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[Madison, Wisconsin]: Parallel Press, 2005

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A Parallel Press Chapbook

*The Minimalist's
How-to Handbook*

Poems by
Karl Elder



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How-to Handbook*

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PARALLEL PRESS • 2005

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ISBN 1-893311-54-6

Published by Parallel Press
Memorial Library
University of Wisconsin–Madison
728 State Street
Madison, WI 53706

<http://parallelpress.library.wisc.edu>

Thanks to the editors of the following, who previously provided these poems an audience: *Beloit Poetry Journal*: “Alpha Images,” “Ciphers,” “Demarcations,” “Logo Rhythms,” and “Nocturnes;” *The G. W. Review*: “Why Elephants Scatter the Bones of Their Dead;” *Mikrokosmos*: “*Deus ex Machina*: Six Chapters in the Education of Albert Einstein” and “The Minimalist’s How-to Handbook;” *The Newport Review*: “Sonnet Beginning Without a True Title and with a Sentence from the Letters of Wallace Stevens.” “Alpha Images” reappeared in *The Best American Poetry 2000*, *The Pushcart Prize XXV: Best of the Small Presses (2001 Edition)*, and *A Fine Excess: Fifty Years of the Beloit Poetry Journal*. “The Minimalist’s How-to Handbook,” co-recipient of the 2002 Mikrokosmos Award for Poetry, was reprinted by *The Grand Valley Review*. “Nocturnes” was featured by *Poetry Daily* (www.poems.com) on the eve of St. Valentine’s Day, 2003.

FIRST EDITION

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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Alpha Images

A

In the beginning
God climbed Louis Zukofsky's
pocket step ladder.

B

We see from above
she faces east, her bosom
of the matriarch.

C

No great mystery,
he that rears on one hind leg.
Pegasus' hoof print.

D

Alfred Hitchcock as
pregnant with the devil as
with a certain air.

E

Where is the handle
and what hand stuck this pitchfork
into a snowbank?

F

Stand it on the moon
for a nation of ants, who
know not where they live.

G

Balancing a tray
with one hand, the other hand
poised to pluck the veil.

H

The minimalist's
gate to hell and heaven, these
corridors of light.

I

Blind to what's ahead,
behind, the ego takes this
pillar for a name.

J

Take pity on this
tattered parasol—too chic
for junk or joystick.

K

What looks like a squawk
is to the ear a moth or
butterfly, clinging.

L

Lest we should deny
the ethereal we have
the hypotenuse.

M

Dragging its belly,
a mechanical spider,
its nose to the ground.

N

A scene from Up North
on a postcard, a timber
frozen as it's felled.

O

The rim of the moon.
Peephole into an igloo.
Shadow of zero.

P

How you choose to hold
it determines the weapon.
You may need tweezers.

Q

Might this be the light
at the end of the tunnel,
the visible path?

R

Head, shoulders, and chest—
who's the cameo inside
this dressmaker's bust?

S

Suppose our hero
tore the spent fuse from the stick.
Say the sound of it.

T

Though you can't see what
road you're on, the sign ahead
reads like calvary.

U

More mind than matter
is symmetry's mirror. You
should be that lucky.

V

V is for virgin.

Whether spread or locked, her legs
are the point of view.

W

Symbol of tungsten
and the filament itself,
its light is the white.

X

North—as if a place
as much as idea—four
needles pointing there.

Y

This flower has bloomed,
become so huge as to dwarf
both stem and petals.

Z

Swordplay with air—zip
zip zip—stitches which seem a
bout to disappear.

Ciphers

1

Have you no shadow,
Adam without an Eve, O
thin man of Haddam?

2

Lest one doubt his feet
of clay, a reminder: this
beggar on his knees.

3

The unlocked handcuff
Houdini still sports, escaped
from the spirit world.

4

O cellist in midst
of a slow, low note—how still
your arm, string, and bow.

5

Surgeon's toy cannon,
radical vasectomy
or bad dream of one.

6

That swirling feeling,
once a sixth sense, innocence
sucked down the toilet.

7

The figure of one
sleepwalking. Little Zombie.
Baby Frankenstein.

8

Infinity Road,
the good Lord God's own address,
now closed to tourists.

9

Elephant—ear and
trunk—see it lean, laboring,
to best nothingness.

Logo Rhythms

+

Judas's cockeyed
kiss or sniper's four quartets—
hoarder's crucifix.

√

Check out the spoiler
on young Road Runner. Rootster?
Or rototiller.

∞

Complete with caption,
here is the cartoon for which
time wears its goggles.

∞

Open form; closed form—
which is which, these Siamese
twins whose names get switched.

