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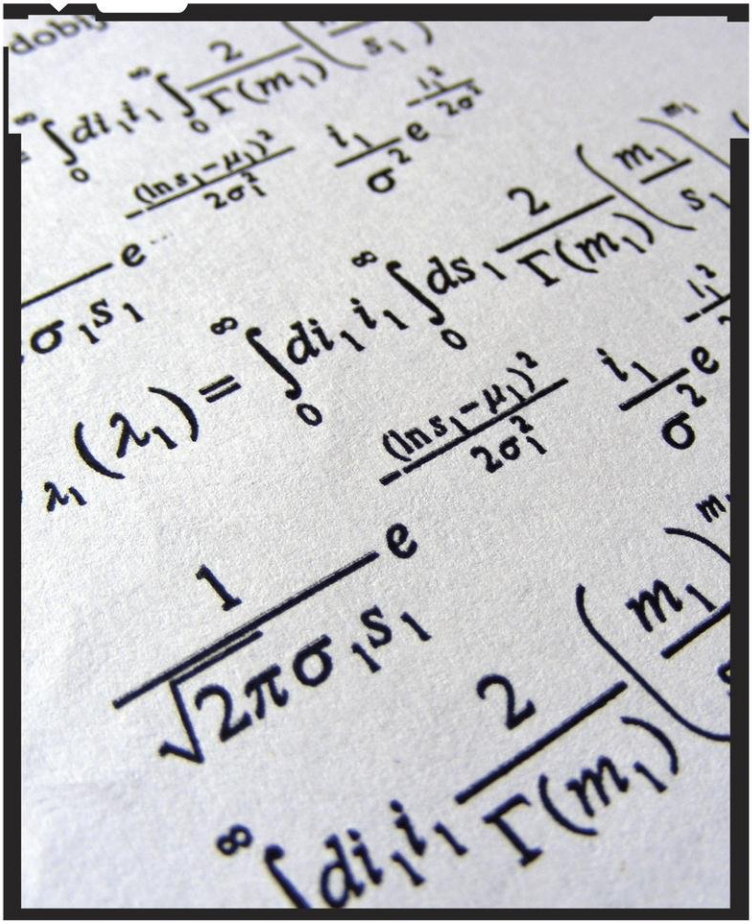

Vectors

Poetry by **Kelly Cherry**

PARALLEL PRESS POETRY SERIES

A Parallel Press Chapbook

Vectors

J. Robert Oppenheimer: The Years before the Bomb

Poetry by
Kelly Cherry

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In memory of my brother, Mike Cherry,
who gave me my first Oppenheimer book

Here are poems selected from Part One of a full-length book in progress, "Quartet for J. Robert Oppenheimer." Oppenheimer was a central figure of the twentieth century, which means that there are many different views of him. I have tried to be faithful to the figure as I see him after taking into account numerous, often conflicting, biographies, letters, reports, and reminiscences.

Contents

Introduction to Art

His mother may have been a bit distracted,
preoccupied with art, her painting much
more than a lady's hobby, the redbrick apartment
on Riverside a private gallery
for canvases by Vuillard and Vincent van Gogh,
Picasso, Derain, Renoir, and Maurice de Vlaminck.
There was a Rembrandt etching, a Cezanne drawing.
Gilt wallpaper shimmered in the shifting sun.
The boy drifted from room to room, sometimes
stopping to gaze at a work that caught his attention,
drew him forward: his mind expanded to
take in color, contrast, composition,
perspective, and the morning light that made
the pictures seem as if they'd just been painted,
if not by his mother, then by his own quick mind,
each brush stroke like a new idea, each
rich tone bright with meaning.

***Grace note.* The collection on the walls of the apartment on Riverside Drive**

Vuillard and van Gogh,
solar flares

among the dark furniture.

At the New York Mineralogical Institute

At the age of twelve he gave a lecture on
geology to degreed geologists.
A little like Jesus discussing Yahweh
with learned elders of the synagogue.

