



LIBRARIES

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Considerations of earth and sky: poems. 2005

Cone, Temple

[Madison, Wisconsin]: Parallel Press, 2005

<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WKFNOLY4R5NMW8Z>

Copyright 2005 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All rights reserved.

For information on re-use see:

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/Copyright>

The libraries provide public access to a wide range of material, including online exhibits, digitized collections, archival finding aids, our catalog, online articles, and a growing range of materials in many media.

When possible, we provide rights information in catalog records, finding aids, and other metadata that accompanies collections or items. However, it is always the user's obligation to evaluate copyright and rights issues in light of their own use.

A Parallel Press Chapbook

*Considerations of
Earth and Sky*

Poems by
Temple Cone



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

*Considerations of
Earth and Sky*

Poems by
Temple Cone



PARALLEL PRESS · 2005

Copyright © 2005 by the Board of Regents of
the University of Wisconsin System.
All rights reserved.

ISBN 1-893311-52-X

Published by Parallel Press
Memorial Library
University of Wisconsin–Madison
728 State Street
Madison, WI 53706

<http://parallelpres.library.wisc.edu>

The author gratefully acknowledges the editors of the following journals in which these poems first appeared: *Anthology*: “Wintering;” *Barnwood*: “Witness;” *Green Mountains Review*: “Ulysses’ Gaze;” *The Louisville Review*: “Fever;” *Midwest Quarterly*: “Lent;” *Nimrod*: “Bluesman;” *North Dakota Quarterly*: “October;” *Poet Lore*: “Summer Job;” *Potomac Review*: “Rappahannock;” *Southern Humanities Review*: “After Donne’s Devotions;” *Southern Poetry Review*: “Coming from a Meet;” *The Sow’s Ear Poetry Review*: “The Story About Horses;” *Water-Stone*: “The Recipe;” *Wisconsin Academy Review*: “Considerations of Earth and Sky” and “Wharf.” “Considerations of Earth and Sky” received the 2003 John Lehman Award in Poetry from the *Wisconsin Academy Review*. “Cherries” received a 1995 Academy of American Poets Award.

FIRST EDITION

Contents

- Considerations of Earth and Sky · 7
Rappahannock · 8
Wharf · 9
Fever · 10
Summer Job · 11
Service · 13
Still Life with .38 · 14
Witness · 15
Starlings · 16
Coming from a Meet · 18
Wintering · 20
After Donne's Devotions · 21
Cherries · 22
Lent · 23
Theory · 24
Love like the Wild Geese · 25
The Recipe · 26
Loons · 27
Gambrel · 28
The Story About Horses · 29
Vanishing Point · 31
Married · 32
Bluesman · 33
Precious · 34
Ulysses' Gaze · 35
Better Stones · 37
October · 38

for Shannon Wiegmann
–grace and shine

Considerations of Earth and Sky

Begin talking through the pain, not with it.
Point out the nail in the stranded post,

rusting, fenceless, like despair. Or the cows
who obey thunder's psalm by kneeling down.

Give it a name. Any name. Try creek-flood,
brush fire, snowstorm. You compound suffering

with the plain beauty of a world we're not meant for,
and you get suffering. Compounded.

Try words washed clean as pebbles. Think *fford*.
There's a keen redtail up in yonder spruce.

When old men drive by, don't try to match their stares
that measure you as a dipstick does oil;

just notice how the Chevy's prime and rust,
shining through the white paint, correspond

to an Appaloosa's spots. Horse of stars.
Bless anything well-made, the north wind says;

don't romance without a good four blankets.
Hunger's a challenge at first, then a joy,

then a tool you remember to carry
everywhere. Almost ordinary, till one day

you're walking an empty highway, past rockwalls
maybe ten million years old. You look up–

granite stained with bird-lime, lichen, freeze cracks–
and realize you could eat the goddamn clouds.

Rappahannock

Summers along the Rappahannock,
first light slivered electric towers
on whose trusses perched
cormorants, drying
their green-black wings.
You could lean back in a rocker,
smell brackwater heating up
as crickets scraped
under the porch, the dawn
washing over beach flats,
sea oats, plantain, parched reeds,
then whitening to a glare so hard
the oyster scows seemed ice-locked,
as if watermen could step over
their gunwales and walk.
You'd begin to see
dark lines of wharves stretching from shore,
the wrecks of trawlers
speckled with gulls and gull-shit,
diesel fumes risen from the wake
of johnboats over slick brown water.
Grackles sing in the sweet gums,
sing like torn metal,
your face glazed with a second skin
of sweat as you wade out,
swim through drifts of nettles
toward the stanchion
you moored the boat against overnight.
You grip the side, pull yourself
dripping onto the bleached deck,
steer through waterways
of wigeon grass and deep channels,
learning the shape of the river.

