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Small imperfect paradise : poetry. 2013

Crow, Dallas

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A Parallel Press Chapbook



Small,
Imperfect
Paradise

BY

Dallas Crow

A Parallel Press Chapbook

Small, Imperfect Paradise

Poetry by
Dallas Crow

Parallel Press

University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

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“Separated” and “Regret” appeared in the anthology *Dogs Singing*, edited by Jessie Lendennie (Salmon Publishing).

“The Aesthetics of Gravity” and “The Holy Order of Fish Handlers” were also broadcast on KAXE radio.

for Rawley and Wyatt

&

for the teachers:

James McClelland, Joyce Dyer, and Tom Davis

Pragmatism

*After Linda Gregg's "Classicism" and Raymond Carver's
"Romanticism"*

Bold as a Union 76 sign, the moon
rises over the state line...

There are no gods in the Midwest,
only rough-hewn idols
forged from what we could salvage

or steal, flimsy and palpable
as our lives.

Adolescence, Iowa

*The dogs on Main Street howl
'cause they understand...*

—Bruce Springsteen

The ocean is a rumor, less believable than the gang bang three classmates claim they had with a shy girl you've known for years, only one of them bothering to kiss her. Mountains are more likely. After all, Joey O. hasn't yet reached puberty, an undisputable locker room fact: he's small and bald as the neighbor's baby below the waist. Still, one of the Richland sisters from Sacred Heart supposedly gave him a hand job in somebody's backseat, using only her thumb and forefinger. Every river starts somewhere. Your life savings consist of 4000 baseball cards, every KISS album up to *Alive II*, and a secret stash of third-hand *Playboys*. In the movie theater, her small breast—clammy in your blind and blessed hand—has the precise tension and gravity of a water balloon.

Frank O'Hara in Iowa, 1980

In their bedrooms teen boys prance
à la Freddie Mercury, fancying
themselves in tights and ballet slippers—
so très charmant, my dear—but
to avoid post-school pummelings
their apparel proclaims allegiance
to Aerosmith, Zep, the home team.

Kids who have never heard of James Dean,
the adults' autumnal rectitude:
I've never been so happy to be dead!
Mothers, you only see some of what you see.

Amid the corn and soybeans and blue tv glow,
we are approaching the pole of inaccessibility,
where summer brings with it a kind of despair,
as do winter, spring, and fall.
Future farmwives of America, prepare
yourselves: you only see some of what you see.

The Emperor of In Between

Let indecision lead the parade.
Let's honor uncertainty, sing hymns
to hesitation, and praise Prufrock.
Hail Hamlet, prince of ambivalence.
Let glorious vacillation reign.

Let might override is and ever shall be.
Let what if outshine ambition.
How good it is to insure a thing's
welfare, to save it, to put it in a jar
and protect it from all of Tennessee,

but even concupiscence is a risk—
what if the lily wilts?
I quaver in awe of the unforeseen,
admits the emperor of in between.

Double Tritina of the Soccer Mom

When do people read books, see movies, have thoughts?
Me, I'm a kid cabbie, a soccer chauffeur with half
my son's team packed in the back of our mini-van.

More than once I swore I'd never own a mini-van,
but that was back when all I had were thoughts,
a coffee shop philosopher, tossing half-

baked ideas around with other artsy half-
wits. Now I drive away my days in a mini-van,
errands and appointments as close as I get to thoughts.

What I wouldn't give to sneak a thought,
like I used to sneak cigs and kisses, a teen, half
in love with a boy, half in love with his rusty van.

My first sex was in that shag-carpeted van.
O lucky night! (Since neither of us thought
of birth control.) That was more than half

my life ago, when I was less than half
the person I am now: wife, mother, home and van
owner, happier than I ever would have thought.

Ordinary Magic

Walking with my wife, before she was my wife,
along the Wallowa River, which weaves past
my father's boyhood home—as much rock
as it was water that time of year—we were struck
(stopped dead in our tracks, so to speak)
by the spawning kokanee, flushed as autumn
maples, a slow incarnadine river finding
its way around rocks, over and between
each other, uphill. A kind of magic: fish, half
out of water, almost dead, climbing
to the place of their birth to breed and die.

Spawn til you die the shirts and bumper stickers
exhorted around that time. Well, dear, wife
of a decade, wife of my life, we are done
spawning. Our offspring are swimming
downstream, a route not unlike our own,
though—if we've done our job well, and
if they are lucky—a bit smoother.

I remember wondering that day if I might,
somehow, through some ordinary magic,
touch a living fish in its own water, so
I reached down, and—unlike those childhood
efforts to catch minnows (with hands and pails,
and friends circling around, the little fish
everywhere, but elusive as love)—picked one
up as casually as you might grab a can
from a supermarket shelf. There was no struggle,
not a single fishy wiggle. I was holding
a fish, and it was not at all like holding a fish.

