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Kisling, Lee R.

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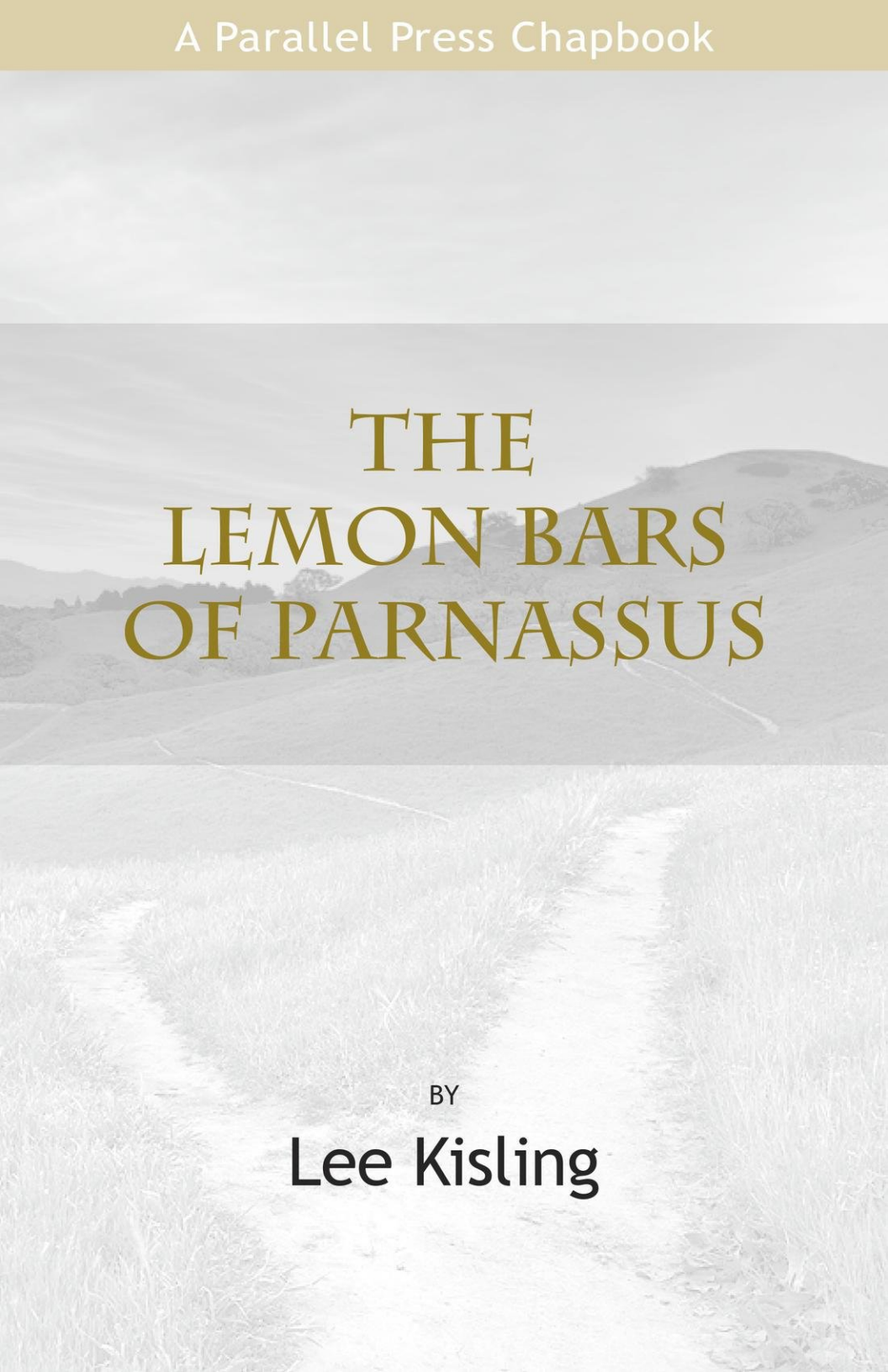
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A Parallel Press Chapbook



THE  
LEMON BARS  
OF PARNASSUS

BY

Lee Kisling



A Parallel Press Chapbook



The Lemon Bars  
of Parnassus

Poetry by  
Lee Kising

**Parallel Press**

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Dedicated to John Graber, my poet friend and mentor without whom these poems would never have landed; to Lori, my first and best reader; and to my teachers at Hamline whom I adore.