Wharf

Was my father's word. The rain-warped wood,
Like a ladder stretching from the dank sand,
Lured me as a child. Some nights I stood
Watching the far shore, my back to the land.

I'd see oyster scows on the river, home
After a long day scouring empty beds.
Looking for cast-offs, gulls trailed them like foam.
The running lights flickered a burnt-out red.

The planks were speckled with nettles, ghost-trails
Gaffed and laid aswirl to dry in sun.
A broken road. Ossuary of scales.
Bridge the builder couldn't fit to span

Water the wind wrinkled like a crumpled page.
When winter storms tore gaps as big as boys,
I'd help my father, or rather watch him, patch
Old wood with new. He'd fit blond boards to joists

Stippled with rust-blooms where the nails had been.
Hammer curled back like a bright steel claw,
He squared up wood-screws and drove them clean.
"Better hold," he said. Once, I'd had to bow

Over the edge with him, to scrape barnacles
From a piling. I asked if he worried
The pier wouldn't last. One flick sent shells
Into the waves, and he straightened, a board

Himself. Hand to the sun, his face grew dark,
Fixing me for a moment in his glance.
"It's a wharf," he said, then bent to his work
Again. And I have not forgotten since.

Fever

A little wind, the door open, and light
shining across the bed to the corner,
to the old rocking crib, faint roses
sketched from pattern books lining its rails.
The painted eyes of my sister's dolls
stared through bars cast by cradle-light.

I felt my mother sit beside me,
her shirtsleeves' mustardy smell of Old Bay
and crab enveloping me like steam. Downstairs,
a bushel load of bluecrab rattled the pots.
Voices. My family calling her back.
Claws scraped the metal walls.

*I've got romantic
fever, don't I?* All day I'd slept, white-hot
sheets clinging to me like dreams of drowning,
where the body never touches bottom.
Below the collar-bone's arc, a trilling,
my heart panting to fly

its white cage.

Romantic, I whispered, as she pressed a cloth
to my face, water tinged with lime and bourbon
that stung before it rose from the skin.
Under the sheet, her fingers ran along
the narrow channels of my side, sounding,
as if her hands could find the true depth.

In the river floated broken shells,
drifts of them, dumped, red peels like tiny cuts
turning white under the moon, white as snow
falling on the moon. I watched the current
swirl them, water filling empty joints
the dark swallowed, piece by piece, like moths
night takes back after the porch lights cease.

Summer Job

I can't touch wood now without remembering
that summer in my uncle's lumber mill,
the hottest on record, or so I say.
We rolled back punch-in time just to win
an hour of dark, enough to cross the concrete yard
with only the slightest halo of sweat
ringing a face. When I walked in the warehouse,
though, I gave up the blue morning air
for heat that hadn't unstified overnight,
that made even dry pine resin again.
Back then, all I wanted was to get away
from the men I worked beside, who joked too hard
with me, straight from college, and didn't read
Keats over lunch. The youngest, they made me
climb three stories to where the choice wood lay
in bins twenty feet deep. Hand over hand,
I scaled ladder rungs rubbed smooth by decades
of men hauling themselves up a tight shaft
between catwalks. Up there, under the eaves,
the air flecked with dust, some of it wood, some
of it probably skin, shed years before,
and me breathing it in. From down below
came cries for *white oak rail* or *crown molding*,
the words muffled, but sure, like hymns in church.
I'd scan unlabelled bins, guessing by grain
or design, then yell back for the boardage.
Three-hundred feet, it'll be a huge staircase.
All around me, on the heavy rafters,
men had written out simple calculations
to judge how many boards each house would need.
Even beams I pulled from the stacks were inked
along the edge with a calligraphy
of division: tallies, sometimes scratched out,
but never, never wrong. What was asked for
was always delivered. To callused palms,

the smooth wood felt almost cool. When it slid
over the rail, into the empty space
above the warehouse floor, I'd listen
to that faint hiss the new wood made, crossing
the old, would feel it tilt, the axis reached,
down to the dark, to the sure hands below.

