren Wilson program for Writers. She teaches creative writing in the Osher Institute at the University of Pittsburgh and has published in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Diagram*, *Calliope*, and *Zone 3*, among others.



## Parallel Press Poets

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