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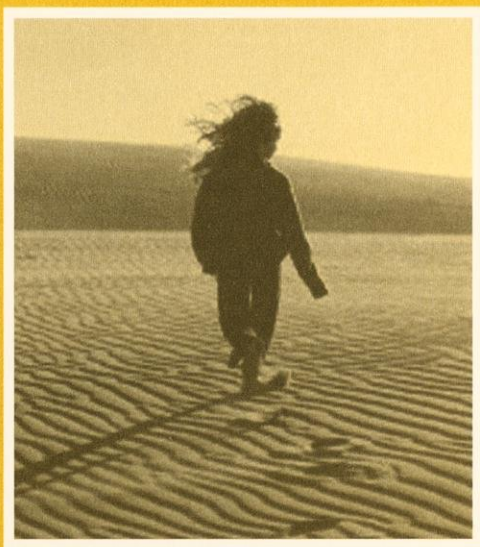
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A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K



Casting Off

Poetry by Catherine Jagoe

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

Casting Off

Poems by
Catherine Jagoe



PARALLEL PRESS 2007

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FIRST EDITION

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For Toby and Ned

This Is the Blue

This is the blue I fell in love with
oh sky of America,
your mornings, your noons, your ineffable dusks
unclouded, pure and simple,
the color of hope, of surety and thanksgiving,
with space for it all, for new beginnings.
I chose you, flawless and brazen,
clean-slate blue, weightless,
free of freight, for you said
I mean what I say.
What I promise, I deliver.
Lay down your burden of grief,
of fear, of guilt. Heal.
Be joyful.

*I came from a huddle of islands
cloud-cobbled, close-fisted, channel strung,
crowded with accents and tongues,
where the sky was milk-soft and mutable,
hovering, unpredictable.
Where no talk was innocent.
Where speech set each apart,
indelibly marked by class, war,
clan. The weight of history.
Woad. Whisperings.*

This is the blue I fell in love with
oh north Atlantic off Cape Cod.
The shock of you, green-grey-blue,
shifting cathedral depths, shafted
with grainy light like organ pipes
singing for the striped bass and bluefish,
the whelks and the crabs. Ocean blue,
I couldn't get enough of you,
trawling the bay six times a day.

This is the blue I fell in love with
oh raw lapis silk of my first ball-gown.
A week I spent cutting and sewing
stitching up dreams and hopeless love,
shipwrecked, of course. It wasn't
the dress's fault. On a new continent,
I chose the same color, cobalt
for my first down coat, glowed
warm in the searing cold.
I wore it to walk into town
to meet the man I married.
That day it was minus 39
and the sky was Chagall blue.

This is the blue I fell in love with
oh garden I planted here in America:
morning glory, Jacob's ladder,
Virginia bluebells, squill for spring, spires
of salvia, speedwell, lupine, delphinium.
The blue of your eyes, oh my father,
brother, sister, husband, son.
Your changing depths and hues.
Yours, my father,
of English forget-me-not,
of prairie indigo, my son,
and yours, oh my husband,
cyan like the sea you came from,
the ocean you love, the ocean
we always return to.

Wisconsin Wedding Party

I took a quiet road that afternoon,
a weekend city cyclist meandering
along the river's course through corn and soyfields,
pastures, woodland, hills, and on the way

I came across a woman standing alone
in the concrete forecourt of a small town bar,
clad neck to toe in tent-like royal blue polyester,
her face alight with happiness,
waving at the stout, retreating backs
of a wedding party being borne away,
full of hilarity, on a hay wagon,
bride and groom standing up front
behind a tractor belching diesel fumes,

leaving the woman looking proudly after them,
she who had probably looked after them
all their lives, her folk
motoring off in the sun to the future.

They took my route and there was no turning back
so I kept pedaling slowly on behind them
in the wake of laughter fizzing bright and guileless
as champagne. The tractor chugged deafeningly along,
deceptively slow like the river, pulling them home
in their tuxedos and bright dresses,
jocular, elated, heedless, unabashed.

And even at the time, it all felt mythic,
filmic, something about the light
and the shouts echoing back from some past decade,
old footage from a videocam,
the hazy gold September light haloing everything,
figures framed in it like Merchant Ivory doing
Hardy's Wessex. Which made me think
what tragedies might lie ahead—
the slow, relentless pace of farming life,
the sinew-cracking struggle of it. Imagine him
spreading acres of shit in the freezing cold.
Imagine the marriage going wrong;
milk prices falling, incest, abuse, adultery,
infections, accidents, machinery failing,
hail, blight, drought, wilt, flood, debt, ruin.