Service

My first summer at the mill, I'd drive
to the Byrd Park courts after dark, serve
buckets of balls to work the tightness
from my arms. The racquet's rubber grip
cooled split skin, bristle-furred balls
loosening my left hand's tired fist.
I'd start at deuce, each swing
lost among the pick-pock play
of other courts. Under the canopy of lights
moths roiled like applause. It helped to believe
someone waited on the other side,
a face in the snowfall of hazy light:
Becker, Borg, Ashe, my father sometimes,
who'd gotten me this job, who'd taught me
to swing through every shot
even if playing alone. Each serve a splinter
pried from my hand, a stack of pine-boards
I could set down: balls ran like stones
from a sling-shot, bit the ground and kicked clean
into night. The hours I was there
I learned the ache doesn't dull
but goes on burning,
that there are motions like wingbeats
in which we can rest, washing sweat with sweat.
The humid air breathed *toss, kneel, release*.
Whole days poured into that swing.
Then it was gone— the job, the night—
and only the stroke stayed with me
long after the work that blessed it
had been carried away.

Still Life with .38

Where normally you'd expect honeydew
flecked with a resin of ants,
here the grip's grooved diamonds
show smoothness from years of fitting close
to a single palm. Faint scratches line the barrel,
straight as chrysanthemums
that last a few days before their petals drop,
beads of water from a steamed glass.

A handful of brass-mitered bullets lies scattered
where the silver blades of brook trout
should be. One casing, spent, points upright.
The cleaning kit's open,
a long-handled wire brush, stain-darkened cloth,
and small blue vials of oil and solvent
spread out in a crescent,
the ritual complete.

But even at the barrel's tip, there's a smudge
of gunpowder black as a fly.
In time, it will eat though finish
and mar the caliber,
but for now it's only a mark of ash
from an afternoon of plinking cans off rails
thirty yards away, the gun suddenly live
as lightning or a snake in the hand.

Witness

I have seen an arrow pass through the heart
Of a deer— and the deer, with a flinch,
Continue to chew the moss
That blackened the roots of an oak.
But the deer knelt down, at last,
In damp leaves, cocked his head to hear
A sound, then sagged, paling the earth
With his white throat, his loosening skin.

And I have seen a carpenter,
With his palm pierced in a jig-saw, put down
The half-carved block— the wood
Sallow as flesh stripped bare—
And so as not to snap the blade, pull it
Clean through the webbing of his hand,
His eyes raised the way the murdered look
To the sky, as vague as St. Sebastian's stare.

The dark pines in winter I have seen,
With branches full of snow, conceal
The kerosene drunks
Gone to sleep in the shells
Of abandoned cars, and I have seen
Those men stumble in the woods at night:
Their hearts answer one another
Like ripples after a stone, or wings,

With blood that wells from everlasting wounds.

Starlings

Rain over the mountains. I slow down to jog
Past the Wesleyan church near my house, the grounds
An acre of man-high corn, left uncropped
All winter, gold paling to straw. A shriek of starlings

Curls above the field, the way water closes after
A stone. Hundreds. A thousand. From the ground,
The starlings resemble the swallows that flew south months ago.
But the starlings are not swallows. They swarm the empty trees

At night, leaves culled out of darkness, and their song
Fills the roads like the ring of guns in winter,
An angry report of metal in the cold, that drops off, quiet.
Even the crows fear them. As I stop beside the field

To cough, cold air grips my lungs like the water
I breathed, diving in St. Mary's gorge when I was twelve,
A pond fed by falls, black water. I've stopped, because
In a swale of grass and thistle near the road a flash

Of blue gleams at me. Pale blue. I reach down
In the grass and lift out a bluebird, stiff, knees bent
As if ready to perch or fly. Its wings are not velvet but silk,
And catch the rough skin of my fingertips as I smooth

Down the ruffled feathers. I shot a bluebird once, far off,
And later cupped it in my hands, still as a body
Pulled from water. While the starlings wheel overhead,
Twilight rises from the ground, curling about my ankles

Like a spill of gasoline. Iridescent. Like starlings.
The color of the crown of the bluebird is blue. Not the blue
Of lips chilled in cold water. Not of gunmetal in full light.
The bluebird's crown is sapphire, pale as empty sky.

