



LIBRARIES

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Walk with me : poetry. 2012

Belair, Mark

Madison, Wisconsin: Parallel Press, 2012

<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/MOJ6M62AXA7RN8N>

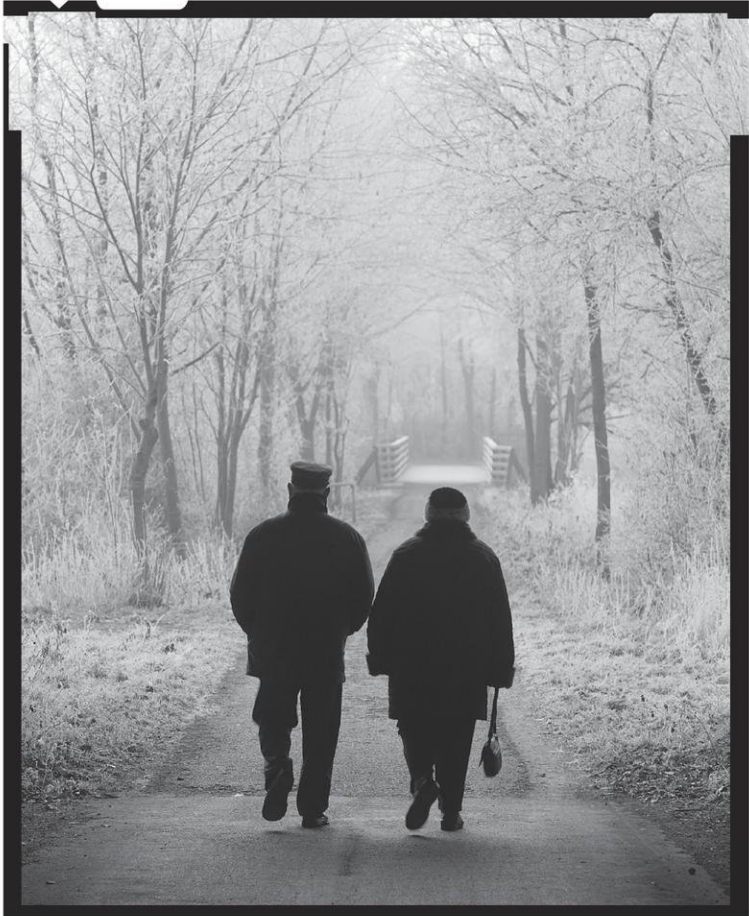
Copyright 2012 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All rights reserved.

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.



Walk With Me

Poetry by **Mark Belair**

PARALLEL PRESS POETRY SERIES

A Parallel Press Chapbook

Walk With Me

**Poetry by
Mark Belair**

Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries
728 State Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706
<http://parallepress.library.wisc.edu>

Copyright © 2012 by the Board of Regents of
the University of Wisconsin System

All rights reserved

ISBN: 978-1-934795-36-1

Poems in this chapbook appeared previously in these publications:

“The V” in *Atlanta Review*; “The Mission” in *Eureka Literary Review*;
“The Boxer” and “Eviction” in *Fulcrum*; “The Underside” in *Harvard
Review*; “Under an Apartment Building Awning” and “There Goes the
Neighborhood” in *Michigan Quarterly Review*; “Nearness” in *Mudfish*;
“Trash” and “Snow Angels” in *Pennsylvania English*; “The Door” and
“the day trip” in *Poet Lore*; “Bronx Cool” in *RiverSedge*; “The Necco
Factory” in *Schuylkill Valley Journal of the Arts*; “Suburbanization” in
Slipstream; “Nostalgia” in *Steam Ticket*; “The Creeps” in *The Chaffin
Journal*; “The Pond,” “Genie,” and “Luminescence” in *The Dirty Goat*;
“The Rescuer” in *The Distillery*; “The Word,” “Fakers,” “the mercy,” and
“Fog” in *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*; “The Hermit” in *The South
Carolina Review*; “all i knew” in *The Sun*; “Grief” in *The Texas Review*;
“The Lemon Square” in *Willard & Maple*; “Floating Leaves” in *Wiscon-
sin Review*.

