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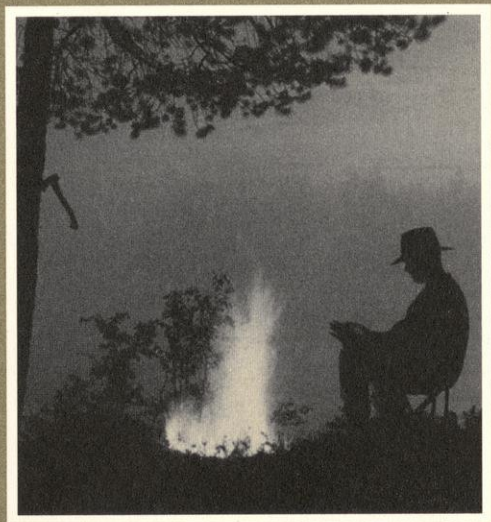
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Bone Flute and Other Poems

Poetry by R. Virgil Ellis

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

Bone Flute

And Other Poems

by
R. Virgil Ellis



PARALLEL PRESS 2007

Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries
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Madison, Wisconsin 53706
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ISBN: 1–893311–88–0

I wish to acknowledge the publications in which these poems previously appeared:

“Porchlight,” *The Blue Train* (Woodhenge Press, 1990); “Daughter Flying,” *Mississippi Review Web*; “A Formula,” *Eleven Wisconsin Poets and The Blue Train*; “The Strange Man,” *2River View*; “Camp Song,” *Cream City Review*; “Performers,” *The Blue Train*; “Bedroom,” *The Blue Train*; “Insufficient Light,” *Border Crossings, Minnesota Voices Project Reader* (New Rivers Press, 1984) and *The Blue Train*; “After Bedtime,” *The Blue Train*; “At Ella’s,” *Sow’s Ear* and *The Blue Train*; “Front Door Open,” *Transactions*; “Sun High, Sun Low,” *Wisconsin Poets’ Calendar: 1990*; “The Landlord Splits Wood,” *The Lucid Stone*; “Chain-Sawing,” *Black Buzzard Review*; “Fly Fisherfolk,” *Poets On: Complaints*; “Raccoon,” *The Sucarnochee Review* and *The Blue Train*; “Alas, Poor Buick,” *The Monmouth Review, Poetry: Sight And Insight* (Random House, 1982) and *The Blue Train*; “Fred Kromer,” *Border Crossings, Minnesota Voices Project Reader*, and *The Blue Train*; “The Dive,” *New Jersey Poetry Journal* and *The Blue Train*; “No Dial Tone,” *Wisconsin Academy Review*; “Sand-Blasting,” *New Jersey Poetry Journal* and *The Blue Train*; “Hugging Lucy,” *New Jersey Poetry Journal* and *The Blue Train*; “Turning the Amaryllis,” *Wisconsin Academy Review*; “Firefly Time,” *Wisconsin Academy Review*; “Flying with Two Bills,” *Stafford’s Road: An Anthology of Poems for William Stafford* (Adrienne Lec Press, 1991); “Going into the Dark,” *Wildfire*; “The Spider,” *Onionhead*; “Bone Flute,” *Love, Anti-Love* (Lonesome Traveller Publishing, Madison, Wisconsin, 1996).

FIRST EDITION

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Dedicated to my father, Virgil Ellis

Porchlight

Curve, eaves, into powder.
Swarm, flakes, biting our cheeks.
Prance, long shadows, as we kick
through drifts to the hollow tree
where we laugh to kiss with cold lips.
Burn, moments, like the yard
full of lights heaped by the wind.

Daughter Flying

Riding on the bench of my forearm
on that walk in the park
your eyes got a little distant
listening to the big people talk
like the long curving path or the sameness
of the trees breaking up sunlight.

Bouncing you a bit would get that smile
but you were ready for more.
When I lifted you with your ribs
firm between my hands we showed
the childless couple a marvel.
Up you went, weightless, laughing,
higher each time, though I saw their
look bordering on alarm.

What was I trying to prove anyway?
What if I slipped and you lay there broken?
Wasn't your fear part of your delight?
Do you remember soaring out of my hands?

A Formula

Touch a milky fire opal.
Hold it up to your eye and see
tonight's full moon
in that fire-frosted stone
you turn between
thumb and forefinger,
like the snowballs
the children roll.

Now step through that glass
and watch them scrape snow
from blackened grass,
to make walls crested
with the last flush of sunset.

Go under the arch
they stood on chairs to reach;
speak praise as the sills
they carved glow from
their candles, red and green.