Cradling the small bird still, I slip it into the pouch
Of my sweatshirt and start to run again, slowly,
My legs stiff as from a heavy sleep, as when they pulled me,
At last, from the pond. I pass the church, listening

To corn-stalks rustle like starched robes, then turn
And head uphill, running towards another field a mile away,
Where an oak lies, felled last summer in a storm.
Black rains swelled the dirt, loosening the roots' hold

As heavy winds tore it down. This fall,
Its leaves turned color with the other trees',
As if they didn't care about the storm, and covered the oak
In a quilt of red and brown, the color of dried blood,

Of rust, of the down of the bluebird's throat. *O child,*
What did you think the water would say?
The rains will still fall. The starlings will still come
At night, and sing beneath your window.

Child, there are words written on the heart
Of things that never come to mastery, words indelible
As the call of birds in winter. And it is the heart
That stutters these words. The heart stutters to speak them.

Coming from a Meet

We'd lost the match, and started home so soon
the kids didn't change or shower. I drove,
the van silent, faintly acid with sweat,
because, as you said, "I'm so fucking mad,
I'll kill them all. Us too." Nine to sixty-six,
against the best wrestling team we'd meet
all season, didn't necessitate murder,
but I saw your point, and drove.

A storm had moved
in that night, whipping up snow in sheets
that spiraled, clung to fenders and wind-shields,
and spun cars off the road, down banked shoulders;
I counted twelve in an hour.

I'm still not sure where the deer came from.
He might have formed, *sui generis*,
from falling snow. Regardless, I hit him;
the right headlight shattered against his ribs,
the van skidded, and there was a soft bump
as legs and pelvis broke beneath the wheels.
We waited for a minute, then climbed out
and ran down the road to where he lay.
The lights from traffic drew near and passed,
a half-light, in periodic brilliance,
wrapping us, enfolding.

There was little blood
in the snow: thin lines from where the headlight cut.
We found the path he'd dug, crawling for cover,
trying to crawl even now, the spindles
of his long legs reaching forward in the snow;
catch, pull, an endless imitation
of motions he'd never use again: a buck
whitetail, young and big, a nine-pointer.

“Wait with it,” you said, then walked back to the van.
I’d never been this close, never had the chance
to grab a deer’s fur and feel muscle
tense beneath, as he tried to fight my hold
and stilled, as if he knew this was how
the end must come: a slowing down, the hurt
of touching ground again and finding it
unfamiliar as dream.

I didn’t believe
you when you came back, said, “We’ve got to kill
him, now,” but the lug-wrench in your hand
was sure enough. “Take his waist, right there,
don’t let the hooves catch you.” I thought how smooth
his belly was, and tight, how he didn’t fight
much in my grasp, but paused, as if listening
for more instruction. I couldn’t see
if you touched him, but pulling him tight to me,
I tested his broken side to see what he
could take, and smelled his fur, moist with musk
and snow, as you snapped the wrench again
and again on his neck. He broke free once,
but I followed, pinned him down, and then
it was over. We dragged him, each an antler
in hand, down to the wood’s edge, where silence
was, no color, not even lights from the road
to show us where we left him.

for Chris Potter

Wintering

There's an owl that barns here
out of season. It's a way with him,
as with the gleaners in old oils
who hoist their bushels and bend
to the grain. Silver-shawled,
he winters alone in the hayloft.

Sometimes when you've lashed bales
on a flatbed for forking in quiet fields,
the owl looks everywhere at you,
lamplight to your steaming face.
You wait in the straw, wishing those eyes,
like blank coins, would test and free you—
that sight, which finally does not come.

After Donne's Devotions

What falls? Another January
snow – over the lake,
a skein of mallards

dropping, like the piano's
felt-lined hammers,
in *glissando*–

each skips once
on the water, chest out,
wings folded behind,

to emerge, swimming,
the change liquid
as a mouth shaping words–

cittern to Bach to
snowdrop. The white woods
begin to fill

with bell-notes,
the church just out
of sight, striking one, two,

and in its toll,
the lesson's passion–
stand somewhere–

the rest falls away.
And this is heard,
a waking song

from years past,
saying, in silence, go
in grace.

