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[Madison, Wisconsin]: Parallel Press, 2003

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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

LIGHT MADE  
from  
NOTHING

POEMS BY SUSAN ELBE

SUSAN ELBE's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *CALYX, A Journal of Art and Literature by Women*, *The North American Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Ascent*, *Permafrost*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Passages North*, *Rattle*, and *Puerto del Sol*, as well as in the anthology *A Fierce Brightness: Twenty-five Years of Women's Poetry* (CALYX Books, November 2002). In 2002, she won the inaugural Lois Cranston Memorial Poetry Prize sponsored by CALYX Journal and received a Rowland Foundation Fellowship residency to the Vermont Studio Center. Susan has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Wisconsin and works as a Web Content Analyst in Madison, Wisconsin.

Parallel Press is an imprint of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries.





**A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K**



*Light Made  
From Nothing*

*Poems by*  
SUSAN ELBE



PARALLEL PRESS • 2003



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ISBN 1-893311-33-3

Grateful acknowledgment to the editors of the publications where these poems first appeared, sometimes in slightly different versions: *Permafrost*: "Garden"; *Rattle*: "Reeling in a Skate on Kachemak Bay, Alaska"; *CALYX, A Journal of Art and Literature by Women*: "Practicing Eternity", "On the Kenai Peninsula, 2 a.m.", "My Angel"; *The North American Review*: "Oconto County Fair"; *Hummingbird*: "White-Radish Moon". I wish to thank the editors of *A Fierce Brightness: Twenty-five Years of Women's Poetry* (CALYX Books, November, 2002) in which "Practicing Eternity" also appeared.

For their ever-wise plaiting of critique and encouragement, thanks to my writing group: Robin Chapman, Rasma Haidri, Jesse Lee Kercheval, Judith Strasser, and Alison Townsend. Special thanks to Jesse Lee for reading this manuscript. To Alison: Without "the pact", this book might not exist—heartfelt thanks and love. To Barbara Bickford, Marie Goodman, Robert Newsom, and Joan Northrup: Much love for sharing the good company of your souls with me for many years.

Published by Parallel Press  
University of Wisconsin – Madison Libraries

FIRST EDITION

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*wake up girl  
you dreaming*

–Lucille Clifton

*Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting.*

–Cormac McCarthy

## *Why I Decided to Be Born*

Because in my mother's ribcage  
a wishbone became compass  
and the silver needle pointed here.

Because in my hand, a nib  
of charcoal drew on newsprint  
a face I knew was mine.

Because when I topped the last hill  
on a long road home  
and felt sorrow without pity

or regret, this homely life  
with its plain face  
and clumsy limbs welcomed me.

Because a sloe-eyed gypsy pried  
open my tight fist and found  
this berry earth, saying *Isn't tart*

*as good as sugar on the tongue?*

Because in a muddy field  
two old ones stood with me,

eyes shining, crooked fingers  
pointing toward a faint  
barn light way off in the dark,

and I heard the muscular  
idiom of round-voweled hills,  
stars sparking over them, umlauts.

In the dark thicket of our many selves,  
who wouldn't want to light the trees?  
Who could not want this world?

## *Oconto County Fair*

*For Judy Jackson, 1943–1991*

We had five bucks between us and the whole  
sweaty night to win teddy bears,  
glass beads, and feathered dolls on sticks.

Underfoot, summer grass turned to mud.  
The night smelled like burnt sugar  
and cow manure. You were 13. I was 10.

The Lion's Club booth sold the best french fries  
and you won a goldfish in pink water  
pitching a ping pong ball into its bowl.

We bought fake silver chains holding  
half-dollar-sized medallions stamped  
*Judy loves Ronnie and Susie loves Steve.*

In five years, you'd be pregnant, getting ready  
for a shotgun wedding, and I'd be  
navigating the cliquy maze of high school.

