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Fearing water : poetry. 2013

Saiser, Marjorie

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A Parallel Press Chapbook



*Fearing
Water*

BY

Marjorie Saiser

A Parallel Press Chapbook

Fearing Water

Poetry by
Marjorie Saiser

Parallel Press

University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

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Prairie Schooner: “Two Voices”

Prairie Schooner: “Education” (as “From Her White Knuckles”)

Prairie Schooner: “Argument” (as “My Father Argued With My Mother”)

Prairie Schooner: “Labor” (as “Walking the Baby”)

Crab Orchard Review: “Template”

For Don

Holding Out

She keeps her hands in her lap
in the front seat of the car

Dad beside her
is asking if she wants to go to the movie

he says
it's up to Mom

my little sister crosses her fingers
my mother's hands lie in her lap

big hands for a woman, blunt fingers
she won't say

yes or no, Dad has pulled the car over
to make her this one time

say yes or no
we sit, a family, in our Plymouth

at the side of the road
at the edge of town

waiting yes or no
my sister about to cry

my hands praying, palm to palm
my mother looking down at her hands

which had slapped me once
one of them

leaping out at my cheek
because of something I said

her hand
shocked my face

half of it
her hands in her lap yin and yang

can't decide won't say
yes or no

I want the movie so bad
I can taste it

sometimes her hands hold a cigarette
her hands in her lap in the car

hold us back like a dam
she can't say

she was perhaps her father's favorite
her hands, one of them, she raised in school

because she knew the answer
maybe she tried to use her hands

to keep someone out of her bed
she can't say she won't say

she can't
at last my father puts the Plymouth into gear

I fall back, mute,
and we drive on.

Argument

My father said, Why don't you want to talk about it?
and the straight line of her lips said
she had said all she was going to say,

and her flat back in her green sweater said
that was all he was going to hear from her.
He said he couldn't win.

I kept thinking somebody could win
but I couldn't find the starting line in that house.
I couldn't find the flags

or the silver trophy or the posted rules of the game.
I found my bedroom and my books
and a map with the names of rivers

on the crooked blue lines flowing east.
Child, find the front door; find the wind.
Let it blow your hair across your face

because it is the wind which has been
talking, promising *never again*
promising *always always*

and sometimes with little pieces of sleet
touching and touching
the smooth cool cheek of the window.

Template

I saw my father sag down on the stairs,
fold like a couple of sticks
and weep, a few tears

down his face near his nose,
his eyes shut,
his arms at his sides,

and my mother stood
a few feet away
making piecrust in a bowl,

her fingers
pinching flour and Crisco
and the dash of salt.

Her chin
the chin of her one-legged grandfather,
his crutch down and forward

and down again,
crossing the yard to the barn
where he couldn't pitch hay

but could manage,
with cursing and grit,
to milk a Holstein.

My mother can mutter
with her lips practically closed.
My father can cry on the stairs

and none of my words
can lift him
or make my mother's hands

stop shaping and rolling
and turning the flat white circle of piecrust,
dragging it limp through flour.

She Cared

My mother cared about a stranger,
a child named Kathy, who fell into a well in Texas.
At midnight, 1:00, and 2:00, my mother

left her bedroom in the dark,
made her way downstairs by flashlight,
listened to the rescue effort,

went back to bed again.
She wanted that girl to live.
Hourly the buzz of her alarm,

her cone of light along the wall.
The crew dug a second well
beside the first, sent a man down

on ropes to dig across to reach her.
I was sleeping when the
breakthrough came: a man in a hard hat

bearing a limp and muddy child
toward a mother.
My mother

came and woke me,
said, "They got her. They
got her." Why can't I

cut her any slack at all? She who
wanted light and air, applause and hallelujah.
She who wanted, against strong odds,

never to give up.
A flashlight's progress in a dark house,
its quiet disappearance down the stairs.

