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A Parallel Press Chapbook

*White Horses
on Sale for a Song*

Poems by
Shoshauna Shy



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

*White Horses
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FIRST EDITION

Contents

Luck of the Draw	· 7
Before Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Dream	· 8
Beds	· 9
First Bests	· 10
Banished	· 11
Looks 101	· 13
In Custody	· 14
Buddy	· 15
All I Remember About Sunday School	· 16
White Horses on TV Don't Count	· 17
Faux Pas	· 18
Eleven-Going-on-Twelve	· 19
High Noon at the Holiday Inn, Omaha	· 20
Chicago Morning	· 21
Dibber's Hill	· 22
Turning Thirteen	· 24
The Imprint	· 25
Family Legend	· 26
Kisses	· 27
Baptism	· 28
My Mother's Predecessor	· 29
Breakfast with My Father	· 30

Luck of the Draw

When I was a handful
Zipped into pajamas
Riding in the back seat
To meet my father's commute,
A photo haunted me
From *Life* magazine
Of a road at night
Where a kid my size
Leaned on the door
And got sucked out.
Surely his mother
Was no ballast like mine,
Smacking Bazooka,
Knuckles stern on the wheel.
I inhaled her moxie,
Scanned the gullies for him.

Before Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Dream

The day I was slated for a polio shot,
Jojo Willis scrubbed charcoal into my skin,
wanted me to know what it was like to be black
assigned to the dead end of Chaster Street
where trees didn't grow and the houses leaned.

How oily that bath after I was plunked in it,
Mother's slapdash rinse not enough.
Dr. DuBois confirmed this with a ball of cotton
dampened and rubbed at the hollow of my neck.
On his palm it sat, evidence for my mother
that she fell short in her care of me.
I glued my gaze to his shining shoes

away from his silence and the sneer of his wife
captured inside a gilt-edged frame,
the lace of her collar patted into place.
Shame didn't lower my mother's brow,
and I smiled at the amusement
curling her lips.

Beds

What was this about *going to bed*
That made women speak
In stricken cadence, the kitchen steamy
With Aunt Hasty's cabbage, her calf
Muscles shiny in their stink-to-stove
Pivot, the March sun drying calicoes
On the line, the hushed voices saying
 He got her to bed
 She went with him to bed
No bother with "the" for this furniture piece

While a sofa was treated a different way,
For no one ever went *to sofa, to chair*
So, what was it about this broad expanse
Where children got sent
Before they were ready, that made men fall
 Against his better judgment,
That exiled women
From Praline's Salon?

The beds on display
In the White Cloud showroom
Revealed nothing between floral ruffles,
Their shams as faceless
As a book of blank pages,
But apparently beds became dangerous when

Grown-ups hovered anywhere near them, something
You took great pains to steer clear of
If you happened to be
Near your boss's wife
A best friend's husband

First Bests

I don't remember what forces wrenched
First friendships apart

Although I remember dates of the birthday
Parties that alike plastic numbers floating
In a bowl bob up with the taste of cold
M & M's pawed from the frill of cupcake
Papers bringing back carpets on skinned-bare

Knees and red kilts with straps and Japanese
Candy wrapped in cellophane that between
Wet teeth dissolved with a crunch like the cut

Of loneliness when someone you sought
Claimed you their best friend

Banished

Not like the moms
who drove cranky Studebakers
fetching us from school to see
kittens get born, baskets
of laundry in the back seat,

she smelled like lilacs a week
past their prime, cut the crusts
off sandwiches, called them *petits fours*,
pressed screen doors aside
with white cotton fingers.