—A false comparison, of course, given
the Oppenheimer family connection to
the School of Ethical Culture and its belief
in rationality and education,
its skepticism toward any theodicy
that would replace intelligence with dogma.

If there was a young Jesus, did he argue
that he himself was proof of God's existence
the way obsidian or basalt is proof
of volcanic activity?

Grace note. **His childhood mineral collection**

Mica, sandstone, quartz. What fascinated
the curious child was light concealed inside,
the fugitive glint, the ticking heart of night.

Sundays

Young Oppenheimer, raised among opulent
elegant furnishings, was himself burnished
to a high degree of shine, educated
at the hallowed, whizbang High School of Ethical Culture.

On Sundays, in the Packard, their chauffeur
slowly drove the family along
the tree-lined street that hugged the Hudson River,
the boys' faces pale behind backseat windows.

Their mother masked her disfigured hand with a glove.
As days grew short and winter holidays
approached, the boys could smell chestnuts burning,
sense snow before it crystallized from air.

Their father pointed out notable details
of architecture. Ella corrected their posture,
her gloved hand no less firm for being gentle,
clouds of snow surrounding the Packard like

the sift of snow inside a paperweight,
how lightly but steadily it falls, how soon
the sky becomes invisible, the air
unbreathable, the glass globe suffocating.

Grace Note. The praiseworthy son

Can parents love their children more than children
can bear? Suppose a child is smart enough
to know he's not as brilliant or angelic
or handsome as they say? Does he not
feel profoundly the chasm between himself
and their praise? Their expectations? Even though
they say they have no expectations? A child
may fret and study all his life and still
believe it's not enough, it's never enough,
and when they try to tell him it is enough,
he smiles, says "Okay," and goes away
believing that it's not, he's not and will
never be what they wanted him to be.

Thanksgiving

Julius Oppenheimer loved his two boys.
Imagine him at dinner, head of the table.
Feel his pleasure, his fatherly pride, perhaps
his surprise at finding himself impossibly blessed.
It makes him almost giddy, this bountiful harvest,
this cornucopia of bright children
whose intense curiosity and good manners
(they were taught to wear suits and ties to dinner)
welcome his homecoming day after day.

There was a third one, Lewis, meant to be
the middle one, dead after forty-five days,
a loss to which Ella would never be
reconciled.
Of course Bobby felt
her hurt, and felt inadequate to the task
of filling shoes that never would be worn.
We give ourselves to love before we know
our limitations, or those of our loves.

Miasma of sadness settled in, a fog
that lay, silent and quivering, a sleeping dog,
upon the floor and at the bottoms of beds.

The Sadness in Him

Always in him was the sadness of a boy
who felt unworthy of his parents' love.
As if he had to make up for the son
who died. As if he'd wished his baby brother
dead and then it happened. It didn't matter
that his parents loved him, or that his brother, Frank,
looked up to him, nor did it matter that
he'd been too young to form a lasting memory
of the infant who died: he'd seen his mother tearful,
bereft, his father with his arm around her,
not speaking. Staring. Staring not at Renoir
or van Gogh or the small Derain or the Rembrandt etching
but at nothing. His parents' mutual heartbreak hushed
the apartment; he was afraid to play, even
by himself, afraid to make a noise, to draw
on a wall, to make a muddy footprint on
a floor or otherwise disturb their grief.
It wasn't their fault, wasn't his either.
So sadly much of sadness can be traced
to simple misinterpretation, and
it sets the mood for a lifetime.

Outcast

The other boys talked about it all
the time and he was curious about
almost everything. No surprise he wrote
his father to say that he was learning about
sex. He might have written his father to
brag that he was learning mathematics,
or how to tie and untie knots, or
construe Virgil, or memorize the Table
of Periodic Elements, but no—
these things, he already knew. Sex was new.

His father registered dissatisfaction
with the way the camp was run, and word got out.
Bobby became "Booby," "the tattletale,"
"the snitch." The daddy's boy who was too smart
for anybody's good. The kids ganged up,
stripped off his clothes, slapped green paint on his genitals,
locked him in an icehouse, and left him overnight.
He stayed awake until despair covered him
with dreams, makeshift rags for an outcast boy.