The Aesthetics of Gravity

Think of the pleasure boys take in falling,
the hours they devote to it: ko'd, shot
in the back, machine-gunned in the
gut; tackled, clotheslined, checked,
body-blocked, tripped; in slow motion
whenever possible; preferably
for an audience of friends or family;
dramatically, comically; into
pillows, hay, leaves, mud, snow—
any pile promising padding or a mess;
water, too: flips, splits, bellyflops,
can openers and cannonballs.

Some may argue that phylogeny
recapitulates ontogeny, that
they are reliving that initial fall
from grace themselves; others may
insist they somehow sense their
own mortality, and are preparing for
their future decline; but I am convinced—
watching my sons catapult and pirouette
through the invisible air, then replay
those all too brief moments of flight
again and again for friends—they are
enchanted by the aesthetics of gravity.

Icarus is their hero, not for his
Pyrrhic success or greedy heedlessness,
but for his most delightful failure.

Teaching the Villanelle

Every year I make my students attempt a villanelle.
They complain, whine, contemplate spontaneous combustion.
An aspiring Dante consigns me to my own private ring in Hell.

They tell each other the guidelines are impossible,
swear to me the assignment requires unattainable perfection.
I urge them not to think of the villanelle's

form as a constraint, but as a container—a vase, a well—
into which words are poured. They laugh sourly at my suggestion,
convinced of conspiracy: one more teacher's maliciously-designed Hell.

I demur, though not demurely, tell them filling the form well
is one art, playing with it an equally valid option.
As evidence I offer Carruth's extended villanelle

and Klappert's "Ellie Mae." For a few the stanzas start to gel.
To their surprise they find a friend in repetition.
The assignment becomes a puzzle rather than a sentence in Hell.

One student wakes more slowly to the task, Monday's 8:30 bell
ringing as he prints out his formal explosion,
cursing not the darkness but his father in his villanelle—
a curse disguised as a blessing for his adolescent Hell.

Visit

Because she was always well-prepared
and treasured the precious minutiae
of this world, I am not surprised
that when my favorite former student
visits me in a dream, she is as bouncy
and joyful as ever, as full of life
as any teenager, and truly pleased
with how well Heaven is organized.

Small, Imperfect Paradise

Imperfect as it is, this
is paradise. My soon-to-be
ex-wife, the traitor,
sleeps upstairs, while I
lie awake down here.

Why is it paradise?
Because the kids
don't know yet.

Separated

The kicked dog forgives the foot,
so I whimper, wag, hope—return.
I want to roll on my back,
and offer you my throat, but

my man-brain keeps intruding:
Not the throat! Anything but that.
The world is my doghouse now,
but you're my only home.

Divorce

Like a home movie played backwards, the gifts
are rewrapped and taken away, the guests
sidle awkwardly out, and then your children leave,
smiling and waving, leaving you alone in the empty
house. Alone. And then more alone. The silence
you've always adored wraps itself about you,
enveloping you in its octopus embrace.

Regret

Despite the date on the divorce decree,
I think the marriage ended when we gave
the dog away (the lab who sometimes shared
our bed, our seven year old son's best friend)

because of your supposed allergies,
which apparently aren't triggered by your
new beau's dog (who barks at me—the stranger
at my old house—when I pick up my sons).

In retrospect, perhaps it was a test:
what kind of guy gives away his son's dog
for a lying woman he never really knew?

The Wonderland Blues

Content in his bubble bath, Wyatt chirps,
Dad, do you want a map to Wonderland?
Do I ever, kiddo! Your mom, thirteen
years of bad road, has ditched me for the roofer
with the wry snake-like smile and a crucifix
hanging from his neck. She's already moved
him in, while I get one night a week with
you in a basement studio, mattresses on
the floor. You and I, bud, we don't know
the half of it. At this point we don't know
her parents (three houses in three countries)
will join the legal battle—silly me, thinking
a divorce was between two adults! But,
as I say, you and I don't know all that.
You only know your dad's sad every day,
and perhaps this is your solution, your
hapless attempt to help your helpless dad.
I want to say, *You bust out that map, buddy;*
you'll be my right-hand man, my navigator;
we'll drive all night if that's what it takes.
Instead—parental, practical, and already
too well acquainted with impossibility—
I smile and say, *Let's shampoo that hair.*

Noms de Guerre

The spectator dad, pops-in-exile,
the hapless papa, the part-time father.
Mr. Clueless, the disenfranchised,
the not-so-gay divorcé.

A cuckold—an object of derision
(so say the dictionary), and
therefore the butt of all jokes.

Asshole. Loser. Dimwit. Dumbshit.

The usurped. The usurpee.

(Wyatt, the youngest, often
calls me the usurper's name.)

The excommunicated, the unwanted,
cast off, adrift.