After that, we'd draw separate maps to travel.  
Me, singing in coffee houses, in love  
with a bitter, beautiful boy. You, on a farm

in Illinois, the sly disease burrowing in you  
and the sorrow of your eldest  
son's suicide at a carnival in Baton Rouge.

I'd stay unmarried, childless, and write poems.  
You'd commit adultery and die too young.  
But that night from the top of the ferris wheel

we could see everything through the trees—  
children on garish carousel horses,  
carnival tent peaks, and the back roads

yellow-eyed with headlights. Suspended there,  
stars thick as mosquitoes swarming overhead,  
we thought anything could happen.

## *This Isn't About You*

Once I was young and hungry and sat up  
all night with him, talking  
on the roof beneath trees leaning over us  
so still, the candles burned  
and did not flicker, and burned  
until the sky flared  
and we were so much like one skin  
that we forgot to touch.

And last night when I stopped for Chinese takeout,  
it was just like that again—  
a love song on the radio,  
my heart as tight from wanting you  
as silver trapped in stone.  
And because what matters is the wanting,  
I sat there in a parking lot,  
in the grey ruin of late winter  
and let myself be young again,  
snowflakes at the windshield  
feathering like cottonwoods,  
the heater blowing hot wind in my face.

Once I chewed a bitter root with him  
and walked a country road,  
the stars so big, the grass so new  
I wanted to kneel down and eat.  
And when my soul came loose,  
and jangled like a tambourine against the sky,  
I watched us walking,  
from a great height saw  
myself walking,  
small in my one and only life.

*The Night I Left My Body and You Called Me Wolf*

I could have said yes, let's keep going  
North, over the border into howling country,  
the sharp kick of balsam in our nostrils,  
our grizzled fur tipped blue with snow.

But you knew I couldn't live on the chew of bitter bark.

Sooner or later when the white-tails thinned  
and even voles burrowed too deep,  
you would have offered your throat  
and who knows if I'd have hidden my teeth.



## *After Long Silence*

Just when I've learned how to enter sleep  
without your warm breath in my ear,  
you come back.

With your bones strapped in buntings  
of affliction, I hear you rustle  
in the deadfall.

Just when my dreams are no longer driven  
by your cinquefoil tracks in snow,  
you come back,

your vision honed on a whetstone of moon,  
throat numb with the milk of stars.  
My guard hairs bristle,

wary that the gimped and lucent shoulders  
could be yours. Sure of stealth  
you move into

the clearing steeped in pale tea light. Blinking  
snow from disbelieving eyes,  
I come to meet you.

Compeer, accomplice, I know your scent,  
your broken tooth. I know  
the naked scar you wear.

*On the Kenai Peninsula, 2 a.m.*

When you said come,  
I packed my green loving  
and walked down  
out of the sky  
into our history, a landscape  
like this one, too wide  
to fold my arms around.

You told the men I'd stand  
on the riverbank all day  
and I did, watching  
salt-heavy salmon  
push current, pitch up  
from water blue as milk, the river  
streaming from their gills  
for a moment suspended in the air.

And like a silver flap opens  
to breathe, new knowledge  
opened in me—love  
is not green but mutable,  
elusive as flickering fin,  
salty and silted  
as a push upstream,  
a blind run for home.

What compels, then leads us  
through the hard slog  
and radiance of this journey  
happens only once, I think,  
a yearning for fresh water,  
the recollected bed.

That night, way north  
of where we began,  
the sky flared  
tallow as the candle  
flame flickering on the floor  
between us, the years  
closed behind us like a weir.

## *White-Radish Moon*

The heart, reckless and obsessed,  
is capable of large deeds,  
but always has to choose.

This or that. Now or never.

Like the white-radish moon  
that dangles over rooftops  
each night, the heart  
haggles—stingy meniscus  
or a clamor of light.

*Reeling in a Skate on Kachemak Bay, Alaska*

We drop bait and jig down eighteen fathoms,  
trolling bottom for the halibut they say  
are white and big as jib sails full of wind.

We drift this way all morning and I watch the men  
pull up 30-pounders and sometimes  
scaly Irish Lords, lustered as fool's gold.

