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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



WHAT
THE
BODY
KNOWS

POEMS BY ALISON TOWNSEND

ALISON TOWNSEND is the author of *The Blue Dress* (White Pine 2003). Her poems and essays have appeared in *Calyx*, *Crazyhorse*, *Kalliope*, *New Letters*, *Nimrod*, *The North American Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Rattle*, *The Southern Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *The Women's Review of Books*, and many other journals. Her work has also been frequently anthologized, most recently in *Are You Experienced?: Baby Boom Poets at Midlife*, *A Fierce Brightness: Twenty-five Years of Women's Poetry*, *Fruitflesh: Seeds of Inspiration for Women Who Write*, *The Greatness of Girls: Famous Women Talk About Growing Up*, *Women Runners: Stories of Transformation*, *Boomer Girls: Poems by Women of the Baby Boom Generation*, and *Claiming the Spirit Within: A Sourcebook of Women's Poetry*. Her awards include the first place Sue Sanibel Elkind prize from *Kalliope* in 1999, and residencies at Norcroft, Soapstone, Hedgebrook, and Dorland Mountain Colony. She teaches English, creative writing, and women's studies at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, as well as *In Our Own Voices*, a private writing workshop for women. She lives in the farm country outside Madison, Wisconsin with her husband.

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WHAT THE BODY KNOWS

Poems by
ALISON TOWNSEND



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For Tom

“Our best songs are body songs.”
—Stanley Kunitz

Mud Poem

It was the coolness
that drew me,
one hot summer evening
when, aged seven
and a half, I
knelt down
under the uplifted
arms of the maple
and dug a bowl
in the earth
with a spoon
from the kitchen.

It was the heat
that pushed me down,
like a young animal
searching for solace—
and a fascination
with texture—water
from the green
hose spurting
into the soup
of mud.

Mixing and kneading,
I felt the earth
rise and move
beneath my fingers,
slippery and elastic
as a loaf of black
bread in the making.
It was the first time
I think I saw
it was a live thing,

a creature like myself
that breathed,
foaming and bubbling
at my wrists until
just stirring the darkness
was not enough.

It was then that I plunged,
dipping my arms in
past the elbow and humming,
coating my skin
with a sheen of brown
that cooled the fever
of play, reflecting
me back to myself
so that I threw
off my clothes
and began painting
my body, every
inch of me covered
in the guise
of the forest—
my head lathered,
my limbs dripping,
my torso plastered
and unrecognizable
with a cast
of fragrant mud.

With twigs in my hair
and a cape of vines
swirling behind me,
I danced
on the bare ground
under the maple.
I sang over my brew
till my head swam

and my blood tingled
and dizzyed, I lay
down, my cheek
pillowed by that
which clothed me.

And when my mother
saw me and cried out,
alarmed by my passion,
I washed it off.
I acquiesced, obedient
beneath the hose she held,
watching while the brown
rivulets turned to silver
before disappearing
in the ground.
I submitted to soap
and the scent
of Cashmere Bouquet.
But that night
as I slept, my
wet braids
tucked like tails
in the wings of my shoulders,
it was mud I remembered,
and the pleasure of black earth.
That moment of pure light
when I was the land,
feeling its skin
as a part of my body,
loving it,
knowing my home.

Ring-O-Levio

Muggy summer evenings between supper and bed,
Bellewood Avenue hums with hordes of bored kids
waiting for darkness like something important,
our hands and faces sticky with ice cream
from the Good Humor Man or Bungalow Bar,
after which girls chant, *Bungalow Bar tastes like tar!*
The more you eat it, the sicker you are! laughing so hard
the Popsicles and Eskimo Pies rise back up in our throats.
The boys chuck jackknives, fart with their armpits,
dart in front of cars until we all begin to crackle and burn
with excitement, spitting sparks like a line of gunpowder dots

in a cap gun, and Bobby Michelle
—who greases his hair back like Ice in *West Side Story*—
and the Irish kid from the next street over
—who I know by his sweaty baseball jersey smell—
choose teams: *You with the braids, you're on my side.*