Σ

Some sure-fangled clamp:
certainty snakebit—though not
swallowed—jaws still hinged.

—

Ingot of lead or
of ink, entropy's ally,
plenty's enemy.

~

Ought one not doubt doubt,
a likeness caught here as if
an eyebrow, mirrored?

≡

What is turbulence
to one third is the bottom
of the flag unfurled.

=

Teeth tracks like ski tracks
in the white icing and/or
Oreo itself.

≠

Nothing is nothing
except when it's not something
that crosses the mind.

≡

Ichimi shizen.
Poetry and zen are one.
Shizen ichimi.

×

The times you've sensed how
the straw through the lid might be
like sex with an ex.

||

O pair of l's, you
who, covert captain, are true
to the rank and file.

⊥

Whenever heaven
plays croquet they borrow from
Euclid his mallet.

π

Bad ass attitude
in coat and hat. Stonehenge pimp
stroll in the abstract.

Δ

So then the voice found
Adam, said, You want I should
draw you a *picture*?

÷

Whose lagoon, what sky
is this reflection of the moon
and solar eclipse?

#

Your call: Italian
ticktacktoe or weighty case
of too much *vino*?

&

Am per *sand*? Even
the eldest of the monks must
have rice in his bowl.

%

Lest you look down on
the blind, know impunity
is a scent its own.

\$

His serpent's tally,
Satan's monogram: Snake, one.
Adam? Love. Zilch. None.

The Minimalist's How-to Handbook

How to Write a How-to-Write Poem

First, write the title;
second, write the word *first*; third
write *write*—OK? Rest.

How to Mind Read

Close your eyes to see
an antenna rising there.
Follow instructions.

How to Levitate

Fasten the seat
belt of your chair. Sleep on a moon
smaller than your brain.

How to Read Aloud

Say to yourself though
you see the window you don't
glass. Words are the glass.

How to Eat Fire

Choose a brand with care.
The brand must not be longer
than your outstretched arm.

How to Walk on Water

Universities
don't hold classes on it. Try
a junior college.

How to Eat an Animal

Give it your dog's face.
Say you're sorry though hungry.
Now take up your fork.

How to Recant and Not Eat Crow

Your arm a lizard's
tongue, snag a low-flying crow.
Then let the crow go.

How to Live

Wild as it may be,
never say heel to your heart
lest you and heart part.

How to Have It All

It's very simple.
You don't have to be a monk.
It's not that simple.

How to Meet Your Maker

Think of a blind date
not unlike circumstances
when you were conceived.

Deus ex Machina:
Six Chapters in the Education of Albert Einstein

The Wheel and Axle

The pure sensation
of an open umbrella
in hand, twirling it.

The Inclined Plane

As if whole oceans
were the rock of Sisyphus
rolling on the beach.

The Lever

What rimes with *lover*,
could cause the earth to move, whose
bearer talks softly.

The Wedge

The axe is a wedge.
Neither hands nor chicken necks
incur accidents.

The Screw

The original
spiral to hell—could it be
more simple? Baroque?

The Pulley

Would it were magic
and not squeaky wheels—the art
of levitation.

Demarcations

The Hyphen

Had you a whole line
of them you'd have your own train.
Imagine the freight.

The Colon

Eyes of a dead man
lying on his side, looking
into a bright light.

The Comma

Ah, giant embryo
with tail, what say you—yin or
yang, you little shrimp.

The Semicolon

A Spanish peanut,
a cashew—which's the best fit
for the appendix?

The Question Mark

Eerie character—
he whose lobe of an artist's
left ear is severed.

The Exclamation Point

Dah-dit. A signal
in Morse code turned on end: N,
you must solve for it.

The Period

How we've come to draw
with such sheer economy
the perfect circle.

Nocturnes

(*Urania*)

June, and in millions

of jewel-like drops of dew

 dwell diminutive moons.

This is how heaven sends its scent

 so in the morning you

 use your hands to wash your face in it.

(*Euterpe*)

June, strewn white petals

 on the sidewalk cement

 where now splat raindrops,

a worn denomination of coin

 so thin there is only its luster—

 not the white of the white

but clear, an invisible thing distinct

 as the difference between looking at the yard light

 and at blossoms *in* its light.

(Clio)

June, and the boom of backyard fireworks
like a tree that has suddenly bloomed
on the horizon across town
has shocked the light out of the fireflies.

Now they travel more slowly, silently,
stupidly,
like the particles of darkness
they mostly are.

(Calliope)

June, and the juvenile great horned
is the sound of a rusty hinge
as the doors of its hunger open
at inexact intervals
on the solid geometry of the dark
where the parent owl waits
in silences long and several.