Deepest thanks to Patricia McCormick, Anna Shapiro, and Patricia
Belair, first readers of generosity, sensitivity, and insight.

For my wife, Patricia

Contents

walk with me

AROUND THE COUNTRYSIDE

The Word	10
The Pond	11
The Underside	12
The Door	13

walk with me

AT THE EDGE OF SUBURBIA

Suburbanization	16
The Creeps	18
The Boxer	20
Trash	22

walk with me

INTO THE COUNTRY OF THE PAST

The Lemon Square	26
The Rescuer	28
all i knew	31
Fakers	33

walk with me

THROUGH ROSE BRAMBLES

Genie	36
Grief	37
The Hermit	38

walk with me

WHILE TAKING SNAPSHOTS

Under an Apartment Building Awning	40
The Mission	41
Nostalgia	42

walk with me

IN A NEW YORK MINUTE

Bronx Cool	44
There Goes the Neighborhood	45
the mercy	46
Snow Angels	47

walk with me

BY OUR POND

Floating Leaves	50
The V	52
the day trip	53
Fog	54

walk with me

OVER UNCERTAIN TERRAIN

The Necco Factor	56
Nearness	57
Eviction	58
Luminescence	59

walk with me

AROUND THE COUNTRYSIDE

The Word

The Ferris wheel, after
furnishing a grand ride,
stops with you at the top
and starts to let riders off
(drop / stop / swing a bit)
seat by numbered silver
seat and you try to savor
each remaining vista
(I can still see the car wash!
I can still see Kelly's farm!),
your allegiance true to heights
each step of the fated way down,
you rocking your seat as much
as you dare while you still have
the chance until it's nearly your
turn and you start to feel the pull
of the big, warm earth and hear
the indifferent gears of the Ferris
wheel and, reorienting, notice
how the process of getting off
is undertaken; then the thin,
nicked metal bar gets swung
open by a slightly scary carney
and you step out and plant your
feet on the wooden ramp, then,
steps later, on the solid crust of
home ground, the familiar place
the ride, it seems, only just began
and though you're only 7 years old
the whole circular event feels like
some weird premonition
except you don't know that word
yet so don't know what it was you
just felt; what it was just happened.

The Pond

Morning fog
rises off a pond
into which I toss a stone
and hear a minor, invisible
splash, the stone's last sound, like
news of the death of someone you never met.

The stone tumbles, I dream, as it falls in
slow motion through the dense cold,
the water new to it, disorienting,
the journey one-way, the silt
at the bottom that gently
catches it—poof—once
stones too, once
part of a hill
that

soldiers died on,
that farmers cursed,
that children still tumble down
toward the pond, disoriented, giddy.

The Underside

Limp leaves on damp dirt
hard-packed beneath our cottage porch
reeked of fall's underside
as I crawled under there
for a football I'd booted to no one,

my parents talking up above,
inside, their voices so muffled,
they seemed not quite real or,
at least, not nearly as real as this
dank space I'd put myself halfway

into, the whole clapboard cottage held
up, I began, dimly, to see, by narrow
pipes set on concrete blocks—some
pipes shimmed with wood splints—
which was why the whole cottage

swayed as my parents casually
moved about, a sensation I'd
never felt while inside, the
whole affair more rickety
than I would have thought,

the fragrance of dinner underway almost
obliterated down there by the fetid dirt,
the moldering leaves, and next to my taut
football—I saw, as my eyes at last adjusted
to the dark—a decaying field mouse.