The children laugh
as you lie down.
The cold bathes you.
From here you see how
their walls lift to the moon.

Showing Daughter War

it was a newsmagazine photo
of bodies in a ditch she'd never
see ordinarily she had so many books
for ages five to eight

every week
under a heading The War there'd be
a factual report nothing to bother kids
with but she'd ask questions

some in the photo were Viet Cong
children I thought might get up
and play it seemed so right then
not that right was easy twisting
on that point to thrust that bayonet
of print into her hands and say

honey, this is why
we're against the war
and see her eyes take it in and her
little gasp I shouldn't have done that
honey I was wrong

the war was wrong

The Strange Man

This little girl skips, and jumps,
turns hand-springs on the empty
playground, her school day done.

Now a busy man
strides late from his car
to his Friday volleyball.

He sees a daughter of years ago—
except she's not that busy being happy—
she knows just what to do.

Just the other day he walked
holding his grandson by the hand.
A young woman smiled at him.

He wonders as he goes by
if there'll be enough friends for a game.
He hears a car door slam

and the lock snap.
Glancing back going into the gym
he sees her in the car looking at him.

Camp Song

Brake failure.
Spilled on this slope
I'm carrion:
hawk screams a claim.

Dream thinning into mountain air—
Maybe a rabbit's shriek,
entrails ripped,
raptor a hooting owl.

Someone croons against
a baby's screams.
Cigarette burns?
Latrine bulb glares on the tent.

Awake to our crowded camp
I pull the flap. Late arrivals:
mother soothing as our mountain lake,
child as troubled.

The Fire

Sulking in the tree-house I wondered
why I had done so little. A chipmunk
presented monotonous chits. I picked at
leaves. A hairy woodpecker squawked.

Tonight we're tired, sit by the fire
and stare at embers, age-rings
pulsing colors beneath furry ash.

Our son fidgets and pokes
at the hissing fire until you
touch him, your other hand in mine.

He'd like to be small enough to walk right in—
We joke with him about fireproof suits,
“We'd be in a big room, the walls all glowing colors—”
how we'd gasp under great flaring beams.

I'll settle for all this.

Performers

Now you must trust me, she said
as we sat in the Kentucky Fried,
her voice carrying from the corner table
where the boy and girl looked down.

So hurried and hungry we could see
why the chicken sells, we figured we could eat,
get back and do the sound check, trust me
she said again, over their heads,

the only words that carried.
Doesn't look like anybody will show,
we were saying, paying no attention
except I caught her eye just once

and looked down at my fries,
whatever happens you must trust me,
as if to someone not there, the kids
moving as if they'd heard it before.

Well we're doing it for the exposure,
we agreed as the woman with her round bland
face, the tall thin boy, and the little girl
filed out, a group you wouldn't look at twice

except the way they looked down, he ducked
and winced as she talked going out the door.
If you really want to do new art
you get used to no audience, we were saying.

Are We There Yet?

you'd say, tired of our prompting
to see the world as you should:
train-thunder as we go under a trestle,
smiling face painted on a barn.

You'd even get bored looking for signs
that had the rare q, x, or z.

Are we there yet?

So we gave up telling you the miles

and just said, we're closer, getting closer,
whenever you asked, so
you made it into a chant:
closer, closer, closer,

until, turning onto our road,
we joined in, and then
we all rocked in our seats,
making the old car bounce and sway,

closer, closer, closer.

Bedroom

Sheets of white sand, a dry run.
I imagine wild passion.
You are a familiar seeing through me.

We nuzzle like narwhals,
like lemmings begin our run
through an Arctic drunken forest.

What peaks we climb, far cries
from the orchard where we found
windfalls of our selves.

We smile like dragonflies,
sip from buttercups
yellow in the afterglow.

Clock-radioed, ambushed
by the news,
we face executions of routine.

Insufficient Light

He thought it was a perfect shot,
her shy face above the icing.
But the Colorburst feeds him a blank
that clouds to blue-black.

Maybe the pall is domesticity—
Gold-white spots burning in—
She appears in silhouette,
before a window with unearthly trees.

Light infidelities.
He can just make out her dark smile,
then looks up at her. Development starts.

After Bedtime

Dark at our backs and the brambles close,
our feet feeling for the path

too narrow for the eye of
his new flashlight.

The beam flares from tugging
wild raspberry and stick-tights to throw

hazel-nut and honeysuckle shadows
that do a crooked dance along fallen logs.

Columns of oak and cherry trunks
eclipse one another as we walk,

doing sci-fi of what I ought to clean up:
rusted milk-can, our ticking time capsule;

car bumper, cruiser gleaming in the alien camp;
old corn-crib, ship wrecked by an enemy blast.