In her daughter's room, the canopy bed
ceiling-high, Thumbelina dolls big
as babies, the whole block invited
to birthdays that featured live ponies,
piñatas, cakes on pedestals

and when Debby announced
Clark will do what you tell him
Even pull down his pants
and I said *Clark do that Pull*
down your pants
which was when their mother

happened to walk in—Two smacks
across Clark's face, Debby pointing *She told him to!*
and I felt her mother stiffen, the steam
of her hiss *You were trouble I knew it*
Don't come here again

Through the foyer I raced
from those *petits fours* cupped
in my hopskotch hands

the hungry time I swore
I washed them, and her eyes
showed she knew
I lied

Looks 101

I find out that being first
to the party in the park
—going straight from Billy's yard
in big brother's patched jeans—
does not guarantee getting
the first slice of cake
nor being chosen when it comes
to Pin-the-Donkey teams especially

when all the other five-year-old girls
wear tulle & crinoline blossoming
from their waists & tiaras atop hair
sculpted with combs by mothers
who gush over every new guest

& although the pink frosting's
the best I've ever had
it doesn't change how no one
is looking at me

till it's my turn with the piñata
when I grab the bat
& whack that sucker so hard
Jujubes rain out of the old maple
for weeks

In Custody

The only time the Arteago boy came over
he stole three pieces of Bazooka gum
which was why I preferred we play at his house
squeezing between the cast iron fence
and the corner of the garage around the dog sludge
in all stages of decay throughout his yard
We played upstairs in a room with green linoleum

while women in heavy shoes
who smelled of old celery
moved about the house saying nothing to us except

Stay out of the kitchen

We made up games with matchbox cars
his chest narrow as a washboard
his fists hammer-hard
any time I crossed him

and even when I didn't
which had something to do with the women
in their dutiful aprons showing only their profiles

and the rumor of a mother
who took a bus to Neosho
and hadn't been heard from since

Buddy

didn't matter if
he ate squirrels
cars hit when

he'd take us where
other grown-ups
didn't & swim

farther than breakers
before the beach
opened skating

deserted lagoons
at night chasing
fire engines to

forbidden freight
yards & skid
down right-of-ways

into broken bottle
blood spurting
every step i

took Band-Aids
sliding off parents'
teeth flashing no

way to hide i'd
been with him no way
to pretend this

didn't happen years
later scar white
on my calf

All I Remember About Sunday School

The way Mark Novotny smelled
Like wood smoke and caramel
At the collar of his shirt
Cuff-linked and tucked
Made me want to be near him
In my lace and white sashes
Want to crash and wrestle
And jump like a hound
What I wanted had nothing
To do with the privilege
Of being included
By his maple eye
But had everything to do
With the hunger to heave with
His boyness and his bluster
From the inside out

White Horses on TV Don't Count

To make a wish come true
You have to smack your fist
To the palm your thumb pressed
After you licked it

Said janie de ville
Showing us the new barbie doll
Her uncle had bought her
When she taxied to the airport
To visit his ranch

Of course
It won't work unless
You see a white horse
When you do it
She smiled

Managing to keep her edge
Over the rest of us who
Despite being alive
Seven years already
Still thought the world was just

One big chicago

Faux Pas

I knew Sheila's birthdays:
Parlor games on TV trays
The quarter chimes of a grandfather clock
When seated keep your ankles crossed
And moderate those giggles
So I begged Mother to keep me home
Claim I had a fever

Yet I still hear the clackety-slap
Of wheels on the pavement
As I rollerskated late that day
Into Sheila having carried
Five blocks on a Chinet plate
One slice of frosted allspice cake
For the ailing child

Eleven-Going-on-Twelve

Touching each other was OK

if it was a shove
at the sledding hill
if it were knuckles
boxing the jaw
if it was an arm across
the collarbone during
Capture the Flag touching was

OK if I combed your cowlick
with a Hershey bar
if you dragged me off the porch
by the wrists
if I slapped you near your bad eye
the one blinded by a BB

but what
did it mean
when I was
belly
down
in
the
dark

watching a Hitchcock movie
between my brother and you

and your leg

your
long
lean
leg

was placed gently over mine?