The Door

Absent the one who placed it, a terra-cotta pot
props open a wooden door, an act meant,
perhaps, once upon a time, to let fresh air in,

though the house, behind the upright doorframe,
has collapsed into open-air ruin, the pot's dirt
become mud, ensuring its performance as doorstop,

the pot/door tension the only evidence left
of the placer's purposes, the one remaining
trace of their life at this house, even, perhaps,

so wracked is this ruin, of their life on earth, until
a bulldozer or exploring child knocks the pot over
and the door swings shut.

walk with me

AT THE EDGE OF SUBURBIA

Suburbanization

Mike would dig out his heavy,
sluggish cock and piss
on his farm-calloused hands
to warm them up,
then go back to pulling scallions
for someone's salad
out of the hard October ground.

With a dirt-encrusted finger
pressed to the side of his repeatedly broken nose,
Mike would shoot out a gob of stringy snot,
wipe his hands on his crusty overalls
then pay us, counting out
sweat-dampened bills.

On the road to market,
riding atop stacked vegetable crates
in the bay of the jolting pickup,
we boys threw tomatoes
at passing mailboxes—
thinking ourselves bad—
until one day Mike, riding shotgun
in the cab, the loaded gun
lying across his arm like the arm of a skinny lover,
blew one off its post.

Mike called dynamite “dynamike”—
he couldn't read or write—
so we boys called him that,
behind his back,
in honor of everything that
exploded from him.

Then the farm got sold
out from under Mike—
just a tenant—
to build the suburban houses
that stand there now.

A few weeks later, Mike—
too young to retire
but not fit for anything else—
left on my family's doorstep
a fruit basket, store-bought and
wrapped in yellow cellophane.

“Thank you,” the printed card read.
Below it sat a childishly large,
drunkenly uncertain
letter X.

The Creeps

Sophie, the old
egg woman, lived alone
in the sagging farmhouse across
the road from our modest suburban development.

Once a week, sometimes
more, my mother would send me
over to buy still-warm eggs from Sophie,
because she was too creeped out to do it herself.

Sophie's fingernails
were always broken short and
packed with dirt. Dirt caulked the creases
in her weathered, widowed farmwife's face too.

Her dark farmhouse was
a hovel—at least what I could see of it,
peeking in—and she wore heavy clothes even
in summer, so she usually didn't smell too nice either.

But Sophie's
brown, speckled eggs—
of all different sizes and shades—
tasted, when scrambled in butter, like nectar of life.

Then one morning,
as our family devoured eggs
bought only a few days earlier, my mother told us
that Sophie, two nights before, had passed away in her sleep.

And that the demolition
of her farmhouse, planned around
this long-awaited occasion, would occur
the following month so that a new housing development could go in.

At first, I confess,
I was privately relieved,
as a balky chore had just
been removed from my life.

Then, later that week, my mother
came home from the grocery store with
a carton of cold eggs, all pure white, all the same
size, all lined up like a tasteless suburban development.

Imagine
my surprise
when I found
that it creeped me out.

The Boxer

The first thing I did when I reached the motel
was to scout the pool area for broken glass.

My boss didn't want no cheap lawsuits.

Then I'd skim leaves off the pool with a long-poled net;
weed the flower beds; mow the parking lot's inlaid squares of grass.

What happened next was up for grabs:

sometimes I folded sheets, most of them stained;
sometimes I did make-work dreamed up by my boss'

wife, a bleached-blond of a certain age,

a party girl with no parties left to go to,
just a motel desk to stand behind with a frown

aimed at anyone else's fun.

As summer jobs for young teenagers went,
it really wasn't so bad.

Then one day a small-time boxer—about a welterweight,

I suppose—checked in with his scruffy entourage
while I was cruising rooms to see which TV sets still worked.

I offered to leave but the boxer said no,

you can stay, then told his pals the story
of a foxy Chinese stripper he'd recently laid.

Needless to say, that TV needed major attention, so I
took off the back and fiddled with its mysterious wires
as the boxer went on and on about his night with the stripper,
graphically detailing their amazingly various sexual positions,
clearing up a lot of mysteries for me
until, despite this riveting education,
my attention drifted to the boxer's entourage of unshaven
low-life punks reddening in keen embarrassment
at my chaste, choir-boy presence.
Big, tough guys, every last one, squirming
like church ladies until one cleared his gravelly throat
with a jerk of his fat head in my direction
and the boxer, glancing to me, leaned back
and laughed a big, mocking, gratified laugh at having
every last punk in the room exactly where he wanted them:
floored.

