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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

A GIRL IN
WATER



POEMS BY BARBARA EDELMAN

BARBARA EDELMAN teaches writing and literature at the University of Pittsburgh, and is Poet in Residence at the Ellis School, teaching poetry writing to grade school girls. Her awards include a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant for poetry, residencies at the Vermont Studio Center and Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and the Scott Turow Award for short fiction at the University of Pittsburgh. Her one-act play "Charades" was produced as one of ten winners of the 1993 Pittsburgh New Works Festival. She has published poetry in journals nationally, among them *Cimarron Review*, *5 AM*, *Prairie Schooner* and *Poet Lore*. In some of her past lives, she's been an actor, a theatrical agent, and an instructor of English as a Second Language in Los Angeles.

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A GIRL IN WATER



Poems by
BARBARA EDELMAN



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For my parents

A Girl in Water

Surface dive
thirteen feet into the murk
of Little Grassy Lake.
Grab a fistful of mud, hold on
if you can. You're clenching
an expanding nothing.
The lake drinks back its dirt
and you race against that vortex
towards air.

Your prize
when you burst the green
surface, fist first,
is a black smudge
in a bloodless palm.

The pain in your ears
is a lot like a bomb that won't stop
exploding, but when it does
you dive again.

Thirty years later your hearing
slides away like mud. At some point
you get tired of saying *What?*
and you smile a lot and nod.

You're too young to miss so much
but you think maybe
that's just what you've always wanted,
to stay under, in the mud
and the easy green
sleeping bag of water.

Still, there's an option to surface,
there's sunlight up there
undulating
with the water's skin . . .

and you think
what if this silence
is *finally all there is*?

Think of woods' sounds—
thrushes and owls,
a hillside of pines in a high wind.

Think of loose human noises—
a laugh that backs into a snort,
a long sigh
sliding through an empty house,
an East Texas accent like a tin cup.

Imagine that you clasp
all of Brahms in one fist
but those eighth notes swim like tadpoles
through the cracks between your fingers,
disappear into the ceiling vents.

You want to smash something.
You want to yank that girl out of the lake by the hair
and swing her around until her ears dry out
but it's a little late.

So you watch from a distance, pissed,
but you get hooked
on the way she keeps diving
and rising, and shivering,
her skin beginning to blue,
her lips tinged with purple,

the way she keeps kicking and kicking
and pulls with one arm,
shoots up into air with her fist raised,
hangs on like that to what's left.

Geometry Problem

I pass the sunset, squared
inside the gleaming steel side
of a south bound truck. Encapsulated,
I have passed to the other side—heaven
is motion, what babies know
drooling through whole states.

Blessèd am I, when neither
here nor there. What I can't
touch won't hurt me.

And what do these buzzards
in their slow circles know,
these topless isosceles
triangles? I have forgotten
the Pythagorean theorem.
Their slight V's
are the devil's eyebrows.

Pea brains! Who are you
to know something I don't, aloft
beneath a lost hypotenuse?

Carry on. Carrion. Ohio
flies by me, a shuffle
of old postcards, and the land
flattens into Indiana where gas
is cheap and you pump first.

At each stop, truckers munching
Snickers get bigger. Six and a half
feet from felt hats
to snakeskin toes, giant
buckles prop up their plaid
stomachs. I want to ride
with them forever.

The low sun thins into winter.
I have a mother at the end
of this road, she's stirring pea soup
as dusk thickens around her house

and my father draws each blind
to close each square of darkness,
crooks a finger through the wooden
ring at the tip of each string,
pulls a blank on his own reflection.

Arsenal Poetica

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit.

—Archibald MacLeish

My poems will not wash the dishes or whisper
in the sweet voice of your mother. They won't
have your father's eyes or his exquisitely chiseled

brain. They won't hold you long enough. They'll
never buy you a Benetton sweater. Looking to pull
things around you to keep out the cold?

They're not accessories or blank checks.
By the way, they might hide your clothes
while we're doing it. I can't control them—

Poltergeists. Brats. One will kiss you, deeply,
teeth and all, as if to swallow you in parts,
while another punches you in the stomach. I know,

you want them in your palms, still, willing as tits.
Palpable and bouncing. Mute. Globed. All that. Look,
it's not a question of answers. I was never good

at Algebra. They don't make you satisfied
or full. They sting you with loose pieces
of yourself. They're not that pretty.

They don't always do their chores.
Their harmonies are strange. They don't
look like you. They don't look like you.

I put them on like silk, like snow boots.
They're what I've got.

All the Doomed Swimmers

The weekend he arrived, bees
swarmed at my window, flattened
their wings like a glistening
skin and slid through a gap
in the screen to get at us.