Stand-In

My mother, on her back, struck at the nurses
during the ambulance ride. *Combative*

was the word they used.
She tried to black their eyes.

She didn't use her famous silent treatment,
so successful so many times;

she used her fists, those old crumpled leaves,
as she aimed at what was above her.

She slapped the best schools,
the up market, the down market,

the classmate
who wore the red sash on the white dress.

She scratched at the rich bitch,
any woman who could dance or had a pretty laugh.

Just this once the handsome face of money
hung almost within reach

of her work-red short-nail bad-luck hands.
When the nurse tells me, I say, *I'm sorry,*

but a part of me that I usually discount
says, *No, you're not.*

Artifact

At the museum, I walk among displays:
beaded moccasins
without toes and heels and arches.

I think about women
dropping meat
into boiling water,

feeding children
corn or hope or milk,
a mother opening her garment

so a baby can suck his fill,
his head between the warmth of her body
and the skin of the deerskin dress.

In a hospital room,
standing at the sink
on my substantial legs,

I wash my mother's dentures,
scrubbing
uppers and lowers,

artificial pink
artificial white
under running water.

My fingers
place her teeth
into a curved plastic dish,

and, with my offering,
I walk to her bed.

She Was Perhaps Dead

She was perhaps dead
and the pacemaker kept her heart pumping.
Her eyes stared like nothing I'd seen
and her jaw clamped; she was biting her lip.
The nurses, knowing where to press,
made her let go somehow.
She never blinked. She stared
like an actress in a silent movie.
The hospice staff knew
how to turn the pacemaker off,
my sisters holding a magnet
over the device under the skin
of her thin chest.
I stood away and cried.
There is much I can do
but I couldn't do that,
though I touched her skin
before and after it was cold,
laid my warm palms
on her hands.
You worked hard, Mom, I said,
and I said, Thank you.
I held my sisters while they cried.
One, then the other
in my arms—
I held those who had held her.

Fearing Water

Mother, you feared
a day of swimming,

the river brown under its trees,
slow under the brow of its bank.

It was channels in any form
you dreaded:

marriage,
love,

quicksand,
depth.

Let us teach
one another,

become a species with fins.
Fear is the watery thing in which we swim.

She Who Does Not Like Her Picture Taken

In the photograph
my mother leans against the car,

relaxes in sunshine,
looks out across the field,

she who does not like her picture taken,
and I took it

from the side
secretly

because secretly she is beautiful,

the yellow light on the folds of her shirt
and the wings of her hair,

her arms crossed,
and then she raises her hand to her face

and rests her fingers
at ease on her cheek.

Secretly, I have this.

Her Kid Brother Ran Beside The Car

After phoning her father, she
caught a ride from the depot. It was
her kid brother who was glad,
who ran down the lane and then ran
beside the car all the way to the house.
He was taller and bonier than the day she had left,
bib overalls hanging on his shirtless shoulders,
thick dark hair flying with his running.

He clammed up and backed off when she
got out. She held her squirming baby
and stood at the driver's window to thank
the neighbor who had given her a ride,
the long thanks protocol called for.
Neither father nor mother came to greet,

one reading the county paper
and one peeling an extra potato, and it was
her kid brother who reached for the suitcase
and ran ahead over the cedar needles
to open the heavy door.

I Didn't Know I Loved

I didn't know I loved her big hands
slicing iceberg lettuce
with a thick-bladed knife.

Her thumb hooked over the lip
of the shallow melmac bowl
she carried to the table.

Embarrassing low-class no-class entrees
like her swiss steak,
her bean soup in a kettle.

I didn't know I loved
my mother's long untanned legs,
goosebumps on her thighs in the wind.

My father loved them,
carried the photograph away to war,
brought it back.

I didn't know I loved open country,
leather boots, prairie grass,
miles and miles of sky.

Coyote's unstudied lope across the field.
Badger's un-pretty teeth,
its front door a hole in the gully.

My mother made cottage cheese.
Why did I never tell you this before?