Cherries

The sun and cherry buds came out today
when the snow finally stilled.
Winter, though we never believe it does this,
sometimes warms the air:
the roots feel a spring wetting down;
soil and bough dampen, somehow darken, within;
the buds press the bark like baby's toes, testing
balance in the sun this late January.
Only the cold returns, and the buds, too,
thicken like knuckles on the limbs.
Your hands want to touch the cherry in the blossom
in the bud in the bark of the cherry,
and I will wait for you to taste the sun
in the cherries in your mouth in the spring.

for Shannon Wiegmann

Lent

In February's dark hour, we choose to leave
behind those things we cling to
most— drink, smokes, meat, a stubborn love
of baseball— to cleanse the heart forty days
before spring breaks open in cherries.
To see the small, soft cup of white flesh
in a flake, or dream of hanging up our scarves—
that is why we send our loves away.

Our time is lent to us, portioned out
in ways we'd weep to understand. The call
of geese at dawn can ease us, or a friend's voice
remembered like the whisper of feet over snow.
But even these we have to give away,
for they were only ours to borrow.

in memory of Andre Dubus (1936–1999)

Theory

Before I listen to you,
explain that eagle, trapped on the lake
near an ice-fisherman's hole,
that dark lily tearing frantically
at its frozen shins.

Whether you like it or not,
you have to step in the same river twice.
There is no other world.

When wind blizzards through firs,
a hollow forms
beneath the inner branches, where deer go
to wait the storm out. Don't ask me how
the deer know to do this.

Just follow your own cold bones.

A spring ephemeral
will tunnel through feet of old snow
to bloom under
the shifting March light. To guard
its nest, a blue jay
will adopt the redtail's cry.

For years, I've clasped trout
behind their gill-vents,
slit their long, white waists, and tossed
ropey guts on shore
for the minks and osprey. I'm glad
my hands lived those things.

It took forever, and then took nothing
at all. Remember that. Before learning
to speak, the tongue first lives
as a muscle. Remember that.

Love like the Wild Geese

If you do nothing else with your life,
you can do this, you can love like the wild geese.
Because they are simple,
they do not even know what calls them
from the snow-clotted fields in spring,
only that their searing bones
light the way. Because they believe
they are immortal,
they rush over mountains, foothills, meadows
in waves of frightening speed,
since no one wants to live alone forever.
To feel air pulse beneath their wings is a blessing.
To watch two glide on a still pond,
another blessing. Even to see one
flying alone, shorn
of its mate, a kind of blessing,
because they join with their whole lives,
and even in loss cannot be rid of that
outline, always shimmering
at the tip of their outstretched wings.

for Heather Girvin and Chris Potter

The Recipe

calls for flour, beer, salt, and sugar, a bread tin, and other ingredients, as desired. I twist the cap off a bottle of Yuengling porter, sip it first, a few drops like honey in my beard, then pour the rest in a pot over clumps of flour. The foam bubbles, then seeps through, and the batter thickens. A tablespoon of salt. Two of sugar. Garlic buds, peeled by hand and crushed in a press, the yellow-blue curds squeezed into the pot. Had you come in the kitchen then, you'd have seen me clean the press of the papery pulps of garlic, rinsing my hands under cold water. But you waited until I'd snapped shut the oven door, then snuck behind, circled your arms around my chest, your mouth against my shoulder, breathing warmly through my sweater. I could almost turn back to smell your hair, but ran my hand instead from your hip to your ribs, pulled loose your shirt and brushed my fingertips against your side. When we opened the oven, the elements burned red as tanagers. You took the first slice from the loaf, still too hot, and mumbled, mouth full, words escaping like steam, "My God, it's wonderful, wonderful bread."

Loons

Between the islands, our canoe drifted,
a single stroke, now and then, keeping us
poised over the sandy, limb-tangled shallows
that dropped away into fathomless dark.
We couldn't hear waves splash ten feet away—
some trick of sound— but a mother squirrel
chirring in the pines seemed almost as close
as the bright orange vests piled at our feet.

The wind went still. Sun on the nodding lilies
lining the shore softened their yellow heads.
I felt hard words from the night before
spread like ripples— diminishing, then gone—
into the cold water that swirled behind.

When the first loon surfaced, it peeked about,
then dove back. A moment later, two rose,
a little farther out, but content, at least,
to let us watch them— velvety-faced,
the throat a band of white, their wings speckled
like a road under heavy flakes of snow.
These were the ones we heard calling at dusk
when our voices had softened: long, low cries
someone could easily mistake for cries
of grief, if they hadn't heard them before.

Gambrel

Offers the most beautiful shelter
of any word I know.

Think shingles
cut from cedar, the amber resin
of pitch-pine for caulking.