Everything happens fast. The night sky glows
like the starry backdrop behind the school stage.
My team confetties through the neighborhood.
Kathy and I squish into her too-obvious storm cellar
and are dragged back screaming as prisoners
to her brother's Davy Crockett fort
where Jay Dickey, the biggest bully on the block
but too fat to run fast, guards us like stolen gold.
Only someone from your own team can free you.
Or free me, as I huddle with Kathy
in the musty dark, snapping Blackjack gum
and waiting to be rescued

by the Irish kid, as it turns out,
who swoops down past the guard, gets
both feet into the den, and shouts *Ring-o-levio!*
Ring-o-levio! grabbing my hand so hard I wince

at how everything since seems the same process
of capture and release, the little doors
of the heart opening and closing
as abruptly as those of the fort
that is a cave that is childhood

that is the Irish kid telling me, *You run good,*
for a girl. I almost say *well* but don't.
And already it is beginning,
though I am ten and he is twelve
and we do not know enough to touch;
we do not know enough to do anything
but crouch there together
in the prickly protection
of the blackberry bramble,
the calls of *Caught! Caught! Caught!*
echoing behind like the first,
small sounds of August rain sifting
through the branches around us.

With No Words to Name This

I do not think my father meant wrong,
those first raw weeks after my mother's death,
when he took me, weeping,
into their bed, and held me,
shaking, while the whole house slept,
wrapped in its navy blue blankets
of grief and exhaustion.

I think he meant well,
meant to soothe the way
my mother had, her soft, powder-
scented body curving around me
when I was sick or scared.
I cannot remember
if he pressed his face
to my flat chest,
where the nipples floated,
hard as unripe grapes.

Or if he touched me
in that cleft of darkness,
my small black sea heaving
against the arch of pubic bone.
I do not even know if he held me
against his own hardness,
or if he only held me,
and what I almost remember
is a story I have invented
to explain away a dream,
my body a knot of wet rope
only a mother's hands
could untangle.

Supplies

for Shirley Townsend

Because I believed my stepmother hated me,
because I'd sat alone in the school auditorium
the day all the sixth grade mothers came
and watched a film called *Growing Up and Liking It*
with their girls, I didn't tell her anything
when *It* arrived for the first time,
but went straight from the bus to my room
and sat with my legs clenched
around the institutional-sized Kotex
the school nurse had safety-pinned
to my stained Carter's panties.

I assume you have supplies? she'd said,
yanking up the panties so hard it hurt.
I didn't, but lied, knowing it wasn't
a question by the way she avoided my eyes,
hoping I'd find an answer in the dog-eared
booklet with anatomical drawings,
pictures of pretty girls
with perfectly-combed hair
going swimming or riding,
and cheery captions urging me to
Remember, you can do all the things you usually do!

I had no supplies.
No quilted pink box like the one
my friend Caroline showed me,
tucked in a drawer with her mother's brassieres,
the little pads stacked, neat and white
as piles of linen, tampons in crackling paper,
(*for when I'm older*, she whispered,
touching them with a reverent hand)
and the stretchy, lace-trimmed belts
in different colors like ads I had seen
in *Tiger Beat* for Frederick's of Hollywood.

I'd done my reading, but I wasn't prepared.
And so I sat in my room, aching, while the bright
arterial red turned a deep rust that smelled
strange and smoky, alive and dead
at the same time, praying it would end.
But it kept flowing, no matter what I did,
until I went to her, desperation
winning out over fear.

And though those years together
were mostly about what didn't work,
I cannot forget the plain white belt
she took from her dresser and slid
around my hips, adjusting a clean napkin
until it fit me exactly right,
and how she kissed me then, hard
in the middle of the forehead,
and explained how to soak
blood stains out in cold water.

What the Body Knows

I was thirteen the December my stepbrother
Michael came home from boarding school
and decided he liked me more than before
(enough to experiment with at least), my body
transformed from knock-knees to lure. He
was all muscle and brain that holiday season,
stalking the house in tight black jeans,
quoting Sartre and Camus, playing Bob Dylan,
and writing poems about death,
“the dark-winged avenger.”

Barely past Nancy Drew, hooked on novels
with titles like *Wildfire at Midnight*,
I'd never seen anyone so slick, and the boys
I dreamed over at North Salem High School
dissolved to nothing fast—
even Peter Krinitsky, whose miniature
face I'd scissored from a blurry
soccer picture in the weekly *Bengal*
and hidden inside an imitation gold locket
whose chain left a green ring on my neck.