When ten of them circled the kitchen
we started swinging. The fastest
headed for the track lights and fried.
I still find their scorched carcasses.

All the clocks in my house are wrong—
flat hands, flat faces,
the little bastards tick like accidents.

Outside now, Kamikaze snowflakes
dive and melt into thawed ground,
cloud my vision. Icicles drip
and lengthen. Another sigh.
Another towel stiffens in the hamper.

It was hot when we would not
touch. We danced
in dark crowds, bumped up
against strangers. Oblong sweat drops
sledded down my body.

Somewhere along the sizzling river
we kissed, then our tongues became
fish, each of us willess, unraveling
into one cluttered river—with its
paddlewheels and clowns and downed
stars, its Styrofoam and carp, its
barges and rust and wet blues.

Now everything swims, like the protein
clouds that shoot through my lover's
iris, the stars in his paintings with
blurred tails; they blink, swim
out of frame, and I
ache like the spaces of a constellation
to be filled in.

Dead Languages

I have memories, you know.
I'm not a person with a helium
balloon for a head.

I rode my bike home
from swimming practice
and ate watermelon.

I ate the melon on the stoop,
sliced it into smiles and spit
the seeds into the grass.

At practice I traveled
between atmospheres
with the rotation of my head.

Fast crawl. My face and lips
loving the supple border
of air and water,

my left ear turning
in and out of the loud
silence of submersion.

I can't remember anything else.
I've always pictured the week
as a warped circle of linked

asymmetrical spaces, the name
for each day printed in a space
like a state on a map.

Each day is a slightly different
color, but all of the colors drab.

The Day They Drowned the Baby Bird

was thick summer.
Chiggers in the grass
make bumps on your leg
like anthills
inside your skin
and they live there.

The plum tree dripped
its purple bubbles, erupting
in sun until they looked
just like my brother's
leaky eyes when poison ivy
took over his face and made him
blind for three days.

Something fell that wasn't a plum.
My sister picked it up. Baby birds
don't look like birds, they look
like creepy babies, all membrane
and bubble-shut eyes, rolling
and rolling their heads because
they don't know yet they're meant

to fly, they want their whole
world touching them again.
"You touched it, now the mother
won't feed it." My mother sentenced
the baby to drown in a yellow
plastic tub she washed her bras in.
"Get it over with
she'll peck its eyes out."

My sister knelt in the grass and held
the baby's chest between her thumb
and index finger, dipped and dipped
but each time she brought it up
it rolled its head. My mother
watched from the kitchen window,
pounding dough on a bread board.

I circled the yard and scratched
my bites until they bled. My mother
is a bird-lover. Before she had us
she was a pilot. She'd like to fly now
but we keep her here, digging
in the ground and pulling
chickens apart for our dinner.

Most of the time I climb
trees. The mimosa is smooth.
I know its whole body like a baby
knows its mom's. The oaks are rough
and scratchy as a man's face.
There's no end to how high
I could go in them.

Once the fire trucks came
with a ladder to get me down.
I'll never fall, but if I do
no one's going to touch me.

Dream Father (Cloud Father)

“What’s down the toilet?” I asked
flushing five times, transfixed
by the magical swirl.

“Never Never Land,”
he answered. “Stop
wasting water.”

We flew to Urbana
on a DC3—
a winged hippopotamus
bumping toward extinction
through the light and dark cauliflower
thunder clouds.

“Is that a dirty book?”
I said at the airport.

“No. They put this picture on it
so that people will buy it.”

“Well, what’s the book about?”

“I don’t know.
I bought it for the picture.”

I may have made that story up
the way I make him up now,
the way I dream him
into foolishness—the father who finally wants me—
he doesn’t know better

so I must
kiss his forehead,
as he did mine when
I was a child. His dream skin
is like old cheese.

And when he speaks
his blither of syllables
I put my arms around him
and he starts to form words,
to tell me
what he wants from me,

then I remember
I am dreaming him,

that when we speak on the phone—
his voice rumbling, fixed
inside the storm's eye of logic—

he will forget
the names of my friends,
my poems, the little
tucked tail of my accomplishments

but he'll remember
the delicate topography of clouds
the storms they give birth to

altostratus
cumulonimbus
cirrostratus nebulosus

The Pedal-Duck Toy

In sleep I walk
along a big street in a small town
where I walked one night with my mother.
A starving wind inhabits the darkness.
It rips limbs from trees
to knock at every door
in search of the rest of itself.

I may have been eleven
but to the passing cars
I was another woman like her.
“What are they honking at?”
Her answer was a soft laugh
and I thought
she is no longer my mother.