Lions chased him in his dreams, their paws
gigantic, the claws as huge and raking as backhoes.
Toward his father, whose wish to be protective
landed him here imprisoned and defenseless,
he felt anger, the taste of it metallic
in his mouth, but how does a son express anger
against the man who only wants the best
for him? So maybe he would die tonight,
maybe tomorrow all the boys would feel
ashamed, sorry, penitent, and dumb.

The Great War

A single shot was fired, and all of Europe
reached for a gun. The poet Wilfred Owen,
twenty-five, devoutly Christian, confounded
by war's reality, determined his death
should be his protest against Absurdity
but near Amiens regretted his decision.
To die—perhaps to dream never again.
And yet, emboldened by the trust his troops
placed in him, he ran the deafening gamut
of automatic fire to seize the enemy's
machine gun and then turned the gun on Germans,
and won the admirable Military Cross.
To Siegfried Sassoon he wrote: "My senses are charred."
Yes; but he had soldierly duties and died
fulfilling them. The news reached his parents
as the bells of Shrewsbury sang of victory.
For them it must have been a pyrrhic victory.

Sailing on Bay Shore, Long Island

the air / the open air / the sky / the sea
their sailboat tacks / tacks again / again
and tips to starboard / turns nearly over / laughing
a pebble skimming the sea / the two brothers
alert / alive in their bodies / the sun / the sun
on their arms and shoulders / seaspray in their faces
no time to think of anything beyond
the ropes / the mast / the boom / their young bodies
tense-taut / and stretched / the glittering sun on both
boys' backs and arms / the wind pushing / goading
the flashing wind / multifaceted sun
no time to think / only to be / to be

Discovering New Mexico

At seventeen he retreated to his room.
It isn't difficult to recall the tumult
within the seventeen-year-old intelligence,
the lofty notions, ambition, pride compounded
with timidity and feelings of shameful failure.
A wonder it is that any of us survive
to rejoin the outer world—a world inhabited
not just by parents but by a seethe of life,
more life than had seemed possible inside
those four walls, that one preoccupied brain.
For a year, he wrote poems and read physics.
A year later, he consented to accompany
his English teacher Herbert Smith for a summer
in the Southwest, camping and horseback riding.
His spirits revived, his health improved. They called
on Robert's schoolmate Francis Ferguson.
Invigorated by the landscape and
away from parents, Robert found a freedom
wider-winged than ever he imagined.
The colors of New Mexico are blue
and yellow, with moments of green and rose (adobe
rose). The sense of space inspirits all
who move through that generous environment.
Thus Robert felt a new lightness, a new
energy. It was this ebullience that encouraged him
to ask of Smith if he might take his last
name for his own and travel as his son.
Smith was aghast, appalled—though Robert perhaps
was merely caught up in excitement and meant to express
his gratitude to and fondness for his teacher.
To be intense is sometimes to be thought
strange, simply because one does not know how to trim
one's feelings to the acceptable range of feeling.

Grace note. **What Oppenheimer knew about composing poetry**

The poet writing rides on a beam of light.

Poetry, or the Theory of Special Relativity

You'll come back to a world you won't recognize.
You'll think that you've been gone barely an hour
but everybody you knew will have died of old age.
There will be a new party in power.

The Well-Stocked Mind

The well-stocked mind's a pleasure to behold
(although the mind that lets itself be wrapped
in clouds and dreams may find a way to serve
some small, enduring purpose of its own).

Robert, having devoured whole genres of knowledge
before he arrived at Harvard, took ten classes
each semester, then earned his Ph.D.
from Göttingen at twenty-two, wherefore
biographers suggest that since his interests
were wide and scattered, he was without "focus,"
his precocious psyche "underintegrated."
The fact remains: he knew a lot and brought it
to bear on his understanding of the world.
If such a person is underintegrated,
perhaps the rest of us should loosen up,
allow a little light to come into
the room. Allow a little leeway in
the world.