High Noon at the Holiday Inn, Omaha

On sale for a song
In the dancewear department
Leotards in Easter-prim pastels
With matching color-plated
Snaps at the crotch
Designed for gliding
Through aquamarine ponds
Or for executing delicate
Jetés Not

For plunging feet first
Into the outdoor pool
Where a troop of 12-year-old boys
Are splashing Me thrashing
Trying to The nylon not
Stretching to Mother laughing so hard she
 Can barely
 Hand me
The towel

Chicago Morning

We hung paper stars and Santa's
On the boughs of a small fir
Bought with allowances
From Conky's gas station, wheeled home
On a bicycle to my brother's bedroom

While parents downstairs
Wrapped away the menorah
All of us had forgotten to light.
My brother and I slept
In bedrolls on the floor,
Radio church choirs swelling
Between us.
When morning came,
We exchanged M & M's,
Gray skies leaking rain with the hint
Of sleigh bells and snow-white pines
Somewhere else.

Dibbers Hill

Behind her back we called her
Great-Aunt Schenectady
because she hardly had a neck
and her second husband left her
so much money she could have bought
all of Schenectady.

She scolded us for not spending
the holidays at her house,
and once she left ours, we tittered
about her shoulder pads
and lace collars.

Then she had a stroke

and Mother made us go
every Wednesday and Saturday
to vacuum and soak, dust-mop
and say *Yes ma'am if you please*
ma'am Change the lady's
stinkin' bed pan.
Jillian and I protested

all the way up Dibbers Hill
till Mother hissed *Hush*
Just have to do this
a few months at best
and it'll be worth every second
You wait and see
She pirouetted through the kitchen
arranging a lunch tray
and laugh how she'd buy me
every dress sold at Kentroff's,
that our house would be brick
with white pillars and a maid,
the kitchen walls yellow
like daffodils.
Jillian and I were bookends

either side of the sickbed
while pale hands clutched
a rosary, the radio tuned
to WY Hallelujah 95.5.
When she finally dozed,
we'd find Mother in furs
wearing hats and striking poses
in the mirror down the hall,
bangles that jangled
on her skinny wrists.

Aunt Schenectady died
on the Fourth of July.
That night after the funeral I sat
on the porch swing.
The di-o-cese! Mother wailed
as she dropped the phone.
Junebugs smacked
against the screen door
between us, teased
by the lamplight, trying
to get in.

Turning Thirteen

my thumb found out
boys weren't all belligerence One spot
on you was soft as velvet
of which I learned
in your brownstone castle
comprised of empty rooms you
jockeyed me into Your hands maneuvering
the tight slide of buttons
cupping soundly beneath
the damp layer of cotton
parting zippers to curve
fingers past elastic

On the opposite wall
sisters stringing fliptops

Across the hall
cousins smoking Lucky's
and then your mother calling
to bring her a Heineken
Managing to stall her
and then comes the holler

What's takin' so goddam long—

You brewin' that beer?

and you against the parlor wall
gushing like a fountain

The Imprint

Tall, rain-hooded,
The lanky figure walks
Draker Hill down
Towards Mel and me,
Our fluorescent knee socks
In clumps at our ankles,
Finger dolls tucked
Inside our knit mittens
On this steep shortcut
The last stretch home.
Kittens turn sideways
To appear bigger
Which is why we speed up
And lean into each other
Watching the approach
Of his long stride.
He scissors between us
And his hand briefly presses
Against my red coat
 on the V of my thighs.
He knows my shock
Will be instantly swallowed
The way snow when it falls
Entombs motion in silence,
That this snow will keep piling
On my chicken dinner,
How it won't get knocked out
By the dice of Backgammon
Nor will my tongue thaw
As I pull up the blankets
Despite the hot bath,
Despite floral print flannel,
A silence sealed
By the hunch of his shoulders,
This suède-soft secret,
Once his, now mine.