Something’s following me.
The first time I turn
there are three metal rings like giant
washers skidding in the wind. A gust
rights one of them and rolls it, a silvery
sliver, into the maw
of darkening street.

The second time I turn for a person
but see a three-wheeled
plastic pedal-toy
shaped like a duck.
The child that was riding in it
blew into the sky, or there was
never a child inside

and the pedal-duck rolls empty behind me
duck-face stuck in a soundless laugh
as the gaunt wind hungers along the pavement.

What She Taught Me

My mother taught me to take back what was rotten, stale, or tasteless and to expect an apology along with a refund. She taught me to walk in boy's shoes, to ride a bike with a bar, to smirk back at smirkers, to kick anyone who snickered. She taught me to play ball, taught me to hit, to drive from the hips and swing, then lay down the bat like a daffodil. She taught me to run, to throw like a boy. She taught me to tell everyone to go to hell. She told me to go to hell. She taught me to drive when I was nine. She taught me to serve the men first. With her back to me, she taught me to adore my brothers, to mirror my sister, to pity the girl who stalked my sister in hallways to call her *Jew*. She taught the whole town to compost, how to vote, to abort their unwanted young. She taught me to pull weeds at the root. She taught me not to say shit at the table. She taught me to say shit. She taught me songs. She taught me I couldn't sing. She taught me to love my body. She taught me I was loved for my body. She taught me to fold the napkin once and place the fork on it, to dampen the dust mop, to let the pan sit in cold water, to pull the skin off a chicken, to carry spiders outside, alive, to hang suet, scatter corn on the stoop for titmice, chickadees, wrens, to laugh at the gathering of crashers—fat squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits. To love the muted beauty of the female cardinal in bright sunlight.

Shopping at Ross Dress for Less

In for the quick kill.
I'll get this over with and be clothed
and fool people.
A sound cuts into my purpose, a diphthong
twists and rises from a child.

Or it's a Siamese cat
in the body of a child
leaning from a shopping cart.
Hiiiiiee? Hiiiiiee?

She unfolds the rolls of her arm
toward the troupes of ruffled dresses, clasps
and unclasps her slow fingers
Hiiiiiee?

The headless dresses do not answer.
The puffed sleeves do not wave back.
Close, I hear the mother speaking,
Cállate, sientate.

So it's a Spanish word, *hay—there is—*
But it's a question, *Is there? Is there?*
¿Aaaaiiee? ¿Aaaaiiee? ¿Aaaaiiee?
Is there what?

Is there a Santa Claus?
Is there a God?
Is there a difference between people and clothes?
Is there anything else to say?
Is there? Is there? Is there?
¿Aaaaiiee? ¿Aaaaiiee?

The syllable lifts and hangs
among the empty dresses
suspended from their metal question marks.

Intersection

I'm heading towards a school north
of Pittsburgh and above me stoplights
swing in wind, strung across a highway
that links together three dead mill towns.

*

Years ago, a passenger, I watched stoplights
bounce from their thick black cords, as wind
reached in to us through rolled down windows.
That's always an oddly lonely sight, I said.
Peculiar to America, said my friend.
They don't hang lights like that anywhere else.

I felt us both suspended then. He
was peculiar to America. I thought
that he was lonely no matter where he went
and so was I. That each of us moved
and stopped in the places we stopped and
moved inside some precarious
belief in how we were supposed to live.

And then the light changed. And then
he went back to Tel Aviv, in a year
when the movement toward peace
in his region felt possible and huge.

*

The light tips bottoms up inside its yellow
casement, the red lit shiny as a city I can't
reach and I forget where I'm going
or what it is I'm meant to do there, while
above me the rules themselves destabilize.

Myself in the Mirror

We dance to a drum
barefoot on a wood floor
before a wall of mirror.
I won't acknowledge my own
reflection, but find a big boned
body to hide behind. Eyes right
I match the teacher's back.

I'm her slow-twin, her lag
shadow. My movements and hers
merge fast. I could be watching my own
posterior mirrored, that same
self who turns away from herself.

The drum pumps
her blood and mine; those are my
snaky arms, my sassy snap
of neck, my slow
butt roll, my head yes
yessing. Galvanized
I step right, ready
to face my face.

A grim woman in hostile plié
stares me down, levels me
with each plane of her face.
Her bumpy knees butt towards me
like a pair of bulldogs.
Her feet are worse—blind piglets—
which way are they crawling?

The drum summons movement. I scowl
right back. I don't know her.

But I must say I love
her collarbone, so fierce
and sharp between her shoulders,
and now her hips drive a circle
to stake out their space
and they know just
where they're going
and just how fast.