Trash

Two trash collectors
chucked old, rain-softened boxes
into the maw of their truck, compacting
them up, some of the boxes spilling ratty clothes
and crumpled shoes, and even the biggest box—the one
that had been upside-down over all the others, the one that
had been, in fact, the makeshift house of a mentally ill young man
I'd sometimes seen asleep or talking to himself in there—crushing up
like it was nothing.

The garbage men just doing their jobs, I supposed.
The mentally ill young man, for once
(was he out scrounging for food?)
not there to protect his home.

As a college student
in need of money, I took a job,
one summer, with a carpenter who
also owned slum houses. One day, he had me
pack-up the personal belongings of two tenants—
a husband and wife—who'd not paid rent on their apartment
for a number of months.

Where they were that day, I can't recall.
Maybe just off working their jobs.

Included in their paltry stuff
were scratchy, black-and-white erotic
Polaroids they'd taken of each other years ago.
He was long and, on her behalf, splendidly hard,
face grinning at the camera with a bounty of male pride.
She was posed on all fours, generous bottom to camera-flash, luxurious
breasts dangling down to the rumpled bed, homely face spun around
 with a slutty,
come-fuck-me look.

I buried the Polaroids in with the rest of their stuff
which ended up, in pathetically few boxes,
out on the broken sidewalk.

Whether the trash collectors found them first
and crushed them up, I didn't wait
to find out.

Job done, cash in hand, I
already knew too much.

walk with me

INTO THE COUNTRY OF THE PAST

The Lemon Square

In a white bag held
by my tight little fist
sat a lemon square—
tart, gooey paste
on a heavy crust,
top glazed white—
bought for me by my mother
at Legere's,
the warm, sunlit bakery,
in our small Maine town,
for us French-Canadians.

We had a church and a school
and a weekly newspaper, too,
but Legere's was the institution
I, at four, took to,
its lemon squares bought for me
Sunday mornings as a reward
if I'd been, during Mass,
a model boy.

If I hadn't mussed my suit, scuffed
my shoes or talked to myself out loud,
then we went to Legere's where my parents
would chatter in a French older than what they speak in Paris,
discussing matters of health, news of Quebec, the sins of ungrateful
children—
but never the mill or its Protestant owners
who, in fact, ran our lives.

We wouldn't stoop to complain.
Wouldn't give them the satisfaction.
Gave an honest day's work
for an honest day's pay,
asked from them nothing more
and gave to them nothing else,
an arrangement that mutually worked out:
they got skilled, reliable workers
and we, left otherwise alone,
were free to keep up
our language, our culture, our religion
despite our financial duress,
which we refused to show:
Sunday mornings, properly dressed,
we displayed to each other
(and to the Protestant snobs)
our pride in being French-Canadian Catholics.

So I, a grateful child, carried
my lemon square home
like a little gentleman, politely
nodding to passersby, never
cracking an anticipatory smile, never
letting on to the slightest desire.

And even later, at home, when I finally
took my lemon square out and ate it,
I knew what was proper
to keep in the bag:
my joy.

The Rescuer

My grandmother and great-aunt, who lived together, hid pennies around their cold water flat when our family came to visit, creating an excruciatingly restrained treasure hunt for me among their fragile, porcelain knick-knacks.

As I grew older—to, say, age seven—they saved important repairs for me to effect with a hammer, screwdriver, or pliers; fixes so easy—or even nonexistent—I couldn't help but succeed.

Their dark apartment at 13½ Kimball Street—as if in a house unworthy of a full number—stood as tidy, proper, and unchanging as did my grandmother and great-aunt in their Sunday flowered dresses and white church gloves.