No wonder the Cooper's hawk,
chased from fallen timber,
comes back in the form of a barn owl
to ghost its heavy rafters.

The hay and climbing heat
bring forth a fragrance
like the idea of God leaving us.

Whoever thought to build
a roof like the look of rain streaming
off a horse's back
never could have dreamed
the tongue would find its equivalence.

Through eighty-degree dawns, through blizzards,
the air inside maintains absolute pitch.
The dead men who raised it
still linger in the dust.

A lifetime won't cave it in.
Yet when the beams do fold, I pray
I'm gone on some prairie,
out where pasqueflowers can push through
the snowdrifts of my spine.

The Story About Horses

My mother asks me for a story about horses.
I stare into her small, dark face
and think, *I don't know a thing about horses,*
which isn't entirely true, I've lived beside a pasture
where a stable of thoroughbreds wintered.
Sometimes at night they'd kick open the gate,
a hammer striking stone.
I'd wake and go out, nicker them back to the field,
guiding them by the bridle like sleepwalkers.
It's not familiarity that's missing, but a sense
of the loyal opposition
I imagine rodeo-hands and horse-trainers possess.
I've ridden horses, washed them, forked hay
and cleaned stalls, which isn't so bad,
just a closeness
like you breathing from their lungs, and they yours.
But I've never had to lay hands on one
out of necessity, knowing
if I didn't break that colt soon, he'd grow wild
and maybe toss someone I loved.
I'm lucky that way. I get to touch them
gently, stroke the skull's long plain of bone,
which is what I try to tell my mother prevents me
from telling a story about horses.
There needs to be hardship, and pain, and any love
that grows out of this will flourish
like a weed, outlasting
late-May frosts and 106° in the shade.
But I realize from the way she's looking at me
this is the story she's wanted to hear,
not about horses, but me,
what it's like to breathe inside this flesh
that came from her,
only you can't tell a story like that outright,
you have to use another one,

about horses,
about how lucky it feels
to have straddled broad ribs
and moved above the ground for an hour or two,
or how you don't have any good horse stories
because life hasn't crushed you
the way the love that loves horses requires,
so you can only identify with their peace
when they're alone,
or their patient gaze that drinks up pastures,
white after spring rain.

Vanishing Point

Horizons have to be learned.
They focus vision
to a chisel's blade-wedge,
so we can chip out
our piece of lonely sky.
When you again
threw off your clothes tonight
with the ease of snow
falling for miles, the roadways blocked,
you and me blanketed in the dark,
I thought of evergreens
stitching a mountain ridge
to the shadowing clouds,
their needles compass points
no one knows to read,
the burnt orange
of your brushed hair
on every one of my shirts.
Your body pressed
next to mine was a dream
of bears waking,
nosing toward blackberries
not yet nipped
with fruit,
the salmon in their blood
endlessly leaping.
Death can't be as final
as your breath closing
over mine,
or the distances of your fingers,
miles run at night
on roads lit by nothing
less than risen stars.

Married

The dirt in Spain baked red. Olive trees
orcharded in long, drowsy rows, silver
dusting the blade of each curled leaf.
Magpies in place of pigeons and crows alike.
Plazas. Wines that savor of words
like *slake* and *brim*. A hundred young men,
dark as bulls, on every street, every night.
The women refusing to walk beside them.
Afternoon cool of cathedrals, or better,
views of the chalk-banked river beyond.
Sweating awake. Then the hour lying naked
together on a sheetless single bed.
Struck bells echoing over the town. The silence
that follows, and the silence after that.

Bluesman

After his first descent to the underworld,
Orpheus didn't die. The Maenads never tore him
apart like an offering of bread,
and the story of his head, singing
as the river bore it downstream to ocean,
is someone's hopeful indulgence
in the persistence of song.

What happened
to Orpheus happens to us all.
He wept. He cursed the animals that came
to comfort him, till the woods were silent.
In Thebes, he sold his lyre
and stayed drunk for days.
But the world doesn't stop for myths,
so when the drachmas ran out, he found work
as a gardener. Kneeling hours in the dirt,
he'd talk to trellised morning-glories,
to the crocus and the daisies.
Of course, in time, he began to sing instead,
softly, and without knowing it.
The persistence of song. Then one day
he noticed the flowers following him
wherever he walked, and when he looked,
they didn't turn away.

