

## **Virgins on the rocks: poems. 2004**

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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

# VIRGINS ON THE ROCKS

POEMS BY KARLA HUSTON

Winner of the 2003 Main Street Rag Chapbook contest, Karla Huston recently earned an MA in English/Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. In addition to winning the Wisconsin Regional Writer's Association Jade Ring for both poetry and fiction, she has received writing residencies from the Ragdale Foundation in both 1998 and 2002. Her poems have earned five Pushcart nominations. She has published poetry, reviews and interviews in many national journals including *Cimarron Review*, *5 A.M.*, *Margie*, *North American Review*, *One Trick Pony*, *Pearl*, *Poet Lore*, *Rattle* and others. Another chapbook, *Catch and Release*, is forthcoming from Marsh River Editions.

Huston is a former board member of the Fox Valley Writing Project, and a former membership chair and regional vice-president of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. She teaches creative writing and contemporary literature at Neenah High School.

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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**



# Virgins on the Rocks

*Poems by*  
KARLA HUSTON



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## *Star Struck*

It's no Hollywood opening this time,  
no hush of appreciating crowd,  
no fawning, yawning celebrity.

It's Andromeda, and she's not chained  
to the sky waiting for monsters from the sea.  
She's a hurtling superstar, streaking

toward her only debut: a final crash  
of constellations, a cosmic collision  
of mythic proportions. She's moving

too fast to catch in a net or a paparazzo's glass,  
moving too fast to stop the telescoping race  
to the biggest opening since the dawn

of God. Stand aside for the ultimate apocalypse,  
a revelation made simple in the blink  
of a million blue baby stars.

Grab your rosary, your yarmulke, all  
your excuses, and your last hallelujah.  
When this one hits, all you can do is pray.

## *Theory of Salt*

A tense bond of elements  
like a marriage, more soluble  
in hot than cold water. Some say  
panic is made of it, the hollow

of an armpit bathed in brine,  
a pocket of sweat and terror;  
God's wrath became an ochre post,  
while Lot's wife blazed.

Or Morton's cobalt canister,  
made famous by an umbrella,  
held by a little girl, her yellow dress  
tilted under a reign

of salt that spins a tumult behind her.  
Some say salt perks up coffee,  
soothes sore throats, cleans vases and pots.  
It removes red wine stains, protects

pantyhose, eats fish odors, and cuts rust.  
And how do we live without it,  
our bodies forever craving a sprinkle of the sea?  
Even *salary* comes from the word—

crystal cakes exchanged as money.  
Still I wonder how we come  
to know it, savor its elemental  
fault, the sweet fury of desire,

the measure of a life in a handful  
of cinder and bone. How do we  
see clearly through  
the oceans in our eyes?

## *Spiritual Warfare*

I'm always thinking about Lot's wife,  
wonder what her neighbors said  
when she packed her tunics and cooking pots  
and left town without so much as a fare-thee-well.

Dave, a guy I work with says, "It's because  
she was a sinful woman in a sinful town.  
You know where the word sodomy comes from."  
I tell him, "Sodomy's been made legal in Texas.  
I read it in the paper yesterday."

Dave has been known to get down on his knees  
and pray before a computer, but it never seems  
to work because it's always messed up.

"You see, Dave, if she'd had a name, maybe someone  
could have called to her, maybe she might  
not have turned back." I'm obsessed with this,  
it's true, but I can't get the no-name-pillar-of-salt thing  
out of my head, and this woman

who probably left with wash on the line  
and goat stew simmering on the fire.

And then there are those two daughters  
who later lay with their father, there being no  
other men worth their salt in that mountain town  
where they ended up. "Good thing she wasn't around  
to see that kind of sodomy," I say. "Women  
need guidance. Remember Eve?"

I tell him, "Let's agree to disagree on this."

He glares at me; his face turns red; pimples  
stand out like, like angry mountains, I think.

"Besides, Dave, Lot lingered; he lingered,  
and God took mercy on him. I want  
mercy for her. And a name, Dave,  
a name, for God's sake. Please call her

something besides 'Lot's wife'."

Dave takes my hand, says, "Kneel with me,  
and let's pray for you, my disagreeable friend,  
and for all those sick people in Texas."

Meanwhile, the computer flashes:

*this program has performed an illegal operation.*

"How about Loretta?" I ask, thinking of my best friend  
from high school. I shuck off his hand and add,

"It's a good name, and Mary's been used."

## *Safe Water*

I used to think it only took  
a bucket of water to kill a witch.  
I'd seen it so many times:

how Dorothy flung it at her  
while the broom flared,  
the Scarecrow blazed,

and the Tinman rusted nearby.  
The old lion sucked his tail  
as the witch crumbled into a steamy pile.