But the tractor simply steamed ahead,
widening the gap between us, cresting
over the hills. My last sight of them:
the bride, erect and willowy, her white veil
streaming out behind, a Chagall vision at the helm
of a hay wagon ploughing into the future,
into the mad, brave foolishness of marriage.

Drafting

Headwind on bikes.
there's nothing like it:
hunkered down
half-blind and deafened, muscle burn
in calves thighs forearms,
miles from home.
Try drafting me, you said.
Just ride as close behind me as you can.
It's taken all these years to learn.
I was too busy raging at the wind
and you, always ahead—
afraid that you would hit
an unseen pothole, gravel, solitary stone,
your swerve or momentary slack
making my wheel kiss yours, us both
careening down, gashed limbs and broken bones.
I chose to battle with the wind alone.
And yet one day I find it's almost easy, after all,
to ride a half-wheel span behind you, match
my cadence to your own, your hips
a magnet that I strive towards
a pendulum of constancy
the balance delicate
too near, too far, and back and forth.
Through years of journeying
with you, I've learned
it's worth the pain
in riot of high wind
to pull and close the gap, for your back
broad as a draught horse
forges me a lee,
a lull,
a breathing space.
Just stay the distance
close.

Stillborn

for my niece Roísín (little rose)

Roísín, rosebud
now never to unfurl
we give you as a parting gift
this name

Roísín, remember
the beating hearts you heard
lulled in the womb, sea-horse
tight-folded round your twin
now sister-sundered

Roísín, surrender
the wide air and the capacious lap of earth
the blue and purifying heat of fire
the rain and rivers, strands
of blackbird song
have claimed you
ashes to atoms to infinity

Roísín, your name
is in the secret recesses
of shell held to the ear
the Kerry surf repeats it
swallows bear it skyward
bees drowsing in the honeyed
coconut of gorse murmur it
the west wind freshening with rain
out on the hills
will bring it to our skin

Maple Keys

The fruits of the silver maple
have arrived, winged hordes of them,
helicoptered in. They lie in wait
on the front porch, infiltrate
the bedroom on our shoes.

It rains for three weeks straight.
The world is a ripe, grey womb.
Pairs of minute, rust-tinged leaves
with silver maple teeth
begin appearing everywhere.

Each seedling bears a pair
of moulted wings, whose nub
has sprung a taproot down, into the soil
a straight shoot up, into the sun.

They will take anywhere—
beds, gutters, cracks in concrete.
I uproot dozens of them every day
and still they come.

I used to think
conception was this easy,
that the challenge was to bar the way
to all those million sperm.

I chart my seasons, wet and dry;
wonder if a single seed
will lodge and root in me.
When did the odds against a human
seedling come to seem so high?

With Child

1.

Every month the echographers
pored over the mound with their probes
inscribing it with loops, flourishes,
question marks, in their invisible ink.
Intent on their work, digging in till it hurt,
as if I were a wax tablet,
blank for their scrawls.
Sound waves trawled the depths
of intercellular space, struck moonscapes
beamed back to the black-
and-white TV by the bed. Conjurors
of unreality, they'd produce scrolls of pictures
and hand them to me to take home:
tadpole, seahorse, white-haired Neptune.

There's evidence that babies
practice crying in the womb
as well as acrobatics.
They're busy in there. So much
to do, to prepare.

2.

At six weeks,
I get seasick.

3.

My contours blur, shift,
morphing. Becoming
us. Mystery
and obliteration.
Emerging.
My stomach has grown
elbows. It can have hiccups
for hours.

4.

I start wearing whatever
fits. I no longer choose
fabrics, cuts, colors; women
leave black trash bags
full of hand-me-downs
on my porch.

My own style vanishes;
everybody says
pregnancy becomes me.

5.

Elderly prima gravida
the doctors termed me: grave matter
bearing your first child
at forty. Gravity
calls. The grave.
The engravers.

6.

I myself wrote almost nothing
of it. Too much flux, too
momentous and mundane.
Only this, found later:
one loose page, undated:
long dark mornings
sleeping weather

baby twitching
stomach growing
legs aching
chair shifting

There is a plague of ladybugs
in here. What do they live on
buzzing around all winter long,
drunk on light,
on white snow light?

7.

I went swimming daily with my also-pregnant friend.
Towards the end, encumbered as astronauts,
we were only comfortable in water.
Our bellies preceded us like spinnakers
running before the wind. The pool
was liberation—laps, flip turns
and dolphin kicks away from gravity,
girdles, support hose, all the grimy snow.
Fake tropic, weightless world.

8.