Drugged by the surprising warmth of this ellipsed  
and argent Arctic light, I am amazed  
when my line drags taut and in my hands

the heavy rod dips like a heron bends to drink.  
I reel and reel, pulling up my own weight,  
heavy as wet canvas. The men say to go slowly,

it will roll in fear and dive from foreign sun—  
this fish has never seen the light. But who knows  
what I've snagged from sodden sleep,

what blunt-eyed creature I haul out of darkness,  
a ghostly harbinger that wavers toward me  
like an insubstantial scrap of paper,

becoming larger as it nears. Too tired to resist  
the last few feet it seems to help,  
ascending easily, entranced by this bright world.

## *Limn*

Night cups us like a match in dusky hands,  
its skin reeking of kelp and fish.  
The sea we sliced this morning  
as if the skiff was diamond,  
lies calm and whole,  
a flat black stone, again.

With no stars to compass by, we know  
this is not home  
but a border crossed, uncharted territory.  
Maps here are dreamed  
from memory, moving over  
hummock, salt, and ice.

Ahead of us, the icy slosh, its salt  
and its indifference honeycombing  
bones, hungry seagulls diving  
at its nickel mirror. The tide, out now.  
Only a thin and deeper gray  
stroke delimits water from the sky.

At our backs, a sprawling bog  
of solitude and beyond that  
ladders of cold and slippery light.  
Browsing in blackberries,  
the bear lifts up its crimson mouth  
and all ways look the same.

## *Light Made from Nothing*

In the Anchorage airport bar, windowless  
and lit with ruby vapor, our reflections  
waver dimly in black formica tabletops  
and your eyes that once gave off such light  
are flat as stale beer,  
but your calloused fingers shine  
with the phosphorus of sea salt.

We drink sour wine and watch each other,  
wary, as we try to talk ourselves  
back into those summers  
when we packed the feathered dark  
on our backs like wings  
and laid down miles like the distance  
we've laid down in our hearts.

We leave ourselves behind long before we go.

Once you were obsessed with looking for your father  
who left when you were two.  
Once you burned our dinner, so angry  
at your mother's drunken husband  
that you wouldn't speak to me  
for days. You often spoke of going North  
to freeze your demons in that glare.

I remember when I let you lead me in a rainy night  
through waist-high prairie grass, down  
into the cellar of an old abandoned house  
where I stood, surrounded by the mallard  
glint of Mason jars we'd come to steal,  
light made from nothing but green glass,  
and water reflected in your eyes.

O, the first loves, carried like small flashlights  
    into all the darknesses  
burn so hard and light so little of the way  
    ahead. I'm seeing yesterday  
        inside this glass of wine.  
Look at us, dazzled again by refraction.  
    Outside, the long Arctic sun.



## *My Angel*

*Every angel is terrifying. . . .*

—Rainier Maria Rilke

In the summer dark behind my eyes,  
he's always there, waiting for me  
dressed in tight black chinos  
with a pack of Luckys  
rolled into his t-shirt sleeve.  
On his arm, my name's tattooed  
in blue like hopscotch grids  
we chalked as children on the sidewalk.  
With him, I'm always fifteen,  
slim-hipped and Candy Pink lipped.  
I'm always moony and unsure.

I wanted one straight-backed, articulate,  
with wings white as the sails  
of Monday wash snapping on clotheslines,  
halo dazzling as a dime  
dropped down a steam vent grating.  
But this one—dark, rough  
as a dockhand—waits for me,  
slouching on the stoop steps  
with others of his kind. They mouth  
gritty southside lingo, lag  
pennies, and play mumblety peg.

He courts me with the juicy gold of oranges  
from the old Greek's fruit stand,  
and the sweaty-feet stink of the stockyards.  
He woos me with the way-too-hot-  
to-sleep scrape of folding chairs on porches  
and the complicated gossip  
of women and lilacs bending over fences.