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## Anvil Sky

Do not look up  
to avoid the prospect  
of an anvil falling from the sky.  
It is, unfortunately, a common occurrence,  
though not discussed at family dinners.  
To imagine it is to invite it.  
And who talks of near misses?  
There are few accounts of the heavy thing  
burrowing deep into the earth only yards away.  
But wouldn't you think? With all that sky  
and our small heads . . .

If you do look up  
try to be focused—it begins as a black speck  
against the lovely blue sky,  
a tiny mark becoming  
slowly somehow larger.  
You have a little time to look around and reflect,  
to doubt and to wonder, to deny or disbelieve  
in the hurtling destiny of iron  
on its way from, seemingly, nowhere.

If you look down  
you may see a shadow  
gathering where you stand—  
innocent of evil, thinking of tomorrow,  
and you may feel the small breeze  
that billows the curtains  
in the pink house with the ivy  
on Kalamazoo Road.

## A Town Full of Owls

This town is full of owls.  
It seems unnatural—there being so many.  
They flew down from the north in search of food.  
They are watching the corner grocery store,  
swivel-heads following the delivery boy.

They watch the unlanded farmers and the unhusbanded women  
and the men who fish to be at peace,  
the swaying alcoholic and the doubting priest.  
They see the man on the corner with his hands in his pockets,  
a man who built on high ground but thinks of the sea,  
the immigrant with an unspeakable language.  
They watch the family in the front room watching nature reruns.  
They see tattoo boys and apron mothers with wooden spoons,  
unfinished dinners, tire tracks on the back road  
and the illumination of radio dials.  
They see empty clothes hanging from clotheslines  
and the barber sweeping the hair from his floor.

There is an owl-dog who follows the mailman.  
There is a drooping willow, toys left in the yard  
and gray smoke curling from the chimneys  
of the houses in this town so full of owls.  
There are elbows-on-the-bar owls,  
faded sports glory owls and long story owls.  
There is a night owl poet with tattered notebooks.

Darkness, closing the day, brings them out—  
call and answer hoots from front porch to widow's walk.  
A deep, deep and wild repetition—  
owls with headaches, owls with crutches,  
upstairs owls, back yard owls, full moon owls,  
can't go home again owls.

## Where I am Going

Where I am going, against all expectation,  
with no point on the compass of common sense,  
is to a place which, as far as I know  
has never been named in a popular song,  
has no Olympic 100-meter dashers, no strings of colored lights  
draped on its lamp posts, no  
submarines, no blue suede shoes, no frosted flakes—  
Mongolia.

If I meant only to dislodge myself  
from the jiggery pokery of my ordinary life,  
this journey would be the thing—  
an absurd travel poster of browns and maroons  
taped a-kilter on the window of an abandoned travel office  
on a back street  
in a bad neighborhood.

I will think about you in Mongolia.  
I will remember your savage laughing love,  
your furious exclamations, your desolate grief,  
your crazy messed-up hair.  
I will remember your loud music, your jubilation,  
and your mad curses.  
I will remember your clothes thrown on the floor,  
your books on every table, your wild ideas  
hanging in the air of this sturdy house.

The people there—they could not possibly imagine you.

I will go and come back. I'll bring you a gift—a furry bag  
from Mongolia.

## **The Lemon Bars of Parnassus**

The god of electric guitars is behind bars  
and the god of dancing naked is behind bars  
and the chocolate divinities have been detained  
and the purple painters and the hollyhock men  
are wanted by the law again.

The god of singing songs is behind bars  
and the pillow talk gods are all behind bars  
and the lords of comedy have disappeared.  
And the man who is shot from a canon went up  
and up and never came down.