She wanted a portrait of herself
pregnant, underwater, in the deep end.
With no zoom lens and both our bodies
bladders of blubber forging always up,
my camera's frame could not encompass
more than her bulbous torso, ripe plum
ready to drop. Her head and long,
slim limbs kept straying out.
I could never hold my breath
enough to get a single picture right.
But I shot the whole roll, thinking
at least we'd have bits and pieces of her,
something to show what pregnancy
was like. In the end, all thirty-six photos
came out blank.

9.

The child inhabits me
like a whelk the whorls of its shell,
a hidden smile. At some level
I am always intimately
accompanied, like holding
a lover's hand
everywhere I go.

Afterbirth

People walk around on the streets
as if nothing had happened.
Coming back from the hospital
I feel as if I'd just been born
myself, everything seems so strangely
familiar. The strangeness makes me weep.
There are traffic lights still. The same
florist on the corner. The same streets.
The same sidewalks. When we get home
we lie down together in silence,
out of the cruel sun.
The neighbors' dog barks in the back yard.
"That is a dog," I tell you.
"That is the first dog you have ever heard.
You will get to know him well." The trees
have greened during my two days away
with tiny, round, chartreuse
explosions, maple flowers.

The Feeding

This is the milk
of human kind/ness

thin tepid bluish sweet

my body hums
burns me
as it feeds you

it forms
in the deep dark heat
where poems
come from

you grow fat
on it alone

*On Speaking French after Twenty Years
for Massan*

Strange, these words in my mouth—
the disappeared returned.
I am no longer agile,
but I offer them hamfistedly to you,
new to America from Mali,
your print skirt
the cloth of my childhood in west Africa,
the tongue between us
the green summer
I spent in France feasting
on freedom and being
twenty-one.

Strange, what is still here
and what has been removed
to somewhere deeper.
Tomorrow and *today* are here
but *yesterday* is gone
as is the verb for *missing*.
Low is here, but *high*
has vanished.

It is as if, out in the desert, I had come
upon some vast, ruined city,
walls full of breaches:
disuse as damaging
as war. The years it took
to lay that architecture
in the brain.

We're talking of the newborns in our arms.
Blanks explode before me
without warning, silent fish-mouths open.

"Oh, mais ça c'est.....!"

I trail off, helplessly.

"Il est un peu.....?"

You nod, smile, fill in the holes
where you can,
both of us fumbling to undo
what happened in that tower
in Babylon,
reaching as mothers
for that lost common tongue.

This State

is splintered, breathless, frenzied, but trying to sound calm,
it's soy beans underfoot, the baseboard smeared with raspberry jam,
it's eating scraps of food after they have been chewed and then
disgorged into your outstretched hand, his saliva your saliva,
it's him reaching for your face in the dark and sinking back relieved,
it's that first, longed-for kiss, the day you saw him lay aside
his things and walk up and kiss you full on the lips with his
tiny, soft, wet mouth, complete surprise, total abandon, it's thinking
your mind will never have sharp edges or straight lines again,
it's being beaten and kicked by a screaming, back-bending,
hair-pulling dervish who later subsides into swollen-eyed,
runny-nosed calm in your arms, it's the sink full of dishes,
plastic cups, bibs, tea-leaves, peach-peel, pasta shells and peas,
it's ketchup at every meal and wondering
how a body can survive on no meat or vegetables, ever,
it's the way his body curves into yours and how your arms
are strong enough to lift all twenty-six pounds of him
over and over again at all the wrong angles,
it's shocking awake each time he murmurs in his sleep next door,
it's the pain behind your ribs when you're apart,
it's seeing your life upended, its contents strewn around by a
tornado, and picking your way through the wreckage with no time
to care because something like passion is driving you on.

Man in a Parking Lot

When you have a son
you start seeing men
backwards, intuiting their childhood
selves beneath the years of accretions—
the bags and jowls, paunches,
thickened, crumpled skin,
the whole weight of the individual
personality, its freight of filters,
opinions, prejudices, habits,
likes, congealed—as if you knew them
before they even knew themselves.

So when a man stumbles toward you,
mumbling, across the Cubb's Foods parking lot,
unkempt and coatless in the snow,
and your discriminating mind says
“madman,” “danger,” though he never
once looks up, locked in an altered world,
fixed, unfixable, you lock your car door and then
sit there wondering how it happened,
when things started going wrong.
Knowing he was once a toddler—
for pity's sake—you find it
strange, unreal, this mane of wild
grey hair, grey beard. Somehow
you know it doesn't belong on him,
all that hair, and you don't know
how he got to be so lost, so sick, so old.

Love Set You Going

I miss you already.
That baby picture of you
a year ago—what happened
to that radiant, impish grin?
Isn't it already dimming,
dimmed? And am I
as lighthouse-keeper
responsible?