In the broad hayfield
he points straight up,

sees his beam disappearing:
“Is that the sky at the end of my light?”

At Ella's

where a dangling neon warns off
all but local trade, couples
with worn faces go in for the fish-fry.
From the landing we slap into whitecaps
that roll the length of Koshkonong,
low in the water with a daughter's pain,
with that scene where she lay alone
in the garage loft, trapped in the squall
of her thoughts, found just in time.

Wind finally mutes the fluorescent-orange rider
whose trail-bike ruts a field near Blackhawk Island,
where General Atkinson routed a great chief.
We can see how a god might rise from "Man Eater's Camp"
to swallow birch-bark and flesh.
Pulling hard, we see shapes
we thought were lodges resolve into clay
heaved up with fallen trees, roots like thongs come apart.

The canoe rasps
into cat-tails that weave in the wind
as red-wings threaten.
We talk. A blue heron lifts.
Why should there be power
in this place to heal?

On the way back to Ella's
copper-yellow light irradiates waves
that drop, that become a mirror
of burnished clouds
we glide on, paddles lifted.
We look up to the land
enlarging as we move
without making a move,
to a stranger who stares as if seeing us enlarge.
We turn amazed
to the business of getting ashore.

Front Door Open

sunlight untouched by glass

air we'll take raw

step out

talk about
picking up the yard

redwings
crows
cranes

until a silence

a spreading attention

the shadow

swoop

red-tailed hawk

a sudden remembering

until the first

redwing call

Sun High, Sun Low

I.

On the way to buy plywood
I saw a vapor trail
throw a wide shadow

on clouds spread out
below the shining jet,
the plotting crew.

The shadow forged
ahead of the craft,
blazing a dark trail.

II.

Splitting wood
I put down my wedge
to see another calling.

Wings to the west
caught the sun every beat,
a flash passed each to each.

When those rippling lights were just
glints to the south
I turned to my work.

The Landlord Splits Wood

All I needed was a sledge thirty years ago to get
slabs for that cast-iron coal-and-wood furnace.
That and getting the fire going early enough.
The kids used to fuss and huddle around the registers,
nursing heat that smelled of smoke. Below zero we'd get
the gas oven going, lay their sneakers on the open door.
We'd laugh and tell them they had to be tough.

With a daughter tenant in the house and the latest
propane unit humming the grandkids wake up
warm, take the same path down to the school bus.
Hickory doesn't argue much with the smooth
hydraulics of my splitter, not the way elm did when I
pounded one wedge in after another to rend
that twisting grain, when there was still elm.

I stack the slabs in the truck. He won't come out.
She serves him dinner in his easy chair, she thinks
that little of herself. He's got bad teeth, three kids
by another marriage, but never got custody.
One drowned, another brain-dead. "You can't choose
my friends for me," she said. If he quit drinking,
held a job, maybe they could put in a wood-stove.

I'd like that, the two of us stacking even rows, the sun
going down a little earlier every day, we'd say.

Chain-Sawing

Deep in the last cut,
when I happened to look up,
the barred owl took off.

Fly Fisherfolk

stand among the shiny rocks, their hatbands
rich with lures. The water is
clear enough to drink they can certainly
breathe the pines there are mountains for lunch.
They know when the moment
comes to cast that sometimes
the sun catches the whole length of that line,
the thinnest flash of light—
wouldn't you think the little plop
and the scat-scat-scat across the surface
was something good enough to eat?

Raccoon

I watch the mechanic pry a dried eye
from the suspension. With the car aloft
I remember how the other night we laughed
sitting so close to the screen
the ghostbusters looked flat.
Then drinks, the odd choice of a vegetarian
restaurant (“doesn’t seem to go with special effects”),
the food fresh and carefully washed—driving home
there wasn’t time to hit the brakes,
just to glimpse
the raccoon running
amiably as fast as it can—
the skull shatters instantly, the spine twisting
snaps in this mad cavort, bouncing under
the floorboards, how the rear axle thuds
beast we abort—traffic coming
we cry out
carrying the eye now ours.

Alas, Poor Buick

(A companion to "Buick," by Karl Shapiro)

You were no mere slip of a grille,
you buck-toothed beauty. No sloop either,
more hull than keel, you wallowed
oversprung around corners. Like a fat whore
you gave a soft ride, drunk on gas—
yet you turned my head, lathe-like,
to love your wheelness; it never waned
under my waxing. I felt manly with you, sweetie,
like in the ads. I was me, in command,
the flying phallus of your hood ornament.
But as your mileage grew those charms foundered;
you floundered on spongy shocks,
clattered in low gear, teeth missing,
rattled rusted, rheumatic fenders,
chattered with your palsied clutch. And now,
as their acetylene teeth gnaw your cast-off body,
junkmen finger your secret parts.