She left the bowl of milk
overnight on the counter, added rennet.
I sprinkled sugar on the clots and ate it.

I didn't know I loved the head of the nail,
the blow of the hammer,
blueprint become the shell of the house.

The foot into the same shoe each morning
six days a week,
leather taking the contour of arch.

I didn't know I loved
the way a red-tailed hawk
will sit in a tree, waiting

to swoop down and to crush
any live warm thing that will nourish.

Two Voices

Everybody heard one of my voices. I don't remember
what it said, though someone bent over it
and asked it to repeat itself, asked it
to raise its chin and show its pretty green eyes.
That voice agreed and waited;

it was a very good voice, and I don't remember it.
The second voice clenched its teeth.
It was clear-eyed and could hardly believe
the others didn't hear.
It knew what had happened.

It said: *Goat!*

It said: *Not!* and *All lies!*

The two voices lived together in the kitchen,
circling, hungry, on the red and black tiles.

Education

From her white knuckles I learned
that fear is a thing to hold on to,

as if it had value,
as if it were a calf at the end of a rope.

From her stories I learned
that a plain vanilla life

must be frosted thick with icing,
sliced,

laid on your best plate
and sprayed with fake whipped cream.

From her silences I learned
that small injuries are rubies

to be polished and set into a crown.
Once you learn this, you know it for a long time.

From him
late

stepping over the threshold of the back door
in his work boots,

I learned that tools are faithful,
that work is good.

Work is a totem pole you carve and carve
a lifetime

into a tall column with staring eyes
and fierce faces,

larger and more colorful
than your own.

Writing About My Mother

is not like writing to her, as I did on note cards
with pictures of hummingbirds,
pleasantries about the weather,
the rain measured in quarter inches
as it sank into the garden.

Once while I sat with her,
a nurse delivered a letter from me
and a photo I had sent: a child
standing on a mound of dirt at a construction site.
I thought she might like to see the house being built
because she had been a builder of houses,
had pounded nails beside my father,
poured coffee from her thermos at break time
and sat on whatever was handy
while she drank it.

For ten minutes she held the photo in her fingers
and looked at a child in jeans and a coat,
looked at a house whose walls
she could see through into the trees.

Time passed in the room.
I crossed my legs carefully,
not to dismantle silence,
and stared at her fingers,
the whorls and swirls of which
had held nails and tools.
I think it was pride.

The Bird She Says She Saw

Then the gold was gone from the world

—Mark Doty

A child may see a grackle in the sun,
its feathers flickering purple and green.

She may describe this to her mother.
Let us say her mother loves the truth

and instructs the child
that lying will get her nowhere,

the bird she says she saw
much too crazy for this part of the world.

Meanwhile the grackle continues
across the grass,

reaching each foot forward,
searching for food,

sunlight
on its slick black feathers.

Its slick black feathers
like a prism

splitting light
into purple and green;

like any ordinary thing moving in the world
striking sparks for the untrained eye.

Keeping Her Warm

I gave a down shirt: rib-knit collar, snaps,
forest green. She said she wears it in the house.
I gave a jacket: royal blue, zipper, hood, premier
northern goose down. When she scrubbed

makeup off the collar, she bleached
the color out but she said she doesn't mind.
I gave a black cotton sweater, a jillion red roses
embroidered on the front, heavy as chain mail.

She said she washed it,
dried it in the dryer, said it held up
pretty well. I gave a sleek wool blend, gray
with white cables. Perhaps it flaps

on her washline today. Or it tumbles
cuffs over crewneck, in her dryer.
I should make her a quilt. A quilt
for the quiltmaker. Last night I slept

under a quilt she sewed: gorgeous prairie,
sea of many colors. Red velvet triangles,
yellow satin trapezoids, purple silk
parallelograms, dark shining rhombi—

her feather stitch holding every crazy thing
together. Thanks, Mom, for that beauty.
May your loneliness go south for the winter.
May your old friends bring you cake. May you

beat them at pitch, pinochle, hearts, and gossip.
May the mail arrive early with gifts. May
hummingbirds remember where all your
windows are. May your feet be warm as

waffles, warm as buckwheat cakes, warm as
sweethearts. May your fingers limber and
bend above any patch you ever want. May all your
pies be chocolate. Love, Me. Love me. Love me. Love me.