He's always there in me like all-night traffic.  
Turning slowly in my head,  
he strikes a match in the blush-stained  
circle of a street lamp.

He's the one who walks me home  
when the moon is high and blinds us  
like a one-headlight, cherry Chevy.  
He whispers in the hallway on the stairs,  
his lips, moth wings against my ear.  
He wants me to go all the way.

## *Inukshuk\**

It starts now, like this,  
in an elevator with two men your age,  
and a woman 25 years younger  
enjoying them enjoying her.  
Overnight you've put on middle-age  
like a bulky woolen coat,  
too quickly mittened,  
muffled with invisibility.

What happened to that wild-  
blueberry girl, redolent  
and ready to be picked, the one  
who never thought she'd grow old?  
When did grieving start,  
this long walk down the beach  
of memory, cluttered  
with love's chipped shells,  
dark kelp of loss, beach glass,  
scrape of sand on sand.

On this scrim, you stand alone  
between the body's sheltering  
dunes and the ocean of old age—  
feet planted, arms thrown wide,  
head into the wind. You see  
how long it takes  
to belong wholly to yourself.  
At last, you step off on your floor,  
the moon rising  
over your left shoulder, shining  
on the deep and still,  
perfectly blue ocean of your life.

*\*Inukshuk (pronounced "in-ook-shook") is an Inuit word meaning in the image of man. The Inuit built these lifelike figures of rock along Canada's most northern shores to serve as markers, or signposts, to lead the way in treeless tundra.*

## *Safe Sex*

Marge plans a dinner of 40-clove garlic  
chicken, wine, and French bread.

When she asks us to please make a salad,  
the two of us quickly agree.

I do it simply, he offers,  
and always with escarole.

Yes, I reply, and dark olives, rich  
kalamatas to suck from the pits.

He presses in closer—More garlic too.  
Yes, I breathe, yes,

and the yolk of a hard-boiled egg  
shaved fine as salt and straw—

yellow as the eye of an iris. Sweet-voiced  
now, he says, I'll do the dressing.

I sigh, *kalamatas*.  
He whispers, *escarole*.

## *Rhythms of Morning*

I am going to the sea, the teal-green latino sea,  
the warm-as-bathwater sea,  
the sea that sings torrid Cuban love songs,  
the sea that touches all shores.

I wait for my taxi to the airport, dark  
houses silent as blue water, steeped  
in fathoms-deep sleep. Across the street,  
one light burns. One crow hacks the quiet

with its rough saw. Here, morning is a fugue,  
a woman with her nameless yearnings,  
a sullen man with surly and inchoate needs  
clinking in his pocket like dull coins.

A single car's headlights sweep over me,  
then gone. Light uncurls, owly as the derelict  
who rises from his steam vent stiff and cold.  
Here, morning slinks and shuffles.

But I am going to the sea, the salty margarita  
sea, the equatorial hip and thigh sea, the blowzy  
slip-around-me sea where morning will jump  
and shimmy and shamelessly rumba with me.

## *Reaching Back Across Our Distance*

Again last night you tried to kill me in my dream  
and I wondered just what ghosts  
you were holding conversation with.

I know none of my history reaching back  
farther than two bent farmers in a sod house,  
their children spilling into the world,  
into the sap-sticky maple hands  
of your Ojibwa ancestors.

Is this why you want to kill me,  
because your great-grandmother smeared  
sugar in my great-grandmother's navel  
and blew into the child's mouth  
the green breath of deer,

because both of us are heirs to  
a broken tongue, alien words  
chewed down into a backwoods hybrid  
until even you cannot lay claim  
to any other language,

because my grandfather clear cut  
your grandfather's forest  
and though your hair is straight  
and your bones are long, still  
you are not dark enough?

Why do you want to kill me?  
This fierce cord between us  
goes back farther than this history,  
back before speech, before skin-deep  
map lines set distance in our veins.

Is it because even in this  
deepest connection, we cannot be  
ordinary with each other,  
baiting our traps with blood and sugar,  
guarding the oldest house, a shelter of skin?