Only the lonely,

The home of the blues,

Fool of fools,

El Capitan de Rien.

Highway to nowhere.

He of the hardened heart.

Mr. Sleeps Alone.

Mr Sleepswithwhomeverhecannow.

I am the bitter name.

Small Song in the Dark

The nightbird croons his small song:

alone alone alone,

a song you know well,

and have even come to love.

It's the only tune he knows,

the only thing you own.

Solo

Two little birds argue outside my window,
their incessant soprano volley a domestic
squabble incomprehensible to noncombatants.
I go about my business, washing last night's dishes,
humming an old Bob Marley tune to myself, content
for now to be exempt from such petulant duets.

Say

we are making love, not
because we are in love,

but because we are not
in love with someone else.

Say this sex, this so-called
lovemaking, is better

than that of our failed
marriages and rutty youths.

Say it is summer, and
each trip to the bedroom

is a vacation from
loneliness, and for a

brief time these middle-age
bodies, soft and lumpy,

nearly unlovable,
soar and sing. Just because

vacations end doesn't
mean they aren't worth taking.

Go ahead: say it.
Now try believing it.

Good

How good it is to sneak away from our responsibilities—
jobs, bills, household chores, her four children,
my two beloved boys, the ghosts of our former
spouses and the burdensome tribute they demand—

and pull the shades on everything that is not us, to
undress each other, to shrink all time and space down
to a single room and the two bodies in it moving against
each other, searching the dark for something lost,

almost forgotten, and in each other's grateful flesh
finding it again and again and again.

Song

Lips, tongue:
already you know
where I am

going, where
we are going,
together,

desire driving
the hands
down, always

moving further
down—under
the shirt,

below the beltline—
a hunger
(lips and tongue,

remember)
searching south-
ward, loving

the other's
body, tasting
the day

apart, the years
before we met,
trying to get

closer, impossibly
close, loving
the effort,

the failure
to perfectly
know the other.

November

These are the dark days—
after the clocks fall back
and before the snow falls

down, lightening the ground
and sky, comforting
the cold, singing to the eye.

Banquo on Horseback

Ride you this afternoon? he asks.
When have I not ridden? Boyhood
friend, comrade in battle, he knows

I grew up on a dapple-gray, wooed
my wife aboard this noble beast.
Something is rotten in our once-

great state. The king has become
strange, politic in every phrase—
hostage to his dreams, I fear.

Lady Macdeath paints a fair smile
upon her face each foul dawn.
I should turn, flee this bloody,

sunless country now; no one sleeps
well at Inverness... What's that?
Give us a light there, ho!

This Thing of Darkness

Old virus ain't quite done with Mr. Daddy yet. Still got a thing or two to teach him. Gonna pick him out of his bed and toss him on the bathroom floor where he'll heave and wretch, his knotted guts exploding out of him. He'll shake and shiver under five blankets and all his winter clothes. He's known some pain in his time—Vietnam, working in the fields, his daddy's belt—but nothing like this. This fever has Mr. Daddy like the whale had Jonah, and it's going to take him deeper than he's ever been, so deep he thinks he's not coming back. He has fever dreams and waking visions, unable to distinguish which is which: he sees himself dying here alone, unmourned by wife or children. He swears to God: no more drinking, no more carrying on. But when the fever spits him back out, Mr. Daddy picks himself up off the floor, checks himself over—no breaks, no lasting injuries—cackles: *If I can handle that, I can handle anything.*

Diamonds From Mud

There's no rain forecast for mid-August. Already ponds have turned to mud, the mud to dirt, and dirt to dust. Dumb luck, the farmer says, powerless and mad as hell, but raised not to whisper *damn* even when the future as he knows it dims

like the sun hidden by the dirty sky dims before noon. He planted these fields amid promises of no floods, due to the new dam upriver; now the manmade lake is mud. Though he appears calm, he's mad at himself. Everything he's done is dumb.

Taking over the farm from his dad was dumb; he should have stayed in school. Dimly-lit libraries were driving him mad, his girlfriend moved home, and his mid-term grades made the choice clear. Mud is clear compared to his thoughts now. Damn

this farm! Damn this drought! Damn everything he was ever taught! He's not dumb: he studied soil like the rabbis study the Talmud, but where did that get him? He starts crying, standing amid a field of dead crops. He's no longer mad,

not at himself. It was the task that was mad, he tells himself, and he'll be damned if he ever stood a chance. His brain is humid, fecund, a jungle of thoughts, some dumb, he knows, but to brighten a dim future a man must craft diamonds from mud.

If I have to, I'll take up gay mud
wrestling, he announces. I refuse to be mad
at things I can't fix. When the banker dims
his lights before turning up that damn
mile-long gravel driveway, he'll expect my dumb
acquiescence, like so many other mid-

dle age Midwestern fools, brains mud-
dled by dumb beliefs. I won't stay mad;
I won't be damned; the future is not dim.