Crooning along with Rolling Stones songs,
giving each number emphasis with his hips,
Michael was as bad as Mick,
what we'd later call *wicked*—
though we didn't have that word yet.
I wondered how I could have ever thought
making JV cheerleading would be it,
the letters NS emblazoned on my chest
while I did cartwheels and the Tigers
lost another game to Peekskill or Pawling,
other little towns from nowhere like ours.

Michael knew about Baudelaire
and Kerouac and how to roll a joint.
I still faked inhaling cigarettes and kept
a pink gingham-covered diary with a red felt heart
on the front, slit with a place for the pen I used
to praise Joe D'Entroni, who'd played in the band
they had for us the last night at 4-H camp
and kissed me afterwards, though I'd kept my teeth
clenched tightly in case he got fresh.

I might have even once believed
this was how girls got pregnant
and had to leave town, but whatever I believed
went out the window when Michael snake-
danced through the house, chugged milk
straight from the bottle, said, "Come here,
little Sis." "I'm not your Sis," I said,

but went anyway, my muscles
bent to his in a way
that made me think maybe I loved
this person I hated, this brother
who wasn't a brother, this boy-man
who pushed me up against the rose-patterned
wallpaper and ground into me with hips

that were so eager I would like to say
there was something good about it,
that our bodies spoke kindly to one another,
doing what the body knows to do, in the brief
moment before we felt my stepmother's
hands on our shoulders, pulling us apart—
back into the world where pain
opened its petals in time-lapse,
like a red flower pressed for years
inside the family Bible.

Smoke

I knew about your reputation
before I knew you, heard how you'd stagger-
drunk off your ass at a keg party-
into a car with the boy's basketball team
and go down on every one. I'd seen them
dump you off afterwards, shoving you
out the door with empty Budweiser bottles
and ash trays of Marlboro butts.

But I needed to know you
and you knew to reach for me,
and the night I stepped forward
when you stumbled and fell from the car
became the two of us laughing each day
over cigarettes in the girl's room
before the bell sent us running-
you to Voc Tech Cosmetology,
me to Honors French.

You sewed me an Indian print dress
drenched with sandalwood and patchouli.
We skipped out of school, hitch-hiked,
ripped off mirror dresses and albums,
and danced together in the bathroom
at the Om coffee house, the faint blue smoke
of our first joints swirling around us like silk.

I thought we told one another everything.

But what I remember now
is how you begged me to sleep over,
even on school nights.
And how we lay beside one another
in your French Provincial bed,
listening to your father

walk back and forth outside your door.
I feel better when you're here, you said once,
sinking into sleep like a child
while I stared at your collection
of "Dolls from Around the World"
and they stared back at me

the way they must have stared at him
when he came into your room
and put those hands that sliced
through sides of beef each day
upon you and made you do it.
Until you got it right. Until
it was what you knew how to do best.
Until there was no going back
from the boys in the car
or your job as a call girl in Denver.

And God forgive me, Amanda.
I never even tried to phone
or meet you for a drink
the way we used to meet
for cigarettes in the girl's room,
my hand on your cheek,
all the things we never said
laid out on the table between us,
smoke still rising
through the bright blond
garden of your hair.

High School Boyfriends

Because they were willing to like me a little,
because they were willing to drape the heavy
animal warmth of their arms over my shoulders,
or hold me tight during slow dances
when the lights went down in the gym,
because they were willing
to claim me, like a new world,
or a wilderness waiting,
green beyond the waves, I

let them do whatever they wanted,
my breasts rubbed raw
under the flint
of their fingers,
my hand cramped
from jerking off the cock
of Lee, Randy, John, Richard, David, Peter, Jim,
each one the same
hard, groping boy-shape
that bruised my lips
in back seat, field, or at
forbidden forest camp-outs,
then left me lonely, my tired fingers sticky
with the salt-wet slick of their come.

I didn't know any better,
I say to myself now.
I didn't even know to say no
and push their hands away.
But the body doesn't lie.
The body remembers forever.
And sometimes the ghosts
of boys' hands still smolder inside me,
a fire gone underground
where something green once grew.

Snow Plant

In the middle of the night,
at the end of the year,
when worry wakes and grips me,
rigid as the fist of winter
slamming, cold against the bed,
I reach out and touch you.