The knees and the piglet feet
start to do their jobs, and her arms
become snakes and her hands
turn to birds and there's harmony
among the creatures. The woman
in the mirror's good at this.

You all . . .
Smile! yells the teacher
but we
already are.

Oedipal Poem One

I lost my virginity the year
you were born, a weight
I was looking to shake
off, as if it were the last
anchor of childhood.

Your fingers trace a line
across my inner thigh.
From this point up, you say,
You're off-the-charts sensitive.
I take in breath

as one who's swum too long
under water. I have waited
to be the ground
for just such a survey.

My first lover was dark
like the shadow of a cloud
on water. I wanted that sharp
border between our skins

when he lay down on me
in a borrowed car. I hardly
bled. Made no sound. Fell
out of consciousness beneath

the heft of him
and dreamt us skidding
off a narrow bridge, pitching
toward the dark river.

Maybe that same night your father
rolled himself like water
around your mother, the way you
wrap me now inside the skin
and tendons and bone of you.

Maybe he pressed his face to her
stretched abdomen to feel
the coiled weight of you, said
Love, Love, his tongue claiming
salt from her flesh, while you

kicked, even then,
against the swell of his voice,
while you kicked
against the looming hull of his body

and swam toward us from your dark lake.

Lower Amazon

In this hemisphere the rivers
run backwards and clouds
appear solid as mountains.

In a flat boat cut from one
log, we paddle upstream, hips
test the lean of our dugout—
a fast move could heave us
into brown water, eighty feet
deep and eroding a whole
continent.

In this hemisphere we breakfast
on corn juice and papaya,
lunch on piranha. Storms travel
counter clockwise, lakes and streams
are black, our skin no longer
white. I am turning

to a girl again. Your back
in front of me flushes with sun,
skin ripples as you paddle
like petals of bougainvillea
(which are not
petals but leaves).

Downstream a boy travels past us,
waves with an inverted hand,
eyes black like yours,
boat laden with pendants
strung from seed and the teeth
of piranha.

In this hemisphere the river
is a roadway, houses wallless
and on stilts, the young
already old, the people sweeter
 than papaya.

Dolphin arc above water, pink
and smooth as human babies. In this
jungle they say a woman who touches
the pink dolphin will return to her
 village pregnant.

It is December. We will return
to telephones and snow. If I could return
to early womanhood, I might
 give birth to you.

In this hemisphere you lay
my pink body on mud, four degrees
 from the equator

where squirrel monkeys travel the canopy
above us, sloths hang upside
down, take a whole day
to descend, defecate, and bury
 their waste in earth.

In airports we will stand
through customs, stand again
on our respective customs
where I am inland in December
 between rivers iced white

and you are a child with black eyes
who travels away from me and waves.

Blizzard

January stamps its wet boot on
my mood. I miss the Pacific—furious,
submissive, the way it leaps

and slides down beneath an even sky;
the sun, exquisite and deadly on
my skin; the blue stupor of pools.

For ninety-six hours, snow has fallen
on the swollen rivers, the steep,
imprisoning hills. My car's stuck

in the Goodwill lot. *I give*. I will
them not to tow it—my frozen shoe,
my jammed skate—then stumble home

along the claustrophobic canyon of a
pounded path, closed off from dark
hollows of footprints in deep snow.

I'll call it ice that keeps you away
tonight, but it's elements harder to trace.
We've stepped into hollows, black holes

in snow. Like it or not, heat rises.
When you were here, I cooked
inside my skin, my hands no longer

my own, towed, ownership revoked;
they tossed red sauce on my pants,
shattered glass. I don't know whom

they were feeding. My index finger
grins where I sliced the top knuckle.
A blue bruise shaped like a killer whale

swims along the top of my thumbnail. I
breathed a wish, now see how it descends:
a calm night's sleep—pristinely alone

under a down quilt, snow falling
on the roof and ground and fire
escape; the space to move—in silence

from room to room, the long hours
opening around me like vowels.

The Modulations of My Mother's Body

Her face is a sun I'm doomed
to orbit, her body a landscape I begin
to claim: the neck's V-shaped ingress,
its pillars of veins, the collarbone
a steep embankment, the throne
of shoulders, the slack folds gathering
and gathering along the arms
like sand drifts, the flattening
breasts, the abdomen's plateau, the soft
slope of buttocks, the gravelslide
of white thighs, the knees
manyfolded as roses, the veins
like raised roots, the feet blooming
blue, the stubby pebble toes,
the body that is ours,
the body that contains me,
that hovers, angelic
at my edges.



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