Convenience was not important to them: they never minded the steep climb to their second floor rental on stairs that ran outside; or the lack of hot water; or the small, cramped rooms: it was what they could afford, so what they had, so good enough, they could make do.

So I, too, refused to mind when I spent cold nights
(the carefully portioned coal heat always ran out)
sleeping on a porch recliner drawn inside,
banging elbows with its metal arms;
a refusal meant to show that,
like them, I could live up
to what you might call
our family motto: no
use complaining.

Not even about the death of my grandfather,
killed in a car crash at age twenty-four,
my father only two.

After all, nothing could
bring him back.

My great-aunt, after the tragedy, moved in with my grandmother
to help her raise my father, each taking jobs—
one in a dress shop, one in the mill—
to make ends meet.

Men at first—then finally—were unthinkable to them.
Yet they knew, having raised a boy, how to
make me, toolbox in hand,
feel like one.

At age ten, I visited my grandmother
in the hospital where, dying
of breast cancer, she lay
separated from me by
a clear, bed-sized
oxygen tent.

A long, single hair grew from a mole on her chin,
a mole I never noticed before, a witch's hair
that disturbed and agitated me: why did
no one, knowing her ladylike pride,
attend to it?

“Give me some scissors!” I wanted to scream
while, stoically uncomplaining, I shed
unmanly tears of frustration
mistaken for grief.

“I can fix it!”

all i knew

my grandfather / herve / was a society drummer in hartford connecticut
in the late 1920s / i have a glossy photograph of him with emil heim-
berger and his hotel bond orchestra / the seated men / posing with their
instruments / stare at the camera lens / dressed in identical tuxedos that
throw the individuality of their faces into stark relief / this one with fat
cheeks / that one jug-eared / looking just off the farm / another with ab-
surdly wavy hair / herve / at the center / sits behind a bass drum with a
waterfall painted on its front / he is comfortable with himself / at home
behind his drums / his chin cleft / his smile wry

after his death in a fourth of july car crash at age twenty-four / my
grandmother / eva / was inconsolable and remained so until / in her
early fifties / she died of breast cancer / my father / two at the time of
herve's death / has only one memory of him / of climbing upstairs to
bed while herve kissed him goodnight between each handrail post

my father did not become a drummer / i did / in one concert / i played
in a re-creation of the paul whiteman orchestra using the original
orchestra charts / at the first rehearsal / during *sweet sue just you* / or
maybe *coquette* / i had a sudden recollection / so long forgotten as to
feel like a visitation / i had been told / as a boy / that herve had filled-
in one night with the paul whiteman orchestra when / while passing
through hartford / their regular drummer took ill / it was / the story
went / the highlight of his budding career and a sign of glories to come /
now i was reading from the same drum part he once did / had he too
chosen to put a tom-tom fill here / or to stress the backbeat there / or
to add choke cymbal accents throughout / had he too held back in the
penultimate verse to better drive home the last / in short / had he and
i / at nearly the same age / made the same story from the same part /
then i wondered / were we all creating a story none of us knew we were
collaborating on / did my father choose life insurance as his vocation
to help others through the kind of loss that had left his young mother
bereft / and did i choose drumming to resurrect the hopes that / with

my grandfather / had died

but why / for i never knew herve / all i knew were the stories

Fakers

I woke when the car stopped, but
faked sleep

so my father
would carry me into the house.

“He’s faking,” my big sister, having to walk
because no faker herself, crankily complained.

But my father, not listening,
carried me in anyway,

faking he didn’t know I was faking
because he liked to carry his boy.

We two fakers,
hugging each other for real.

walk with me

THROUGH ROSE BRAMBLES

Genie

Steam from a manhole cover
spirals up on this dark night
like a genie growing larger
and larger; a genie freed
from his underground
confinement by the
rub of the millionth
random footstep

or,
perhaps,
the scuff of
a special step, the click
of a particular high heel that
drew him out, ready to serve, her
wish his command until he sees her
unseeing eyes burdened with old, love-hurt tears
and hears the quick click of her oblivious, receding heels

so whirls up and vanishes
with his burden
of wishes.