The bumper car gods and the candy bar gods  
and the yellow kangaroo cookie jar gods  
are all behind bars and the skeleton key  
has been dropped to the bottom of the Vinegar Sea.  
And the only gods left are bandaged and wear glasses  
because the old gods are all locked behind  
the Lemon Bars of Parnassus.

## How Does the Moon

How does the moon  
pull the sea onto the shore,  
lifting the boats  
and flooding the little castles?

How does the moon  
show only one side  
marked with the scars  
of a thousand blows?

How does the moon  
keep its clockwork pace  
and throw its pale light  
across the fields?

How does the moon  
inspire the wolves  
to howl their old song?  
And why do we not also howl  
when that lantern lights the sky?

How does the moon  
weave the threads of our lives  
into an improbable nightly narrative  
which it censors at first light?

How does the moon  
make long shadows  
reach out from the gravestones  
like fingers?

How does the moon  
make magnets of hands and lips  
when the world  
is so full of care?

## Picnic Rain

Where does the picnic rain come from?  
Is it the water evaporated from the great sea,  
or water spilled over the dikes  
that hold in rivers?

Does it come from dripping faucets in old houses,  
from leaking pipes, or the sweat of laborers?  
Was it once the breath that fogged the windows  
of cold-morning cars? Was it beer spilled  
on Saturday nights in dance halls?

Is picnic rain the water once flung  
from firemen's hoses at burning buildings?  
Is it water from the plastic bottles thrown in ditches  
or the garden hose spraying the roses?  
Is it cups poured too full  
or the last drops from the medicine bottle?

Is picnic rain the answered prayers of ants?  
Is it a gift from a generous god who blesses  
by saturation the too-happy  
or the too-dry?

Does picnic rain lengthen the weeds?  
Does it kiss the tangled roots of living things  
on its way to dark underground streams?  
Does it remember the wind and the sky,  
the snap of lightning  
and the long descent onto the cushion of umbrellas  
or the shingles of houses all in a row?

Do the teardrops of so many  
rise again to form clouds  
which assemble with purpose  
over the plains and picnics  
of we, the just and the unjust,  
who thirst always and again  
for the fair summer days of love?



## Dark Chocolate

Have a bowl of mango white cocoa  
bread pudding Versailles  
with caramel sauce, in a moat of cream—  
then a chaser of espresso.  
Lean back in those cushions and  
tell me what's wrong.

I'll bring peach shortcake  
with raspberries and almonds  
in an antique glass dish, chilled for an hour.  
While the afternoon passes between us on the porch  
you'll tell me, won't you—  
tell me what's wrong.

Have the maple crème brûlée  
or the pumpkin orange cheesecake with  
Grand Marnier. No? Listen!  
Try the melon trio in lavender champagne syrup  
or the cinnamon apple sponge cake on a white china plate  
with simmered summer blueberries.  
Simmered. Summer. Blueberries!  
And tell me what's wrong.

## **That Hat I Want**

That hat I want  
is overcast gray.  
It will hold its form in all weather.  
It will be my calling card in approaching.  
It will create a lingering image  
as I plod down the hill.

That hat I want will reflect my mood.  
It will establish my perimeter.  
It will stir in me certain emotions.  
It will draw out others to confession.  
It will apply the glue to repair  
the broken remembered things.

That hat I want will hide  
the Jack of Hearts in its liner.  
It will sing the song and tell the story.  
It will be the backfire of love's engine  
ending in laughter.

That hat I want will remedy  
my usual blunders. It will rearrange my speech.  
It will open the valves of my compassion.  
It will lend authority to  
my normally flimsy advice.

That hat I want  
is grandfather gray.  
Its kindness will be kindled by foolishness.  
It will be the parking space for my Oldsmobile of regret.  
It will be the fading photograph of  
how I am remembered.

## Eclipse

Wednesday night in a cold clear sky  
we watched an eclipse of the moon.  
The full moon dimmed, then threw an amber light  
down upon our neighbors who stumbled outside  
in their animal skin robes. Then huddled together, stealing looks  
at the sky they started in crying and wailing, calling—  
No No No! They tore at their hair.  
These people, not known to us, never turn on lights,  
never collect their mail, cook meat over a campfire,  
have Michigan plates.