After I Brag

What can I do
after I brag, after my words

spill like yellow dye
down my white shirt? I can

never erase
what I said. My mother

tied a chicken
around the neck

of the dog, that mutt who
chased her hens on the farm. She

doused the dead hen
with something to make it smell bad,

kerosene, I think, and
tied it upside down, one leg

on each side of the neck of the dog,
the feet of the hen together

at the nape of his neck. After I brag,
my *mea culpa* upbringing does that:

fastens what I've said
so that with every step

it bumps my chest. After I brag,
which my particular species wants to do

but should not, I have to wear it.
I can't get away.

Labor

My mother picked up a piece of clotted blood,
wiped it from the floor with a Kleenex,
a motion of stooping down and scooping up.
She followed me down the hall
of the small-town hospital

and she probably knew the names of the people
in the chairs in the waiting area, but I didn't.
I knew only the pains of labor
and that I had been waiting hours and hours
for all this to be over,

no husband holding my hand,
and I walked the hall
because the nurse thought walking might help.
I held my back and held my front,
that hobbling holding groaning posture of motherhood

and motherhood also following it,
mopping up its spill,
its red stain
while the doctor
goes home for Sunday dinner. Motherhood is

pain in regular increments:
something to be stayed with,
to be trailed in its wobbly circles,
its keening cry followed,
until it can lie carefully and heavily down and deliver.

My Mother Lied

My mother lied, but how do you know I am
telling the truth about her lying? She embellished—
just as I've added a flagstone to the walk, a red one,
to step on as you come up to the house. I've added a table
under the tree, a chair for you, a chair for me, and I have added
a beer—I'll make it a Guinness—
do you like the jalapeno with the good white cheese?
How about an olive? I make it a calamata.
I make this bread, its crust
the color of wheat, and the holes large enough to put your finger in—
I make those holes. She may tell you the truth is not in me,
but I tell you I was on the horse; you will not stop listening to her
even though I correct; I edit what really happened
on the ride home in the dark where nothing
is true and there is no stopping the thudding
of hooves—no stopping my fall to the side
—there is no saddle, no framework for this story
except the one I make. You are leaning against the door jamb,
thinking your thoughts. Often she wrote fiction
as she talked. She was more interesting than the mothers of my friends
if I make her so. She backspaced and made the horse turn in at the gate
and made me stay on into the moonless interior of the barn
where I was scraped off with great and lasting loss of skin,
and where I sit now, nursing the verity of it all.

Fruit to Last

The red apples she slices
into thin half-moons

and arranges with her knobby fingers
on a flat pan

which she slides into the oven.
They dry brown as leather. She tries

to convince me:
they will be tasty this winter.

Pears she instructs me to wrap in newspaper,
each pear in its

swirl of newsprint, its drape,
its shroud. The shrouds layered into a basket.

*Store them, she says,
in the cellar*

and I do,
but not all.

This one,
cool round weight in the palm,

this one I redeem,
I bring into the afterlife,

its blossom on the twig
riding the north wind,

the rain it drank,
the morning light it lived in.

Incisors through the yellow skin,
white meat, dripping, into my mouth,

on my lips and chin, the juices.



Marjorie Saiser's most recent books are *Beside You at the Stoplight* (The Backwaters Press, 2010) and *Losing the Ring in the River* (University of New Mexico Press, 2013). Her poems have been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Field*, *Nimrod*, *burntdistrict*, and *bosque*, as well as the anthologies *Women Write Resistance* and *Becoming: What Makes a Woman*.

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