You are screaming by the front door,
desperate, furious, streaming tears.
You are trying to walk in my shoes.
They will not oblige.
You fall flat on your face
again, bawling, inconsolable.

At the pool, bronzed teenage lifeguards
are lowing like steer, horsing
around in the shallow end,
shooting hoops, ducking each other.
They bellow because they want
the girls in bikinis on lounge chairs
to hear them. These days
I don't just wince.
I listen.

Is this the one
you'll sound like, look like?
Peering into a dark glass,
wondering, is that you
out there? Is that
you?

Cast-Offs

Here I am, sorting
my son's outgrown clothes
for the gap-toothed teenage girl
with a week-old child
whose father's been deported.
I am kneeling alone
in the living room, smoothing,
folding, stacking, pressing them
one by one to my face:
sailor stripe, mint, buttercup, baby blue.

All his evolving infant selves
lying around me on the floor,
shed like successive larva skins.
The shoes he learned to walk in.
His dungarees, fleece rompers,
onesies, layette gowns, receiving blankets.
Back and back: before he could talk,
or stand, or sit, or roll over.
Twenty pounds, fifteen, ten, seven.
When all he ate was me.

*Shed: Separate, divide. . from another,
part company with, depart, part.*

These are just vestiges,
husks.

What is it about the clothes of the absent
that matters so much?
As if something adhered to them.

Once I drove through a town
I remembered clearly from years back:
the longest bike ride of my life,
stopping for lunch en route, starving,
weary and drenched with sweat.
I was still me, the town still there
but I was awash
with missing myself, that place,
that day, irrecoverable.
“I want to be bare,” he says, at three.
He’s learned to blow kisses.

He is casting off, of course, loosening
the mooring rope, preparing
to throw it off.

He’s already off, we all are,
down the unseen river,
its pull inexorable. We could swim
for all our might against it
and still be dragged downstream.
His feet were once three inches long.
No matter: he will outstrip me.

Brushing Teeth

Devouring earth for a new highway,
the dozers spat out skulls.

Don't worry: this is not
a horror story. No violence

was done; they were ancient
Gauls, peacefully interred.

The archeologists were sent for,
given a month to unearth

what they could from the flinty plain.
And that's how I came

to spend a month brushing teeth.
Skulls lack noses, so the ground,

as we scraped laboriously away,
began to sprout jawbones,

a field of cracked and dusty teeth
from which no men would spring.

I think of them sometimes,
brushing my son's milk teeth nightly—

the same age, roughly, as the child
sewn in soil I spent a month uncovering,

brushing and brushing so I still recall
the shape of every molar, each incisor.

You Say

eye outside moon
red dog milk mommy? mommy? mommy?

dark nap
truck truck bus
bye bye ball

lake wind cold
snow lights
lion roar no ssshhhhh
crow caaw caaw
daddy where daddy?

and I say
you seem solid
in my arms
but you are running
through my hands
like water
hurting on
no heart-mesh fine enough
to hold in love

Laundry List

Jumbo size kitchen roll.

Dredge life silt nightly.

Drudge.

3lbs organic chicken breasts and thighs,
bone-in but skinless. Vacuum
and mop floors. Closet errant boots,
coats, hats, trains, gloves, and underwear.

Surrender.

Migraine medicine. Mint leaves.

Change sheets. Bleach out
dried blood and muddy pawprints.

Drowse.

Buy Clifford the Big Red Dog
Band-Aids. Return
library books (16), pay fine on Passion
According to St Matthew. Something
on hold. But what.

Hoard. Get Valentine.

Raspberry fruit leather.

Dream.

5 loads of wash on warm, mixed colors.
Root out those scarlet chenille socks
that always run. Do not forget.

Meander.

3 medium leeks. Make soup.
Tomato ketchup. Honey for tea, sore throats
and bribery. Bread flour.

Loaf.

Ajax. Extra virgin olive oil. Kix.
Scrub grime off bath and sink.

Thrive.

Get sitter Tuesday night (?)

This is my life.

*Braided. Abraded. Frayed
and rinsed with light.*



Catherine Jagoe was born in Britain and moved to the United States in 1986. She works as a translator and interpreter. Her translations include the Amnesty International award-winning Argentine novel *My Name Is Light*, published by Bloomsbury UK/US in 2003. She has translated numerous other works of fiction and nonfiction and is the author and coauthor of two books on Spanish literature and culture. She is a member of Lake Effect, a group of poets in Madison, Wisconsin. Her poetry has appeared in *Rattle*, *Kalliope*, *Wisconsin Academy Review*, *Poem*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, and other journals. She lives with her husband and son.

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