I reach out to touch you
as you curl, wrapped in your own
sleep, and though I am often
angry, more often uncertain,
my hand fits around the curve
your hip makes as if fired there,
a handle placed on a cup
by an accurate potter,
the cup's rim meeting
exactly with my lips.

Touching your skin,
I can feel the heat rising
in small waves that pulse
and shimmer like light
on a hot day. I can guess
at the story that your penis
is dreaming, drifting like an eel
in a forest of sea grass,
while the salt currents wash you,
whispering of their source.

Lying beside you,
feeling your simple bodily warmth
soak through my cells like an infusion
of slow fire, I understand at last
how it is that you bind me
to this world,
steady as a hemp rope
mooring a rowboat at high tide.

And how you release me,
the knowledge of your sex
as you sleep there beside me
as comforting, as startling still
as the first time I ever
saw a snow plant push
through the floor of the forest—
stout, fleshy, entirely bright red—
aware only of the sun's heat,
coaxing snow to melt.

It is never winter in your bed.

The Habit of Its Fit

Love is made up of a great many things
and I am not clever enough to explain
them. But I know that it is also habit.

—Jean Renoir

Ever since I took off my wedding ring
something floats around my finger
like the gravitational field of a new planet,
or an invisible cushion of air
memory makes room for despite me.

My other fingers splay slightly aside,
still accommodating the shape of the wide
silver band engraved with leaves
that are half sea and half forest.
Absence becomes presence,

insistent as the thing itself,
and I arrange my life around emptiness,
the way I once arranged it around
yours, struggling to fit even
when the fit cinched me, like a maple I saw,

girdled by an iron ring, but still growing.
One of my friends says, *Buy yourself a new ring,*
one of your own. Another promises a “friendship band”
with my birthstone, like those we traded as girls.
But I think it takes the body a long time

to forget sixteen years with another,
to learn solitude—and the shape the soul
assumes alone, lying down in bed on spring nights
in a white cotton nightgown like a girl
who has never been touched by a man,

but with the knowledge of a woman intent
on loneliness—that ghost-ring
spiraling around my finger like bands
of dust and light, the habit of its fit
reminding me how stubbornly wedded I am.

No More Self-Help

Today I put them away,
all those self-help books about relationships
I've been reading the last six months:
Intimate Partners, Conscious Loving,
Keeping the Love You Find, Love is Never Enough.
Let's face it, nothing is ever enough.
And when you're grown up nothing comes for free.
But the romance is over, and I'm moving them
to the bottom shelf where they belong,
then standing at the door of this house
where I live alone by the lake
and calling her back home—
that skinny girl with scraped knees
and braids down to her waist,
the one who believed she was magic,
the one who believed
she was a black horse with wings.

I am calling back
the one who knows
how to walk in the woods
without making a sound,
a licorice bull's eye melting
in the sweet heat of her mouth.
I am inviting back the one
who has been away, rapping my knuckles
against my chest and calling out to her,
the way a psychic calls her soul
back to her body, reeling her in
like a silver fish on a line.

I am asking her to return,
that woman who lived alone
for a month in the Palomar Mountains,
no electricity, a hand pump,

and a rattlesnake vibrating each morning
beneath the cabin steps.

I am requesting that she teach me
to remember how to swim,
rising like a sea otter
through each salty Pacific crest.
And that she remind me I once skied
over twenty miles in one day
at nearly ten thousand feet,
the thin air burning, heady
as mountain light in my lungs.

Slick and sassy and smart
as a whip of peeled willow,
she dives and resurfaces
like a tadpole in the waters of the self.
She instructs me in the practice
of Zen breathing with my cat,
And she sits at my kitchen table,
eating an English muffin with the muse.

Distance runner, wagon train scout,
bear-girl and muddy tomboy
who also loves to play house,
she is on her way back.
She is out there, running toward me
as she always does, pell-mell, helter-
skelter, tangled braids flying
like ropes in the wind,
her gaze fixed steadily
on the blue curve ahead.

I call her home to me.
I call her back
to the immutable laws
and the truth of the body.
I call her home.

And she comes—
the one who has never
really been away,
the one who is always with me,
even when I think I am alone.