(*Erato*)

June, and with the speed of a hummingbird's wings

a bead beats the walls

of a plastic whistle

calling kids playing Kick the Can in.

The stars blink.

Doorbell lights link the houses in the dark.

Bedsprings, bedsprings, bedsprings.

All night

crickets sing.

(*Terpsichore*)

June, midnight.

The bugs have taken their last bite.

A neighbor's compressor

metallic as the cricket

shudders and falls asleep.

Parked under the streetlight,

Shawn's black pickup still ticks.

There is reason his shadow is quiet.

Who in his right mind
bounces to bullfrogs
plucking their fat rubber bands?

(Polyhymnia)

June, a day begun when the goldfinch
skipped the length of the lane like a stone.
When mayflies danced in place,
an erratic whirl of electrons heated by the sun.
When the form of the oak, the ash, the linden
turned amorphous in the breeze.
When in the afternoon a lost squadron of geese
flew so low overhead
their wings whipped up sound
not unlike dime-store balsa-wood planes,
their rubber bands wound and released.
When the only sign of now, the night,
was crow, sitting warily but still for his portrait
on the ball of a flagpole—shadow lord of all,
at once magnifying and soaking up the light.

(Thalia)

June, a delicate rain.

You don't mean to look up her skirt,
but now as if afforded a periscope,
you slowly focus upon the asphalt
turning from drab to patent leather.

(Melpomene)

June, and the funeral home lights

are on in the basement.

There has been an accident,
a little girl.

It is how the undertaker
will afford the hall
for his daughter's wedding.

Suppose in midst of preparation
he freezes, looks to the ceiling
as if standing under
the dumb thunder of a dance floor.

What love has joined

let not grief put asunder.

Should we take the bride's hand

to find the only step she knows

is the danse macabre, it is no wonder.

*Sonnet Beginning Without a True Title and
with a Sentence from the Letters of Wallace Stevens*

I shall say my prayers up the chimney.
I shall kneel to collect the past's ashes.
I shall open the flue and feel it clang.
I shall crumple a sheet of newspaper.
I shall ignite the sheet of newspaper.
I shall lay a pillow on the bare hearth.
I shall lay my head upon the pillow.
I shall watch the words go up in cold smoke.

I shall hear the hollow mouth of the moon.
I shall invent my own constellations.
I shall say, this is what it is to live.
I shall delicately don the black ash.
I shall speak through the mask of my poem
called "The View from the Crematorium."

Why Elephants Scatter the Bones of Their Dead

1.

Having lived nose to the ground,
so to speak, then burial in thin air,
their scattered bones a metaphor
for their dissipated souls—
behavior as curious
as the trunk itself,
prehensile periscope,
forty thousand muscles
rolled into one
organ attached to a brain
so massive
as to be the envy of,
say, a Sherlock Holmes—
surely why elephants
are drawn to the bones
of even the outcasts
of their own kind.

2.

Flung, those bones must arc,
land in random patterns interlocking
and concentric, markers of the dead
and the realm of the living
and therefore the great domain
of the spirit of elephants
so the young need not stumble upon
nor fear death, shown the rite
of sowing the bones
of cow and rogue alike
to slowly grow more ghosts,
trunks become dumb trumpets
yet triumphant
as the quiet stride of an elephant
in this
or any other life.

3.

Or this is denial,
how the creature says
there's no such thing
as the vanishing elephant,
how collectively it rises,
a mote in gravity's eye—
feat
promised through its genes,
to be scattered always
as it also has scattered—
ivory the only remnant
of the elephants' graveyard,
scattered everywhere,
disappearing
before our very eyes.



KARL ELDER is the Jacob and Lucile Fessler Professor of Creative Writing and Poet in Residence at Lakeland College as well as author of seven collections of poetry, including *Phobophobia*, *A Man in Pieces*, *The Geocryptogrammatist's Pocket Compendium of the United States*, and, from Marsh River Editions of Marshfield, Wisconsin, *Mead: Twenty-six Abecedariums*. His work also appears in two editions of *The Best American Poetry*; *A Fine Excess: Fifty Years of the Beloit Poetry Journal*; *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*; *Sacred Fire*; *Sacred Waters*; *We the Creatures*; and several other anthologies. Among his honors are a Pushcart Prize, the Lorine Niedecker Award, the Lucien Stryk Award, grants from the Illinois Arts Council for poetry and fiction, Lakeland's Outstanding Teacher Award, and the Robert Schuricht Endowment.

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The Minimalist's How-to Handbook is the thirty-seventh chapbook in the poetry series published by the Parallel Press, an imprint of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries.

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ISBN 1-893311-54-6

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