The Poisoned Apple

He considers the apple, the one in front of him,
an apple ripe with poison, lethal weapon
of his creation. No, he does not think
once of the vain stepmother in *Snow White*.
Nor could he think of Alan Turing, computer
pioneer and a genius cryptographer, who
in thirty tech-savvy years, will shed the world
like an outworn coat by eating half an apple
he has, it's thought, infused with cyanide.

This once, he does not think. The apple compels
and he obeys, staring, staring, transfixed
by the red apple he has poisoned with chemicals.
He moves the apple from his desk to the desk
of his tutor Patrick Blackett. He is so envious
of Blackett that he wants him out of his way.
He'd kill him. His head is full of unformed fantasies.
Cambridge rings his parents, who are visiting.
Julius pleads. Robert's put on probation,
shipped off to a Harley Street psychiatrist.
A close escape—for Robert Oppenheimer.

Robert the Dog

A warm summer day in London, in Harley Street.
Sitting among couples at a café, he ducked
beneath a table and began to bark:
his friend Francis Fergusson reports
this worrisome behavior. "Dementia Praecox,"
his analyst said; "schizophrenia,"
we might say today yet surely what he suffered
was not that but anxiety, the disease of
smart people in their early years, when life
requires they recognize that they are still
apprentices and not yet in control
of anything—their work, their love (or loveless)
life, unknown and perhaps destined to be
eternally unknown, the knowing wished for
a simple competence acknowledged by
the masters of their trade. O youth, that is
so eager to collapse the time between
the present and the future—glowing future
in which one takes one's place among the masters
while giving elegant and lively cocktail parties
on the patio with one's spouse beside one.
He would have thought that he was playing a joke
on Fergusson. Well-dressed consumers of tea
or coffee or cognac stopped consuming tea
or coffee or cognac. Why did no one laugh?
He barked again and Fergusson came running.
The frozen crowd reclaimed its powers of
locomotion, moving politely away.
The hazy English sky seemed out of focus.

Apparently no one noticed that when he barked
it was because he wanted to be petted.

Epiphany in Corsica

On vacation in Corsica, something changed him.
A woman? Or Proust, who wrote of "that indifference
to the sufferings one causes, an indifference
which . . . is the terrible and permanent form
of cruelty."
If it was a woman
she must have been caring and kind, a woman in
whose hair he lost himself, the cloud of it
passing across his face as he kissed it.
This was a man bedeviled by demons
of his own creation. *Imperfect*, they said,
those demons swarming around his ears like flies
or bees. If you have not had this experience,
enjoy your immunity to it. Robert
rolled groaning on the floor as if demented
and confirming the doctor's diagnosis, which
reflected the doctor's deeply wishful thinking
(no need to treat this obstreperous patient).

Far more likely is that Marcel Proust
awakened him from his waking, haunted sleep
wherein he was the central consciousness
of all that existed to a world he shared
with others and for which he bore a shared
responsibility.

Assistant Professor of Physics, University of California, Berkeley

A blue-eyed hero,
tall as a god,
lean as Gary Cooper
or the young (but shorter) Richard Burton

some movie star anyway,
for sure

His students tried to *be* him,
his charisma was that intoxicating

They copied his walk,
his talk,
his habitual smoking

the way he held the chalk

they gawked at him,
mimicked his gestures

He loved being admired,
being liked, being
at the center. As if
he was the mind who made
it all go, the motor

in the machine.

Oppenheimer, 1931

His mother was dying.
Leukemia.

It was the Great Depression.
Grown men were crying

into their beer.
No one was buying

a house, a car, a coat.
"I am the loneliest man

in the world," he said to Smith,
his high-school English teacher,

after his mother was dead.
I, he said.

Had he no thought
for his brother's pain,

his father's pain,
the grief of that old man

in the living room,
heavily sighing?

But loneliness is
a universe.