Family Legend

Conversation takes an intimate turn My dad when
Japan surrendered The diamond ring once his ship
docked The patient sweetheart waiting

We lower the radio Pull up chairs Prop elbows
on the table Tell us about the blue-eyed blond who
almost eclipsed Mother

Were her sweaters tucked into belts? Not when
we went on hayrides She had a red jacket
of corduroy that buckled at the back

The stationery on which she wrote? Received
in Pearl Harbor Black cartridge ink on airmail blue
sometimes softly scented

Did her father like you coming around? He sold houses
in the Heights Hers had shutters and a circular
drive and the door a brass kick plate

Her perfume? White Shoulders it was
Even now when I catch a whiff I—

Yes Say it Go on Tell
How she looked at you
How she fit about your waist Narrate Relate
exactly how

How we almost were not born

Kisses

I wondered what Nick Statz
Would choose to do first—
Ask me to go steady
Or kiss me on the lips.
Would his kiss taste more sweet
Before or after that question?
I weighed this for weeks
While reading of lovers
Who hiked in the Alps
And rode sleighs across tundras.
Even though Nick hitchhiked
to Skokie with my cousin,
The way he winked told me
Our kiss was in the works

Till Christmas break was over
And Kelsey came to gym class,
His ID bracelet jangling
From her wrist.
I admitted to the mirror
Kelsey's mouth deserved him:
She now had cantaloupes
Instead of button breasts.
Once I could accept mine
Were destined to stay peaches

I bought a silver bracelet
Listened to it jangle
Kissed myself

Baptism

When I was 15
Marissa Jean Roper
gave me a new name,
severed me neatly
from being defined
by syllables so cheeky
they flounced as they skipped.
She slapped off of me
the flat nasal sound

that was mocked and misshapen
by my first honest crush,
snipped the elastic
of pink ruffled cuffs
mandated for Seders
at Great-Aunt Claire's
and snuffed out the sneer
a hated teacher wore

when he stretched my name thinner
than his own thin lips.
Marissa's bravado
that duped crotchety neighbors
and wrangled car keys
from the pockets of uncles,
who convinced lions and pit bulls
to give her wide berth

showed me if I wanted
to be suède and not gingham,
if I wanted to run like a deer,
not a puppy,
I could leap from the river,
I could shoulder her claim.

My Mother's Predecessor

The breeze is blowing

Your dotted Swiss dress

I imagine is blue

The sun casting

Your outline on

The sand below

The boardwalk

Where you stand

Hand on the rail

The engagement ring

Displayed to reflect

A secretive smile

As he snaps the shot

I am holding

Between my thumbs

Fifty years later

Certain I

Would not be *I*

Had he married you

Breakfast with My Father

I enter the Pancake House
For breakfast with my father
And realize how rare to find
Those words nestled together
For fathers board early subway trains
Or shave at pre-dawn mirrors,
Coffee thermos balanced
On a suitcase beside them,
Blueprints or spreadsheets
Across commuting laps.
Most of us hear those two words
And recall the dread
Of the paperboy's footfall
Slicing between two bowls
Or remember a woman's sobs
In the presence of an empty chair.
So, I am aware what I have here
Is a luxury, a privilege:
Mine is still alive, and I
Am old enough to appreciate that,
Grown enough to realize
Not everyone has
 (nor would they want)
Breakfast with their father.



SHOSHAUNA SHY is a member of the Prairie Fire Poetry Quartet, and the founder of BookThatPoet.com and the program Poetry Jumps off the Shelf. She is the author of *Souped-Up on the Must-Drive Syndrome* released by Pudding House Publications, and *Slide into Light: Poems of the Brighter Moments* published by Moon Journal Press. Her poetry has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Cimarron Review*, *Slipstream*, *New Millennium Writings*, and *Poetry Daily*. One of Shy's poems "Bringing My Son to the Police Station to be Fingerprinted" was selected for inclusion in the Library of Congress program, Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools, launched by Billy Collins. Shy currently lives in Madison, Wisconsin and works for the Wisconsin Humanities Council.

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