Fred Kromer

Once through pneumatic doors
I went numb where grim do-it-yourselfers
quested among name-brands or
trudged with bored feet between
stacks of lumber. Taking my number
I watched them dodge fork-lifts
and check prices cynically.

Fred Kromer was the name on his tag.

“Fred, what’s the best way to cut galvanized roofing?”

“You got a radial saw? Well, take a dull old
combination blade,” he said, “put it on backwards,
you know, wrong side out? It’ll cut most any metal.”

“You mean I won’t have to buy a special blade?”

“Why no, I’ve cut 55-gallon drums that way, right in half!
Used ‘em for geranium planters in the front yard.”

“Well thanks, Fred, I’ll give it a try.”

I skipped out of there with nothing to buy!

So I tried it, my saw screaming eeyow, eeyow, eeyow
going over the corrugations, the sparks shooting
and the steel glowing on the cut. I could see Fred
bent half-around a barrel, his muscles steady
in the ungodly noise. Well hell, I thought, successful
and deaf, wearing my roofer’s hat.

You gave me a new combination, Fred,
nothing wrong with that.

The Dive

In air hard with echoes
I pad overweight on wet tile,
past those kicking off concrete each lap,
to the deep pool.

I take my deepest breath, pitch
forward and under, hang
upside down like someone drowned, force out
as much air as I can afford.

I sink weightless
to a shimmering green web,
the bottom that seems above,
concrete veil my fingers brush.

I spring to where my body begs,
to that membrane ripped
by jack-knives and swans,
to the glory of ordinary air.

No Dial Tone

I pick up the phone and it
behaves like a seashell.
I hear miles of wide ocean
and then heavy breathing,
maybe someone imagining my fear
while touching a blade with his thumb.

But it's only me, so I mutter
under my breath, hanging up and
picking up a couple more times.
How muddled it all is—
miles of antique copper and tedious relays
with a dash of fiber optic, and me
holding a thing I might as well
use to crack a nut.

Another time the cell phone quit
that day you tried to explain,
your voice breaking up
like a continental shelf. Then I actually
had to talk to my neighbor, borrow
the phone to call 24-hour repair.

Wishing things would fix themselves
I pick up now and then,
wonder why I want the ocean to go away.

Sand-Blasting

When I've been at it a long time
in the body shop, dust billowing
and grit sifting everywhere, the work
slows down. Sand tumbles out of the nozzle.
The grains scrape rust into particles
that lob across my mask. Corrosion
erodes into brightness. It's as if
I scour a rare artifact, or scrub
pock-marked royal skin for anointing.

It isn't healthy—or is it?
Through the best filter I breathe a finer dust,
the cool breath of stone.
I become a stone cool self
diving in clear quarry water,
the grains of me so fine
I plunge through limestone,
accelerate through liquefying rock
to a blinding core a voice saying
yes, yes, the work is here, too.

Hugging Lucy

At last he dares to do it, Ignis Fatuus,
throws his arms around her waist
that dwarfs him and presses his cheek
against her rough skin as the neighbor
stares incredulous.

Now he knows a slight death,
a lucid moment: being so rooted
he feels her draw
the juice from under him
and flood the air with her breath

that he takes and pressing an ear
he hears her say
“Wrap your legs too around me
but don’t call me the horse of Odin
for I am Lucina who gives without fear

my bitter nut for the long winter,
my hollow for the horned owl,
my splintered flesh
for your Lucifer match . . .” A cough.
Surprise. He steps back, stands proper

looking up as if to take
her measure while John says,
“Gonna take that one down?”
and he says, “Yeah, lots of board feet in her,”
knowing he’s made the old mistake.

Turning the Amaryllis

Easing out of that pot
well-fed and cocksure—
it just keeps on climbing

past the dusty violet
and the dingy aspidistras,
points that swelling tip

to the winter sun and then
blows all four horns:
“Here there can be no shame!

Admire my open flame!”
Thing is it forgets
drying with the grass,

a three-day rain,
or getting clipped
by an honest herbivore.

It keeps preening and
leaning (they’ve been
known to break)

so I turn it and say
“Here, macho,
lean the other way,

look at the panelling
or the print of resting deer.
Check out who’s sitting here.

Many rooms
have no plants at all.”
It straightens up, for a while.