The Wounded Warrior

He had his mother's eyes and when he looked
at her, he saw himself looking back.
The world turned over. "He worshiped her," said Smith.
Into the pit, now, the lethargy of
unwillingness, of refusing to try
because he knows that what he wants to happen
can never happen—she will not return
and there is nothing left in life to hope
for. Days are smashed—as one fine poet wrote,
they "lie in fragments." Oppenheimer witnesses
time's wreckage but cannot repair what's broken.
Nor can he speed time up, as the still-fairly-young
would like to do. The pain of not yet being
whole, completed, formed, assails him as if
he is a wounded warrior, and yet
who is his enemy? Where is his rival?
What is the battle about and why, when he seeks
to counterattack, is there no one there?

Scientists Flee Germany

Scientists began to flee Germany,
fearing for their future. For two years
Robert dedicated a portion of
his salary to their aid. If his psyche
mirrored his anxious alliance with his parents—
his craving to escape the shame he felt
at their uncertain efforts to assimilate—
if he himself had fully assimilated—
he saw that his *gemütlich* life was absurd
compared with lives of Jews in Europe, where,
window by window, lights were going out.

Aeneas and His Father

To my father, Anchises, I said: "Come, my father,
Climb up on my shoulders. You weigh so little.
Let us face together whatever happens.
My son shall walk beside me and my wife
Behind as usual. Now, my family,
Listen: Just outside the city, next
To a temple of Ceres and a mound, grows
A cypress worshiped by our ancestors,
And there we'll meet. Father, carry in your hands
The gods of our country, for I would not be guilty
Of sacrilege by touching them before
I wash off in a clean, running river
The blood and grime of battle."
I then threw
A golden lionskin around my shoulders
And bent to allow my father to climb on my back.
My son held my hand and kept up with us, even
Though he had to take two steps for every one
Of mine.

Thus did Aeneas bear Anchises on
His back, the weight less than that of his own son.

[*Aeneid* II, ll. 207-223]

Kristallnacht

A darkening world. Bread lines in America
and Germany, and in the Soviet Union
the poets of an era exiled, shot,
disappeared. On people's faces, misery
and fear—if they dared to show their faces.
Most kept their heads down hoping to be not noticed.
They lived in tent cities or hired themselves
out like sharecroppers.
Not everyone. Not
Robert Oppenheimer, who worked hard to give
his money away as grants for graduate students.
Still: paint this harsh decade dark and troubled,
with flames eating at the edges and
creeping toward the centers of the cities:
Berlin and Munich, Washington, D.C.,
Paris, London, Rome, Madrid, Vienna.

To blame somebody, to destroy competition
for food, land, money, to transfer their pain
and guilt—anti-Semitism served
such loathsome purposes. Who can forgive
us and the world we made?
After the shattering,
silence. A silence not like the silence of death.
Rather, a silence like time holding its breath.
Shards lay on the pavement as if stemware
for thousands of Jewish weddings had been stamped
on by the black Fascist boot. History
was now married to horror.

Hitler Redrawing the Map of Europe

The failed painter Adolf Hitler redrew
the map of Europe. First Austria, and then,
with Stalin's help, Poland.
England declared
war against Germany. America
began arming, but *The Wizard of Oz* was on
the screen and Glenn Miller all the rage.
The children of that depressed age are called
the Silent Generation—earnest kids
who knew their parents had it rough, kids who
did not want to trouble their hurting parents further.
It came anyway, as we all know—trouble, war.
And still America dallied on the sidelines
while the Nazi fist slugged Europe, jumping the bell.
And Europe reeled and fell but then got up
again, bouncing off the ropes, underweight
but scrappy as a boxer with mouths to feed.

The Affair with Jean Tatlock

The pessimistic Jean, intelligent
and sad, drew up her stockings, pausing briefly
between, with one in hand, then straightening
the seams before she fastened rayon stockings
to garter belt. He watched the play of her hair,
its falling forward and backward, amber waves
of grain, had she not been a member of
the Communist Party. But who was not back then,
when anyone who grieved on behalf of the poor
was suspect in the eyes of red baiters?
She turned his attention outward toward the world
he'd seldom acknowledged since his first school days.
So long he'd been unaware and now—
amazed by the extent of his ignorance!
He'd wanted his life to turn in this direction
since reading Proust. Of course she was beautiful,
as was he in his manly way. Oh to be young,
with bodies limber and flexible, as tuned
as machines to their purposes. But Jean Tatlock,
easing the white slip down over her head,
her sinuous body, silk slip rippling tight
against her abdomen, released her heart
into his hands, which, trembling, let it fall.