Precious

Because the dream I saved myself is gone,
and you've left me nothing here to lose,
take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

Because I had to sing to be alone,
and never asked was this the life she'd choose,
the dream I'd saved to save myself is gone.

What good's a father without a son?
You know there's love we never use.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

Leave me tears, enough drink to make me strong,
poolhalls, churches. Raise my heart a cross.
Now that the dream I saved myself is gone,

and I've got to work for what I owned,
there's still a weight on me I can't toss.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on,

make me righteous, make me a righteous man.
So hard, when every song I sing, there's loss,
because the dream I saved myself is gone.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

in memory of "Georgia" Tom Dorsey (1899–1993)

Ulysses' Gaze

The wind comes from far off,
As it did when we set sail

Traveling slowly
Over the darkness of waves

To nestle in the island coves.
In search of rest,

Beneath the great granite cliffs
The wind casts salt in our eyes.

Where birds, gold-flecked, sing in hundreds
We have forgotten our dreams of home,

And disappear, like flames, into the sea,
The men cry, turning to me.

Ulysses, alone, remembers Ithaca,
Ulysses, dark archer, we trusted you

Who now would give his only son
To guide us back safely,

To see the smoke of a hearth-fire,
Out of war, beyond the waves.

The thin line rising from a hidden coast.
But while we stay,

While this wind forever blows,
Our ships, untended, sit in port,

And no smoke flares into the sky,
Till we should sail again.

There yet remains a hope—
I can see the way wind shifts, I say.

The wind can die.
The wind means everything to me.

Better Stones

Thirst and the odor of scorched weeds have as much
savor as grapes. Last us longer. Not geese, but their absence
in winter. Not the marriage, but the nights of grief.
Like a fracture, definition lies in what is broken.
No wonder Jesus' pain redeems us. At Mass, the bread
is taken without wine. To sharpen the memory of wine.
Better that than the feasts of emperors. Better stones
than fields of gentian. The ocean fills our mouths with salt
to tell us of the streams that feed it. No one dies
having tasted this life. Only having tried.

October

These quiet, dim mornings, I listen
beneath oaks turned red as churned clay
for the emptiness left by birds already miles
distant, chastened by the coming cold.

“Practice,” the Tao advises, “being still.”
Believe in what you least expect, I say.
Walking beside the paddock, the bitter scent
of crushed walnuts underfoot, I trace a barn swallow

nipping flies off piles of horse-turds.
Still here in October. The deep blue coat,
long, bifurcated tail trailing each banked turn,
a twittering for its song, not musical

but busy and glad, an under-the-breath hum
that carries the body through its labors.
I see now the swallow’s building a nest,
or finishing up: it flits from piles of straw

to a mud-daub wedged under barn eaves.
Between trips, it perches a bow in the fence rail,
ruffles its wings, and preens. I have to wait
till it slips in the nest-hole to get near,

one step each time. When I’m close enough
to see each feather lining its rusty face,
and the damp, black eyes, I’m close enough.
Around us, the leaves go on falling

down invisible threads. If asked, I’d say
each hour’s its own season, and just as brief,
but no one’s asking. The swallow’s gone now.
I’d say the world, somehow, suffices.



TEMPLE CONE is an assistant professor of English at the United States Naval Academy. His poems have appeared in *Southern Humanities Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and elsewhere, and have won awards including the John Lehman Award in Poetry from *Wisconsin Quarterly Review* and an Academy of American Poets Award. He lives in Annapolis, Maryland with his wife and forthcoming daughter.

Considerations of Earth and Sky is the thirty-fifth chapbook in the poetry series published by the Parallel Press, an imprint of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries.

Parallel Press Poets

Marilyn Annucci • Harriet Brown
Charles Cantrell • Robin Chapman
Francine Conley • Heather Dubrow
Gwen Ebert • Barbara Edelman
Susan Elbe • Jean Feraca
Allison Funk • Ted Genoways
Max Garland • Rick Hilles
Karla Huston • Carl Lindner
Mary Mercier • Stephen Murabito
John D. Niles • Elizabeth Oness
Andrea Potos • Roger Pffingston
Eve Robillard • Carmine Sarracino
Judith Sornberger • Judith Strasser
Alison Townsend • Dennis Trudell
Tisha Turk • Mason Williams
Matt Welter • J.D. Whitney
Timothy Walsh • Katharine Whitcomb



<http://parallepress.library.wisc.edu>

ISBN 1-893311-52-X

A Parallel Press Chapbook