Would morning not come? Does heaven portend  
dark days ahead? Have the gods abandoned us?  
Is it now finally that terrible omega—  
the end of everything? The blank bitter end?

As we knew it would, morning arrived  
with its daily paper full of riot and ruin—  
the school bus accident and the fallen bridge,  
the university shooting, the globe warming.  
In the variety section a starlet in handcuffs;  
on the sports page the blue, blue eyes  
of the oversized ballplayer who denied shooting dope  
into his buttocks.

Coffee and Corn-puffs, handcuffs and buttocks.

That the stars sparkle with irony is, in this universe,  
some relief—a story, a comedy, a long-legged vaudeville.  
The drama in the night sky reminds me of  
the distance unfathomable, the light years of space  
between us, we who watch,  
waiting, wondering,  
shivering in this pale light.

## Raining in Space

The astronaut, outside his shuttle  
watching planet Earth revolve,  
sees Waverly, Pennsylvania and the small house  
on Larimore Street, his boyhood home.

Sees his mother open the screen door,  
walk onto the lawn, put hand to forehead  
to shade her eyes—she looks up  
deep into space.

A mother with instincts, she yells  
“Jimmy! You forgot your galoshes!”  
Her penetrating voice reaches down the block,  
over the neighborhood,  
across the jet stream, through the ozone.  
“Jimmy! Your raincoat!”

The astronaut, floating in his white spacesuit  
turns his bubble helmet to listen.  
“Oh Jeez, Ma,” he answers  
as the clouds roll in from Jupiter.  
Thick gray storm clouds gather in space.  
There are fingers of lightning and the first wet drops  
splash against his faceguard, then  
sheets of very old rain pelt down  
shorting his battery circuits.  
With one arcing hand he makes the sign of the cross  
and begins to cry.

Re-enter HELEN

Faust: Was this the face that launched a thousand ships  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?  
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss

[*Kisses her.*]

Christopher Marlowe (1564 –1593), *Doctor Faustus*, Scene XIII

## Helen

A metric of beauty, the Helen who  
launches a thousand ships,  
nautical hyperbole, yes, but useful—a measurable fleet,  
a bristling flotilla blown northeast by the Adriatic wind,  
flying the standard of angry adoration.  
How many ships would you launch, my mouse?  
500 ships equaling 500 *milli*Helens, or  
836 ships – 836 *milli*Helens, or maybe only  
one ship equaling .001 H, still, inspiring a navy  
gone to fetch you back from Paris  
to fat and grouchy Menelaus.

Notwithstanding my thick glasses,  
the cataracts, the heat rippled memory or  
the love-blind imagination—  
notwithstanding near-sighted obsession,  
the deep sea tears in the squinty breeze,  
none of these could keep a man ashore.

The bloom is off the rose, maybe, or beauty  
not so deep—our sour grapes distilled  
into the pleasure wine of hard pursuit,  
and so the curtain of sails grows small before me.

Notwithstanding my aching back, the blistering hands,  
this mapless sea or the shortage of cloth,  
in a stolen dingy with flaking paint,  
taking water at the seams, pressing on,  
far behind the others but heaving with love,  
I sit at the creaking oars, pulling for Troy.

## **Buck**

Call him a railroad, hauling across  
old Louisiana to the Gulf.

Call him steel rails laid down on the southern leaf mold.

Call him diesel backhoe stirring the red Alabama dirt.

Call him a creaking drawbridge over a Mississippi bayou.

Call him kudzu vines climbing the telephone poles  
between Natchez and Bayou Louise.

Call him a junkyard, back porch Sunday school teacher.

Call him short haired, hard headed, steel booted.

Call him primo, first born, head of the family.

Call him iron and rock. Call him rust and money.

Call him Buck and he will answer, but  
*do not*, under any circumstances,  
call him Vernon.

## Peggy Lee

In musical terms, the ear bone is connected  
to the eye bone, and that's why  
your eyes go liquid  
every time you hear  
*Is That All There Is?*  
by Peggy Lee.