Kitty

At last he married. A woman I. I. Rabi,
a colleague, would one day flat out say was *evil.*
Evil? Unhappy, yes. Alcoholic,
yes. Ambitious and self-serving, but—
evil? She saw in Robert ambition equal
to her own and a way to fulfill it. He, in his turn,
saw himself magnified in her eyes—a leader
among men, like her second husband, Joe Dallet,
a hero of the war against Franco.
She must have seen that he was one of those
dramatic men attracted to a desert
austerity, a T. H. Lawrence of physics.
(Great men are irresistibly sexy to
some women. The flashing in her eyes? Excitement,
which revved her pulse and warmed her skin and urged
her toward her new and most promising husband.)
Even so, personal wishes were not
sufficient for him to take the proffered job.
What was sufficient was that Jews in Germany—
friends, colleagues, relatives, and scientists
who did good science—were in pain or danger.
Unnecessary suffering offended him.
In short, there was no way he could not accept.
Like Wilfred Owen, he believed in duty.
He didn't know that he was stepping off
a plank into a sea of fire, wherein
one could drown or be burned beyond recognition.

The Women

Jean abhorred hypocrisy, so crucial
to power; Kitty, widow and divorcée,
despised the people who despise the poor.
Neither woman would cede her politics
to her lover's. Both were rebels with causes, breaking
rules of propriety, whether in sex
or sympathy. The FBI might haunt
their homes, lean on neighbors for information;
the women were not easily scared. But Jean
was scared of demon shadows in her mind,
of falling from a cliff into a pit
of self-negation, and Kitty imagined that
when she gave birth, her child might swallow her
whole, like Jonah in the belly of the whale.

Director of the Manhattan Project

As in a drifting silence like the void
of outer space, young Robert moved among
eternal numbers kindled like the stars
with powers beyond the merely human—or
could heroic effort achieve such grand powers?
He came so close to singularities,
black holes, a theory of gravitational collapse,
but, in a characteristic hurry, set
this work aside. Did Robert understand
that he had forfeited the Nobel Prize?

Oppenheimer needed acclamation,
the actual life, the shine, more than more drifting
untethered through a void, through eager women,
through poetry, through alcohol, drifting.
A war was on, and he could be of use.
But did he have even an inkling of
just what he was relinquishing? Or was
loss a given, as it was for most,
those stretched years of sacrifice and hardship.

Lives would be changed. The atom would reveal
a power incommensurate with its size.
The skies would open their doors, the firmament shift.
A man would find and lose and find himself.

Kelly Cherry has published twenty books of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, eight chapbooks, and translations of two classical plays. Her most recent titles are *The Woman Who*, a collection of short stories (2010), *The Retreats of Thought: Poems* (2009) and *Girl in a Library: On Women Writers & the Writing Life* (2009). Her collection *The Life and Death of Poetry: Poems* is forthcoming from Louisiana State University Press in spring 2013. She was the first recipient of the Hanes Poetry Prize given by the Fellowship of Southern Writers for a body of work. Other awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation, the Bradley Major Achievement (Lifetime) Award, a USIS Speaker Award (The Philippines), a Distinguished Alumnus Award, three Wisconsin Arts Board fellowships, the Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook Award for Distinguished Book of Stories in 1999 (2000), and selection as a Wisconsin Notable Author. In 2010, she was a Director's Visitor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. In 2012 she received the inaugural Rebecca Mitchell Taramuto Prize for fiction from *Blackbird* magazine and the Carole Weinstein Poetry Prize. Poet Laureate Emerita of Virginia and a member of the Electorate of Poets Corner at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City, she is also Eudora Welty Professor Emerita of English and Evjue-Bascom Professor Emerita in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She and her husband live in Virginia.

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