Firefly Time

Deep in a June night
the yard becomes a kind of sky
where firefly stars blink
constellations that change before
I can name them.

By shutting my eyes I can try
to make some kind of
afterimage map,
but the light is so faint
what I see are inky swirls
my little observatory can't reach.

Opening my eyes I see time is flying.
Maybe fireflies have speeded
things up because they've
studied us long enough
and want to get the race over with.

If a night this long is all of space
it could be they don't know
they're rushing toward the Big Dawn
that washes out everything.

It's terrible to slip back
into bed to watch
what closed eyes have to offer,
except I can hear
bullfrogs telling each other, "It's OK,
let them glow, go slow, go slow."

Flying with Two Bills

—for Bill Stafford and Bill Rewey

The Bill who owns the Cessna
climbs us expertly
toward scuds of yesterday's storm.

We look down at strawberry pickers,
corn washed clean, the Wisconsin brimming
its sand bars.

"Highest its been in years"
he says, offering you the controls,
poet Bill who's never flown a plane before.

"Oh-oh" you say as the wing drops in a buffet
on your turn over the capitol dome.
Bill the pilot knows just what to say,

even takes panoramic pictures,
whirls to snap you
laughing at his control.

In my back seat it seems there's just one
Bill in this airplane.
I think of where we might barnstorm,

buzz the patriots of Hutchinson,
pull this big banner over Ames, Iowa
that says "LOWER YOUR STANDARDS AND WRITE"

oh and then we'll follow Lewis and Clark,
dipping our wings to deans all the way.
We'll head out Discovery Bay north

to the Chukchi Plateau where
there aren't any people—visit
mergansers, harlequins, and eiders.

But you're not saying
where you're taking us. You fly.
Saint Catherine, you will say,

feared her visions came from the devil
unless in them the soul
proclaimed its own nothingness.

It's time to get back to the conference,
so you touch us down
in Madison

the way you often do,
with a perfect three-pointer,
the way you said a willow touches water.

Going Into the Dark

—for Dorothy

Bill, clouds of blackbirds that
darken our September sky
press down
from high wires, willow, and oak,
ranging across our lawn
as if to give the news of your death
to everything that listens.

The grass stabbed so many times
with such unbearable word
must take it.
Poplar and oak must put on a brave show
as if nothing unexpected
has happened, as if all these raven cries
have been going on at least since Virgil.

But look, you might say at a workshop table
anywhere in the world, how they
strut their stuff,
prance for no particular audience—
give a certain attention to the liquid
in their squawks and how easily
comes their song you can drink in.

I see you, Bill, in the silky stepping of these
grackles, in the shine of their golden iris.
They cock their heads
the way you would cant an eyebrow
Oh? Is that so? and I see your little shrug
to make the greatest point: “Do in your life
what you say in your poem.”

They lift now in a wind of wings oh
your poems are scattering everywhere
like your ashes
sifting down the mountains—"Don't claim
too much," you said when I wondered
how far to go—"You shut your eyes
and go into the dark when you write."

The Spider

Tent, book, cushion.
Box-elders that couldn't compete
after the great elms fell
stand angular, dry, under

arching oaks and hickories.
A spider crawls on canvas.
From underneath it seems
to walk off a shadow branch onto air.

No richer word
than "language."
Skull shines in web of mind
held by threads I brush aside.

The book says that in experiments with gases
a spider's thread holds
the tubule a laser implodes.
No other fiber will do.

We can study, for a moment,
plasma too hot to contain.
Sitting on the cushion what can I rig
to catch emptiness?

calm in the
absence of calm appears,
implodes concentric shells
that radiate music of my fears

I hang by a thread, shadow of thought,
long to walk into air.
Where to go
when I can go anywhere?

Bone Flute

Please make a flute of my bone.
Where marrow kept me whole
let your breath flow.

When you play
I take on your flesh.
This flute becomes us.

You can deliver me anytime
from the case where I lie
still-born.

You tongue the wind
the water the fire
through my clay.

If when you pick me up
you think of death,
just play.



R. Virgil (Ron) Ellis retired from university teaching in 1997 and has since devoted his time to writing, editing, publishing, and performance, finding time also to work with his wife Shirley to restore their land to native habitat. He has published steadily over many years. A Wisconsin native, Ron holds advanced degrees in literature and media studies from Cornell University and the Union Institute. In 2001 he joined *Rosebud* magazine, serving first as poetry editor, and currently as associate editor, art director, and Web author. Currently he is concentrating on shaping books and electronic media of his poetry and performances.

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ISBN 1-893311-88-0