Maybe  
you should get over this, a grown man  
wanting always more,  
such as—your mother humming privately along.  
She kept green figurines of elves  
and she had a job selling water softeners—  
two facts which, only later, seemed funny  
when you moved away to a place where the water was so hard  
that tears just bounced off your face and  
clattered across the floor.

But then  
the slow dancing disappointment of that song  
imagined for you the saxophonic sorrow  
of the very best people.

Maybe  
that's all there was, and is,  
her sweet sad humming  
and this joyful melancholy imagining  
of water so hard you could walk across it  
back to fourteen years old, listening  
to every sound.



## Cities

Pittsburgh. Pancakes.  
Streets busy. Fair sky. West wind.  
Stroll along the docks. Iced tea and cinnamon toast.  
An upstairs singer. Sea gulls on posts.  
A bookshop. Young girl selling flowers.  
Mannequin in a yellow suit with a large purse.  
Downtown Marriot. Blue pajamas.  
Woke up screaming.

Spokane. Noon whistle.  
A hopscotch drawing on the sidewalk.  
Cop eating a donut.  
Taxicabs in a line. Evergreen trees.  
Fat man wearing a bow tie.  
The Jefferson Hotel. Birdcages in the lobby.  
Jet planes drifting into Fairchild.  
Woke up screaming.

Chicago. Sail boats.  
Skyscrapers. Lakeshore Drive.  
A balloon drifting away. Elevated trains.  
A street musician with a guitar. Skateboard boy.  
Young girls in uniforms.  
Hand in hand lovers. Taverns: Johnnie's, Billy's.  
Small plane pulling a banner.  
The Monet Exhibit. The air chilly.  
Yellow-gold leaves. Street lights flickering on.  
Sit on a bench to watch the lake. Sorry.  
Really very very sorry. Words are inadequate. Just  
sit on the bench and watch for a while.  
Woke up screaming.

## **The Farm**

Well, the dish ran away with the spoon, you know,  
and the black kettle spilled the beans.  
And the cat played the fiddle with a gopher's guts  
and the little dog laughed  
at that wretched moron of a cow,  
and the farmer said to his wife  
"I never should have married you."

The full moon turned blood red  
and the raccoons ate the corn  
and the storm clouds gathered  
and the little dog laughed  
and it was just a  
terrible, terrible farm.

## **The Trailer Park**

The mobile homes on Jenny Lane are gone.  
The shabby storage sheds and rusty mowers are gone.  
Also the spidery strings of Christmas lights,  
the big bags of dog food and the broken bikes,  
the rolled newspaper in the bushes—all gone.  
Vanished, more like, or hauled away—  
there on Wednesday under a grizzled sky, now gone.

And the people are gone—the woman in yellow curlers,  
the old fellow in rubber boots and a bathrobe,  
the auto mechanic who never gets clean and  
the unshaved novelist—all gone, disappeared,  
with their dented cars, their toasters and their trash.

The note that says milk bread cheese is gone.  
The note that says I am leaving you is gone.  
The gravel driveways, the TV antennas, the row  
of mailboxes, they are gone, gone.  
It's a weedy pasture now  
with thistles and a fence and an old brown horse  
staring at the road.

## Jimmy

Some people have to tell lies.  
It is in their curious crooked stars.  
There are the small verbal pirouettes, naturally—  
the delicate blending, the charming embroidery,  
the sepia filters, the opaque memory.  
Of course there is the wishful thinking,  
the subtle brush strokes of self-improvement,  
the face-saving revision, the casual omission,  
the should-have beens, might-have beens,  
the winking amplification, the need to impress.  
There is the tactful edit of certain facts, the  
little improvements around the house.  
Sure.

And then there are the cinematic pigs-can-fly  
accounts, the whole-cloth alternate reality bits,  
the dancing bear universe, the blue-eyed swear-to-God  
cliff-hanging giraffe-and-peacock stories  
which take one's breath and, therefore,  
must be true.  
No one could make up such things, Jimmy.

It is there—on the playground of your imagination,  
with little-boy certainty, that the four star video unwinds  
across the screen of your eyes, there in the darkness  
of need and belief—it is the gas in the dirigible,  
it is the woolly on the mammoth.