*I'm melting, I'm melting*, she said.  
The monkeys grabbed their eyes  
and flapped their wings in despair.

For years, I slept with a glass of water  
next to my bed, always afraid  
she'd get me when I wasn't watching.

Now I know it's not the witch  
who scares me, but the idea of her,  
of that old nose still

hooked under her nasty hat,  
the puddle of fire spreading,  
what I couldn't control

finally reduced to fog and smoke  
and the chance to save myself  
almost out of reach.



## *Mona Lisa Imagines*

The virgins on the rocks were never  
unhappy, yet you painted them twice.  
At least the twelve apostles could

gnaw meat off bones while they lingered  
or leaned into a bit of gossip  
or fingered silver coins. Today

you want my hands folded just this way.  
*Chiaroscuro*, you call it,  
a new way of seeing, but oh,

I am tired, wait like an unanswered  
prayer or an angel condemned  
to kneel forever, while you study

the slant of light and adjust shadows  
with a thumb. Today it's your hair  
that has me worried, flying out from

your head, your beard a silver nest  
for insects and stray bits of food.  
And Leonardo, you have such nasty

habits: belching after every meal,  
farting when you bend for a rag,  
or scratching your balls and peeing

from the balcony into the lilies  
below. Now you could use a bath  
and those nails clipped, but once

you might have been handsome.  
Maybe then you'd have painted me  
younger, crowned with roses, my fingers

full of gold rings. Why not ask me  
about the scar on my arm or my crooked  
little finger? Will anyone remember

the smoky haze around my face,  
the subtle shift of light and dark,  
see how much it hurt to smile?

## *The Gods Argue About Sex*

Hera wants a man with deliberate hands,  
a little love poetry tongued  
in that spot just behind her ear. Zeus  
wants a woman with Olympic kneeling  
power, the ability to swallow  
in a flood. On their top ten lists  
of dream lovers, she chooses Kerouac  
for his dreamy eyes or Rhett Butler,  
except for his bad breath  
and limited vocabulary.  
He picks Emily Dickinson (those dashes),  
Cleopatra (all that power) and Cher  
(her one syllable name).  
Zeus says women have more pleasure,  
with multiple orgasms and the g-spot.  
Hera says men have the most fun,  
their tool so useful for peeing outdoors  
and writing in the snow.  
They can't agree and finally ask Tiresias,  
who lived eight years as a woman—  
something to do with voyeurism  
and copulating snakes. Reluctantly,  
he says that indeed women  
have nine times more pleasure.  
Hera is furious, so positive  
that men have it best, with their  
never-ending supply of phallic symbols:  
guns, fishing poles, weed whackers,  
guitars strummed low, jack  
hammers and golf clubs.  
She rages and fumes, threatens  
a lifetime of headaches, while Zeus  
laughs until his sides ache,  
saliva trickles down his chin, the front  
of his robe quivers.

Hera blinds Tiresias for his insolence.  
Zeus, not to be outdone,  
gives him the ability to see  
with his hands.

*To My Husband Who Thinks I Only  
Write Poems About Sex*

I wrote about the dentist's office the other day,  
about watching those birds outside pecking  
in a box, their tiny beaks split with thistle,

and the squirrel, its hopeful tail raised  
while trying to find the way to its share.  
I've written about rotting potatoes and spiders,

the call of blackbirds pinned and waving on cattails.  
Who hasn't written about blackbirds?  
I've written about paperboys peeing in the snow,

summer baseball games and tobacco sheds,  
even the guy who stole my parking place. And yes,  
I've pulled desire into slim syllables and lines.

Today I wrote about how the hair I shaved  
for you has started to twirl and bend again,  
how the skin itches, the way a healing

wound does. I wrote about how Clifton  
watched her mother hurl poems into the furnace,  
the ash glowing like jewels, to please a husband

who didn't like her writing, either. I understand  
the way some things seem out of reach.  
The squirrel's tail—curled into a question.

## *Secret*

We practiced being grown up,  
trying on her sister's bras and lipstick,  
checking our profiles for changes,  
kissing our reflections in the mirror.  
One night when we played doctor,  
I let Nancy examine every inch  
of my skin, her voice crooning,  
*open wider. Say ahhhhh*, her fingers  
outlining my nose, my lips, the turn  
of my chin. *What's this?* she asked  
as she ran her hand under my arm  
until I nearly giggled.  
Nancy drew maps on my skin,  
a new destination in each curve.  
She knew where she was going,  
my body shivering and expectant  
as she circled new breasts, traced the dark  
line down my belly, coming so close.  
Somehow I knew this had to be wrong,  
everything soft and lovely had to be.  
She closed her eyes and swayed  
over me to an invisible song,  
her hair falling over her face  
like a dark curtain, while outside,  
the moon opened its mouth, the scent  
of clover clinging to the breeze.  
We promised not to tell about how  
first desire could rise like a promise,  
how all we'd have to do is give  
in to it, let it take us  
to something that could be love.