Antigone in Her Tomb

Zeus,

Your will, finally, is unknowable. I am exhausted, exasperated. Look where my most willful vows have landed me. Father, mother, and a brother already underground, exiled for eternity from our native Thebes...I claim no kin in that city. My so-called sister mourns alone, respected by a fool and other frauds, a quorum of spineless idiots posing as law-abiding citizens. The offense reeks—a blind man can see that. No one deserves such a sentence, least of all my deceived, much-wronged brother—left to rot on the desert plain. Generations will know I would not accept that unjust decree. I am not sorry, though I admit I may have misjudged the jury of the gods. Here I will end my otherwise unending agony, groomless, convicted, and unconvinced. From now on, on the surface of this most grotesque earth, my name will echo, a doer of deeds, one who believes, who acts, while Creon—cruel, unjust—will be forever banished from the rolls of the noble.

Always, always, always,

Antigone

Betting on Love

Love is a long shot, a dark horse, a filly
in the fifth, or so say the porkpie poets,
those soft-hearted cynics with gravel in
their voices: autodidacts, railbirds, lonely
men who make good company for a few
hours and speak with the authority
of the perpetually disappointed.

She goes off at 30-1 or more, but you
saw something in the paddock, didn't you?
Did she look you in the eye? Did she
whinny? Nicker flirtatiously? Toss her rider?
It doesn't matter: you'd bet your final
dollar on her. You'd bet money you don't
have—sell your house, steal. And what is she?
A claimer who's never placed, a nag
with a history of flagging down the stretch.

She's a beauty all right, but can she run?
Will she? Today? For you? If not, you know
tomorrow's post time. Your lonely friends will
be there, too. Maybe you'll find another roan
trying to avoid the glue factory, another
lovely risk to set yourself on fire for.

The Holy Order of Fish Handlers

There are those who claim
they can catch the sleek
trout in their bare hands.
My first response to this
was disbelief, but when
I try to imagine it—
I who can barely catch
that lovely and elusive
fish with hook and line
and who have seen them
flash upstream when I
merely scratched an itch—
I imagine something
like a sacred meditation,
a dance of stillness
demanding the non-
attachment of a monk.
To teach oneself to
stand in a cold river
without disrupting it,
to cast no shadow:
is it any different from
learning to levitate, or
mastering that bullfrog-
like chanting that resounds
even underneath the temple?
They talk of calming the fish
by gently stroking
its belly, and I admit,
like a hungry trout
gulled by glint and feather,
I may have been seduced
by a beautiful idea,
but I want to believe

in this, the holy order
of fish handlers, who, to
briefly catch their prey, must
first forget themselves.

Prospero on Hay Creek

I have wasted my life.
All those years surrounded by
water & my mind elsewhere,

plotting revenge that withered
to forgiveness. Who would have
predicted I'd find happiness

in the Midwest? A most un-
royal land! The less said
about its bland food & rude

weather, the better, but none
of the old concerns—magic,
power, exile, arranging

the proper marriage—compares
to the heart-starting yank
of a golden ten-inch

German Brown. O,
brave new world that has
such fishes in it!

Why I Am Not Frank O'Hara

Today I'm feeling very Frank O'Hara in my new chartreuse shirt.
Of course, I lack his rakish widow's peak and almost Roman profile.
I lack his Manhattan address and his avant-garde coterie.
I will never pose for Larry Rivers or Alice Neel, never
(much as I'd like to) own a Fairfield Porter or Jane Freilicher.

I will never saunter into a typewriter shop on my lunch break
and tap out a new poem to accompany that evening's cocktails.
I lack a certain *savoir-faire*, a certain *je ne sais quois*.
I'm a straight Midwesterner, a secondary school teacher
with two sons in tow, but my step is jaunty nonetheless.

I've got the summer off, and today we're going on vacation!
I've packed my fly rod and my Du Fu. Nothing
can bring me down, not even standing in shuffling
line after shuffling line for ticketing, baggage check-in,
and security. Don't they get tired? They look tired.

For nearly eight years they've been on orange alert!
In front of these uniformed strangers I take off my belt
and shoes, offer up my cellphone, my house and car keys,
then slip through their metal detectors undetected.
My only identifying traits: a jaunty step and a chartreuse shirt.



Dallas Crow grew up in small towns in Michigan, Iowa, Ohio, and Wisconsin, and attended Oberlin College. He now lives in St. Paul, Minnesota and teaches high school English at Breck School in Golden Valley, Minnesota. His poems have appeared in many periodicals (including *English Journal*, *Poet Lore*, and *Tar River Poetry*), two anthologies, and—as part of a public art project—in the sidewalks of St. Paul. He has also published a number of essays on contemporary poetry.

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