Shall we wash the windows, then?  
Shall we cross examine, testify under oath—  
shall we let the air slowly out  
of the balloon which is a ruby red and  
splendid floating thing?

## Dreams

How is it possible in this sensible universe  
that your dreams press into mine?  
It is a double feature in a double bed.  
These, love, are not my symbolic representations.  
These are your odd foreign language films,  
with short-haired characters, bad acting, tight shoes  
and diet scales. This is not my narrative,  
not my geography, not my weather.  
These, darling, are not my wild dogs.  
All of this—  
it's not my stuff.

On your side of our moon-managed bed,  
do you wander in that immense house I've conjured?  
You should avoid the starving farm animals, dear,  
and leave for me that bicycle with  
the intolerably small wheels. Stay away from the cliffs  
unless you mean to stop my usual stomach-turning vault.  
It's my back alley. It's my dark industrial area.  
The railroad tracks—those are mine.  
The snake behind the toilet—mine. The midget in the plaid suit.  
Also the lawyers. All mine.

In waking hours we guess each other's thoughts.  
After dark there begins a sleeping sequel which moves  
from pillow to pillow—what can you possibly mean?  
What is going on inside that blond slumbering head  
with eyes turned inward and knees pulled up?

Last night I dreamed that we sorted it out.  
We divided our night things. On my side—  
my tangled circuits, my father's glare,  
my public nakedness and my un-birdlike flights.  
You took your shepherding, your missed appointments,  
your lost purse and your failure to please.  
The unclaimed articles we divided equally—  
the dented station wagon, the slippery sidewalk,  
the keys that don't work, the unfamiliar houseguest,  
the little horse with the baleful look.

These boundaries, I think, made you happy until morning.  
I won the lottery and ate cheesecake in the sun porch.  
I'm pretty sure I did, but  
I don't exactly remember.

## Grendel Wonders

About the future of monsterring.  
It is his vocation, his hairy birthright,  
his dismembering benighted visitations  
to the slaughterhouse of Hrothgar's Hall.  
That's all well enough, he fiendishly supposes, but  
time points to something—a change.  
He is tired of being their monster,  
but he has a talent for it—  
tearing the jugular, eating their spleens.  
There's something to it, he insanely reasons—  
stick to your knitting,  
but he can smell a change coming.

They are helpless victims, these people,  
and yet they need to be murdered.  
It must be so or it would not be so.  
It is the agreement between claw and flesh  
that each demands his satisfaction.  
They may as well put out a welcome mat  
instead of throwing the bolts and bracing the door.  
The more they try to keep him out,  
the more he must pound and splinter his way in.  
Could it be merely the ennui of repetition  
which has him, in moonlight, sniffing the air?

If the people were less violent  
they would neither understand nor attract Grendel.  
They, like he, follow their destiny  
of conquering and cruelty.  
Tradition has armed them. Their honored fathers  
sleep in memoriam with steel ready,  
having fulfilled the abiding rule of creation:  
kill first, kill second, die in turn.  
The dead have gone on  
to battle their merciless gods, the living mumble praise  
and plead to be spared.  
But Grendel is tired  
of fueling their prayers.

Change comes.  
The wind blows. A new moon pulls  
at the old sea.  
Forgetting starts. Remembering fades—  
benighted day sets free her shades, then  
clouds drift east revealing a constellation of hope  
above sore earth, and morning comes.  
It always comes.

Until then, of course,  
Grendel will continue as he began,  
conferring his wicked blessing upon the weak  
who conceived the world, built the temples,  
and composed the ballads  
which make him so furious  
outside their door.



## **The Fog**

Love, I yelled, Love is not a  
many-splendored thing!

What? the voice came back.

Only partly, I called. It's only partly  
splendored! It's . . .

What?

Love, I tried again, it's  
somewhat splendored, of course, but . . .

What?

And I saw my words disappear  
in the fog which rolls down  
from the hills this time of year.

## **The Yellow Buick**

The sky over Agincourt was a nuanced gray.  
Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't—  
let's argue about this in the car.

My parenthetical remarks offend you.  
In fact they make you furious. In fact  
they make you want  
to drive a stake through my (like this) heart.