Ordering Clothes From Victoria's Secret

No matter what I do,
I'll never look like these women.
No matter how many miles I run,
or how much yogurt I eat,
I'll never pour my body into its skin
the way these women are poured
into sun-bronzed breast and thigh,
their waists slender as my grandmother's
before she was married.

Yet I order, choosing the "classic
cotton lycra leggings" in purple
because my legs are stronger now
than they were when I was twenty;
the "provocative, body-seamed black dress
with the sweetheart neckline"
because the hollow in my throat
my mother swore signifies beauty
has deepened over time;
and the "romantic floral knit dress
which buttons, from its scooped neck
through a fitted bodice, to the hem
of its midcalf length skirt,"
because the style is more alluring
than all the minis in the world.

I order
because it is my forty-fifth spring
and good to run in purple leggings,
my 36-A breasts riding high;
because the face that personal history
is inscribing becomes more my own each day;
because I wear the same size
I did at eighteen, my smile as wide
and bright as the day I got my braces off;

and because I remember the swath of auburn
that burned beneath the white
at my grandmother's nape,
like a hidden river
or a bright fire,
after ten children and sixty years,
when my grandfather
stood behind her at her dressing table
and pulled the tortoise shell pins
one by one, softly from her hair.

In The Absence of Ocean

In the absence of ocean
I wash myself in the salt of your body,
whether arching up and up to meet you
as you ride above me, intent as a swimmer
cresting a wave, or lowering myself
upon your surge and swell, as open
to possibility as the sea cave
I discovered and swam in as a child.

It is the most ancient of movements,
this rising, breaking, and falling
that moves through us like water, simple
as our bodies which are so largely salt.
But I had not thought to know it again,
the small boat of my life broken up,
broken into, everything familiar
smashed to pieces against the rocks.

It was all wind-chop and ice-swirl
and I was barely surviving, treading
the fathomless dark, fighting the currents,
forgetting the lesson of surrender undulating
in the lift and sway of kelp.

Then you were there and recalled
something of the ocean inside me
as I recalled something of the ocean
in you—how the salt helps heal us
even as it stings, tears welling
unexpectedly in my eyes
as your lashes quiver
and your breath comes quickly
in short, shallow gasps
that are somehow mine too

as we move together
like wind upon water,
like sea grass or dolphins,
or the divine surge
and current of swell
blessing us, making us whole.

If I Called You River

(for Tom)

If I called you river and straddled
the silky, silver muscles of your passing.

If you called me river and pulled me to you, swimming
in the silky, silver pull of my legs.

If I wove myself around you, sweet
and sinuous as water itself, as the call
of the redwing floating toward you now from the cat-tails.

If you slid beside me, sleek and playful
as the otter careening down his muddy ride
in one long breath before he caresses the water.

If I caressed you back, reflecting sunlight,
reflecting wingspan of hovering red-tailed hawk,
reflecting the tenderness with which light
is received always by water.

If you were water entering water.

If we flowed that way for a long time,
distinct but inseparable, the glinting
flecks of silica from your sediments mixing
with the sun-sparked mica of mine.

If the spring rains came, pushing us hard and fast,
from our home in the mountains.

If I had known high water and times of flood,
the edge of me lapping, leaving a birth-scar
along a line of rain-drenched trees.

If you had known those times too,
your calm surface churned into a wall
of water pulled, root to stem, stem to leaf,
leaf to air where it balances for a moment,
quivers, and falling, begins again.

If I was a river you had never seen
but had dreamed of forever.

If you were a river I could taste in my sleep.

If, even in winter we kept moving together,
meeting in secret beneath our glassy quilt.

If everything is season and snowmelt.

If everything is release and return,
the peppered foam of frog spawn
and the salmon's muscular
silver thrust.

If I called you river.

If you called me river.

If the river knew anything more
than this sweet braiding and undoing of water,
that feeds everything
and yearns for everything and is,
in its rushing, everything the river can know.

If the river knew.

If river were ever possible to contain.

If the heart were, and the blood, and the body,
this human urge to name things
by things other than what they are.

I name you river.
I name myself river.
I name what we are together river
carving a channel between the grassy banks,
leading us

to the open mouth,
the salty swallow,
the deep, green voice of the sea
that cries out so far within us
I cannot tell if it is you who cries out or me.



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by Alison Townsend

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