## *Half a Cup*

I'm the puny one, the breast you'd kick  
sand on at the beach, small because of a lack  
of attention and the excess of gravity.  
Even when she fed babies, they opened  
their mouths for the plumper twin first.  
Now she is getting older and I'm tired  
of holding up, looking perky  
in tight tee shirts and small sweaters.  
She hooks me into underwires  
because she wants that separation,  
that certain lift. When we were younger,  
she could barely hold a pencil underneath.  
Now she could lose an entire checkbook  
there. Once, boys, with bulging  
zippers in dimly lit cars with engines  
and radios humming *I can't get no satisfaction*,  
held me in sweaty hands. Just enough  
to fill a palm, spill out of a mouth.  
Now she looks for lumps. I'm crushed  
between cold plates, while technicians  
palpate and push. The x-rays glare  
with suspicious light.

## *Modern Fairy Tale*

Dear electronic prince,

If I grew my hair long,  
and let it fall to you,  
would you braid it  
with clover and sugar, hearts  
of ivy, and spider silk?  
Tiny bees might hum  
while you pull and turn  
the softness, tuck each strand.

A slim ribbon of words  
holds us now. Tie me  
with your sweet scarf,  
carry me off to a new  
never-never land where  
no one fears the dark's  
tangle or the witch  
who might eat us whole.

Be my dangerous savior, O.



## *Most of All*

He's got it right, the friend who wrote a poem  
about a woman wearing a man's shirt,  
about how it's the warmth of him she needs,

the way she can pull his scent to her nose  
and feel his arms around her again.  
I think a man likes to see a woman

dressed in his shirt: the sleeves  
dangling and the buttons and holes  
fitting together backwards. The stupid

grin he wears when she tells him  
she's going to pee, and he asks to watch.  
She is aware of how her knees touch—

how disturbing the bubble of her stream,  
how she pulls the paper off the roll,  
then she presses the lever for the final flush.

As she rises, she wraps the shirt more tightly  
this time, tries to fit her body into every  
stitch and seam. She likes the way the shirt

holds her, so soft and so manlike:  
that, and the sigh of his breath  
in every thread. Yes, that most of all.

## *Divinity*

I haven't dreamed about you in two years,  
not since the one of your funeral  
where your face was a cake atop your casket,  
the wound covered by a pink sugar rose.

Each mourner lined up with a fork to take  
a piece of you home, and there was nothing  
I could do to stop them. This morning  
you retuned as the ocean,

and when you rolled over, you said hello  
in that crooked way you had, then fell  
back into yourself. The gulls were made  
of green sea foam in this dream.

I should mention, though I don't think where you are,  
you'll need this information, but egg whites  
won't set up when the sun doesn't shine.  
So check the weather forecast before whipping

whites and sugar. Adding two drops of green  
food color should be enough, unless you think  
divinity should be every color—or none of them.  
This might depend on whether you remember

the way yellow ricochets off walls sometimes  
or how shadowed and blue your rooms. Of course  
none of this means anything if I can't remember  
the way your head flew back when you laughed.

## *Air*

He spilled his griefs while I listened  
from the bed. The air conditioner  
forgot to hum and cough and the sun  
slipped its hot tongue through the blinds.  
A tanker pumped gas outside. Maids  
wandered the halls looking for something  
to wipe and spray. The minutes ticked  
away like unkept promises until midnight  
filled the room with moon.

He buried his face in my breasts then,  
cried when I kissed his hair, the tips  
of his fingers. Now missing him  
feels like an eclipse. Now I am sighing.  
Now I see his lips mouth *why*,  
*why, why?* Now his eyes  
are rippling sapphires. Now night  
and day fill with ache and rain.

## *Syllables*

When I don't have words from you  
each day, I must have poetry,  
the syllables sipped like teaspoons  
of tomato soup while fluorescent

lights flicker above me.  
My thumb has begun its winter  
fissure, and below the nail,  
a hole, where I've bitten skin—waiting.

Tonight I sleep in my husband's  
bed. His tongue trembles with breath,  
and my mouth opens and closes  
and empties the dark.

Even though it's cold today,  
my nipples don't show beneath  
my sweater. I've sent them to you,  
an envelope of rubbery nubbins.

Erase me if you can.