The famous poet once kissed your grandmother on the lips  
in a moment of inexplicable passion.  
She hit him hard with an umbrella which is now  
one of your most cherished possessions  
especially when it rains.

I have observed that in the blackest deep  
of the darkest night, out of most flashlights  
no light comes.

## Waiting for the Sun

Maybe because we are so full of water—  
muscle and guts and brains,  
but mostly water; maybe that's why  
we go always to water, to rivers and lakes,  
to pools and ponds and dishpans.  
We scan the sky. We look for clouds.  
Maybe because we are so many we need more water,  
why rain has fallen for days and weeks,  
why it comes pouring down  
in splashing torrents—black waves of rain  
flooding the streets, filling the fields,  
tumbling bridges, turning cars into boats.

Maybe because we are full of air—  
breath and beliefs and a thousand words,  
but mostly air; maybe that's why the wind finds us,  
this Jezebel wind,  
bending the trees, shaking the windows,  
taking the roof, bringing with it  
the rain because  
we need the air and the water.

Maybe because we are so full of dissatisfaction  
we conjure the storm. We fear and desire  
this furious pelting rain, the howling wind,  
the rising tide. Maybe we need to stand and face  
the sodden wreckage of our possessions,  
of our past, our plans,  
to pick through the ruin, the ruin of us.

Maybe because we are so full of longing  
we pray for change, a fresh start—  
but first, oh merciful heaven, please  
rip all this to pieces, push over the house,  
shatter the windows, topple the chimney.  
Drive us bawling for high ground  
to stand huddled with strangers,  
wet and afraid through the gray-black night  
waiting for the sun.

## **The Fullness of Time**

In the fullness of time, in the late afternoon  
you are going to feel better—  
it is the promise of the passage of days.  
Knowing this makes things worse, of course,  
because pain is a river without banks.

But that is not what I wanted to talk about.

In the vastness of space, in a back corner of nowhere  
drifting quietly, pulled by invisible ropes,  
glinting in starlight old as creation is an  
amazingly perfectly tuned piano  
waiting for your long fingers and your sad, sad smile.

But that is not what I wanted to talk about.

In all of the books on all of the shelves  
on the millions of pages of words,  
in between the lines is the distilled essence  
of the battered fact that  
life is hard, then it gets better.

## Blue Horse

A half a mile, I was told, turn left,  
cross the tracks onto an unmarked county road.  
Shoes and socks in the rising water.  
Sitting quietly, retrace in my mind  
the gestured directions which brought me here.  
Here? Am I the first one here?

Fingers pointing east, then north, go past  
the old creamery, follow the power line,  
left at the silo, right at the cool breeze.  
Gurgling water and cattails bending,  
red-winged blackbirds flutter and scold.  
Slowly sinking  
into  
the mud.

Go. Past the fallen barn, by the 3-way stop, then  
look for the blue horse by the pine trees.  
Turn right just past the hayfield.  
You'll see a corn crib they said, then, bear to the east,  
over a hill where the road curves south.  
Up to my knees. Colder than you would have thought.  
Listing to the right and a paper cup floating.  
Blue horse? They must have said house.

You are here, wherever you are, and where you belong—  
where you've been taken by chance—  
by wanderlust, by persuasion, by trains and planes,  
by misunderstanding, by love or loneliness  
to the place where you ended up,  
passing through narrow doors of necessity.  
Here you are at last!

It's a nice drive, they said. Easy to find.  
Follow the landmarks. Right at the cow, left at the ant.  
Here, in the lowering car in the percolating pond,  
listening to KOEL 96.3, voice of the people.









Lee Kisling, an Iowa native, is an engineer, writer, husband, and father of two who has lived in Hudson, Wisconsin for twenty-five years. In 1992, his first juvenile fiction novel, *The Fools' War*, was published by Harper Collins. He has written many songs and poems, plays the piano, and in 2008 had a series of cartoons published in the Wisconsin poetry journal, *Free Verse*. The poems in this collection are from 2006–2010. He is currently enrolled in the Creative Writing Department at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota.



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