## Garden

*after seeing a wall sculpture entitled Garden*

*by Roland Martin, Tweed Museum of Art, Duluth, Minnesota, 1998*

In a certain slant of light the tree  
is slender ropes of beads  
and the leaves around it on the floor  
a tiered skirt fallen from a young girl's waist

on her hips a boy's hands  
crazy with such luck  
her white cotton bra and underpants  
done with like the peonies of late spring

walking toward them in a new light  
I see the tree is shaped from  
chainsaw chains the skirt leaves  
of jigsawed pine and cedar it is useless now

even as I lean in they are leaving  
he smells of sun and Old Spice  
she like Juicyfruit and green lake  
I hear their kisses soft

sucking sounds small fish in water  
for a moment they believe  
everything endures and for a moment  
in the brassy apple autumn light

so do I



## *This Map of Skin*

I press my palm against a frosted windowpane  
and when I pull it back,  
what we didn't do for each other  
sticks like wet salt, rime  
stinging in the raddled landscape of my flesh.

This is not the same winter nor the same hand  
that guided me to you, the future  
spinning in my fist like a compass.

When the redheaded witch said, *see*  
*in your hand, right here, a twist,*  
*a fork begins*, I only saw the simple map  
carved out at birth—a lifeline  
curving down into my wrist, a headline  
running deep into a notch of bone,  
a long and narrow rut of love.

But it isn't always love we want  
even when we say it's love we want.  
We didn't know then how  
to save each other, that small  
accommodations of the heart could.

My hand burns with this hard-got wisdom,  
the body's deeper, singular knowledge—  
we shape our hands with what we hold onto,  
what we choose to let go.

## *The Difficult Simplicity of Certain Contemplations*

Tapping a tarot card with her dusky finger,  
the woman tells me  
*sit with your emptiness,*  
*in time answers will come.*  
She says I know them all and only must remember.

My friend tells me I must decide what is enough,  
then live with it.

Even my shiny-suited banker waxes wise, asks me  
if I think rich people are happier than I.

But always there's the knowledge  
of how all this will end.

In between  
we try to love a life that's like a man who can't commit—  
a little restless, always vague  
when someone asks *when are you going to*. . . ,

a life that's like the ragged, feral cat  
mewling at the door,  
insinuating with its cheek and hunger.  
We give it mercy or rough blame.

I'll tell you what love of this life is. It's looking up  
through trees newly bare of leaves  
and seeing there the oldest road,  
a broken line of white stars  
stretching out across the sky.  
It's thinking,  
this could almost be enough.

## *Practicing Eternity*

*This is called practicing eternity.*

—Tao te Ching

So what if you believe in angels,  
if once you left your body  
on a clear October night, if  
you sit, feet numb, spine grieving,  
and lose yourself in breath. So what.

You're sunk into this muddy world  
up to your hubcaps. You waltz  
under its mirrored ball, delirious  
as a 1940's girl in her white faille  
dress and peek-toe pumps.

This bully world still has the strength  
to break your heart  
with all it's street-smarts and its swagger,  
its Spanish love songs  
and its one and only mango moon.

You say it's not death, but the dying,  
what comes before,  
but it is death—giving up that moon  
none of us can bear to leave,  
the Chardonnay and berries,  
summer's peonies exploding  
and the alchemy of autumn,  
the caught breath that demands  
itself, refuses to give in.

Each day you say, *start now*.  
Teach yourself to yield. Become  
light without desiring light.  
But see how you've failed again,  
your heart attentive and engaged,  
a lighthouse at the edge  
of a cold and dangerous sea.  
Once again the child  
climbs its hundred dark stairs  
and with one small smoky lantern  
tries to guide the boats safely in.



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is the twenty-fourth publication of the Parallel Press,  
an imprint of the University of Wisconsin – Madison Libraries.

Series design by Tracy Honn.

Typeset in Scala by Greg Britton.





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