## *Absence*

The words that hang  
the poultry festival  
chickens in a word tornado  
the lick and blow theme bar  
the lavender flowers  
dried and pale  
in my garden the ice  
on the bird bath, shiny  
and wrinkled, clutching  
yellow leaves  
the cigarette in my hand, the cigarette  
in my hand, the poem  
curling, the smoking  
fingers, the deleting  
that still goes on  
daylight saving daylight  
in my absence  
the bird staggering across the gate  
the empty feeder and the filled  
the nympho-mercial and poetry  
masks, confetti of contradiction  
the how-to on dildoes  
in a hotel in New Jersey  
red roses and white, cold  
plaster and latex  
Luna stained lips  
and sapphire water  
getting lost on the way  
to anywhere, everywhere  
happiness in a blue capsule  
the missing  
a lover who says: *this*  
seems important to say.

## *Angela's Sauce*

Thirty years ago in San Diego,  
my new husband took me  
to a friend of a friend of a friend's  
for a spaghetti dinner. *No one makes  
sauce like Angela*, everyone said  
and since I was from Wisconsin,  
a place empty of beaches, hippies,  
and anything cool,  
I went along intending to see  
how Angela did it, only  
she didn't want to do it that day  
so we just sat around waiting for dark.

Someone turned on the Lava Lite,  
and someone else pulled out a bong,  
its yellow water the only light flickering  
in the room. Angela walked in, then,  
swinging thin hips and someone cranked  
the stereo, the only thing worth anything there—  
except for the pot that appeared  
like *Jeff Beck*, someone said.  
*Jeff Beck*. Yeah. And I nodded,  
positive the cops would come  
through the door any minute,  
haul me off with Angela,  
those tomatoes simmering,  
my husband dreaming of plum wine.

## *What She'll Do for Love*

Katie, my student, says she wants  
to improve her writing, do  
a book report for practice  
or a literary analysis for fun.  
I play along, flattered she's asked,  
so together we flip through books,  
consider ideas, till she finally blushes,  
then admits this work is for a boy  
who will surely flunk otherwise.  
My stomach knots around my scruples.  
This is cheating, I know,  
but without it, he'll fail.  
And she'll fail him.

Once I loved  
a boy so much I'd do anything  
for him—wash his hair, clip his nails.  
I wrote essays for him about Hawthorne  
and Shakespeare, speeches about  
putting greens and modern art.  
How easy it was—  
the open page, his mouth repeating.  
Like Katie, I hoped he'd be the servant  
to my clever tongue, need my words  
so much he'd never leave.

## *Mandolin*

David's making a mandolin for art class,  
and I'm amazed by his patience, his progress,  
how he's sanded the oak neck smooth,

how he's tapered the mahogany board  
to curve and turn. Each day he adds something:  
nickel frets, brass and ivory pegs.

Why mandolin I ask? *It's smaller*  
*than a guitar*, he says, *and easier*,  
and I think, yes, and a tone even more sweet.

I ask him about the sound box—  
how he will make it round,  
and how he will get the *f* holes to curl.

I can't help but wonder, when the instrument  
is finally finished, what songs  
will he'll make with it,

and what lucky girl will be the first to hear  
the strings sing, belly vibrating  
with the music of this kind of love?



## *Satin Lips*

First she exfoliates:  
rubs granules of sea salt,  
sloughs off the cracks and chap  
of too much, or too little use.  
Then she applies a slippery  
lip balm: sticky plumeria kisses  
and mango wishes,  
and waits for someone to notice  
how soft she's become.  
So sweet,  
she smells of berry pears,  
Madagascar vanilla, cherry  
almond milk bath. Her hair  
glistens with grapefruit elixir;  
her face shimmers in mint  
aloe cream, limbs polished  
like wet leaves and citrus.  
But her lips,  
her *ooooh* baby lips  
are soft pillows of apricot  
moistened just so.  
Her smile pouts; she knows  
there's no doubt mouths will water.  
Some boy ought to  
just step up and pucker.

## *Road Trip*

I drive alone to the contradictory  
comfort of radio static and cold coffee.  
Indigo clouds stack like accordion flutes  
across a dusty sage sky. A huge yellow  
crane bends over boxcars,  
scatters oily ties in the roadside like hairpins.  
Hawks perch on treetops—black deacons  
waiting for sinners—and ditch chicory sways  
like drunken blue sailors. A gray semi  
nudges the white lines behind me,  
its toothy grill crossed with the holy  
mumbling of John 3:16. In the next town,  
I pass three Lutheran churches.  
Robed in blistered white paint,  
they wait like anxious sinners.  
I listen to the sometime-music in my head,  
while cornfields ribbon in front of me  
and like cords, pull me into the seldom  
ritual of going home, remind me  
of other careful communions.





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