Grief

The proud oak tree's gaunt
center stands stripped of leaves

while its outer fringes retain a rounded rim
of yellow glory that shakes in the autumn wind

like a flamenco dancer, devastated by love, arms raised
to snap her castanets, her billowy blouse sleeves

dazzlingly defiant.

The Hermit

My mother fell in love with me
when I was a boy.

The baths she gave me were strange.

She'd mock me when I'd cry—she
needed a man—then beg, abjectly,
for us to make up.

I didn't go on dates as I grew up.
I never dreamed of sex.

I dreamed, instead, of living,
pure and chaste,

in the quiet security
of being unloved.

walk with me

WHILE TAKING SNAPSHOTS

Under an Apartment Building Awning

Her delicate, oval face
tilted, relaxed lips slightly
apart, she tries to locate, by feel,
an earring post's pinpoint of entry
into her small, tautened, tender earlobe.

Soft brown eyes—useless for this task—alert
but looking off, only her slender, probing
fingers—nimble as a blind woman's—
can she trust to finesse
this gentle piercing.

The Mission

The tall, rolling bakery rack left
empty as a spent torpedo stash, a slash
of early morning sun slicing the baker's
uniform whites, his narrow galley kitchen
scrubbed military clean, bags of flour stacked
like sandbags around a machinegun nest, the baker's
solemn duty set before him, his sleeves rolled up, ready
to commence firing into the difficult terrain of our daily lives
cupcakes, pinwheels, cream puffs, croissants: little bursts of happiness.

Nostalgia

An inverted stack of fresh bananas
hangs off
the abounding fruit stand
whose red-and-white striped twin umbrellas
shelter them from the summer sun, though
it's rain that's brewing up above.

A metal scale hung
from one of the scallop-flapped umbrellas
swings up in a damp breeze
and the fat raindrops fall
and the hunching customers scatter
and the harassed fruit man scoots under
a long, burgundy restaurant awning
while the inverted bananas—
piled high, cozy, luxuriant—
take the fresh, slanting rain
and turn a deeper, richer yellow
as if refreshed by gentle memories,
their exile just a dream.

walk with me

IN A NEW YORK MINUTE

Bronx Cool

Not much shade here
on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx
on this searing July day.

But the street vendors—the day-old-fruit man, the knockoff
sunglasses man, the man selling bootleg videotapes and CD’s—
create inviting islands of shade with their multicolored umbrellas.

Hospital workers in scrubs, long laminated IDs dangling from
clear plastic cords, line up beneath the street’s lone shade tree
where an idling Mr. Softee truck was savvy enough to park.

Winding from one shady store awning to another, three chatty teenage
girls
flit past three silent guys openly checking them out while lounging in a
thin
slice of cool shade thrown, at block’s end, by a looming building corner.

It may be hot up here in the Bronx, but street life (life itself, in the
Bronx)
doesn’t stop. And if there’s no escape from the merciless sun, if all relief
narrows on you until it’s gone—that’s okay, too: just slap on your shades.

Let others call it attitude.

There Goes the Neighborhood

What had stood inside her fridge
was sailing out her kitchen window
as I was casually sauntering by.

It was the jar of relish—
smashing at my feet—
that initially caught my eye.

“Don’t do that, darling!”
I called to the poor, notoriously
crazy old lady inside.

Then the mustard and ketchup—
in surprisingly quick succession—
rocketed by.

Soon a passing cop noticed
and the system kicked in.

Later I heard
she was placed in an institution.

Her apartment, gutted and renovated,
went for a small fortune.

Now the window—threaded with alarm tape—
never opens.

the mercy

newly married / my wife and i figured we'd try new york city / a place
i might get work in / jazz musicians not in demand much most any-
where else / we drove down from upstate on an exploratory visit / a
visit to reconnoiter / to get a lay of the intimidating land / chancing
past a home care agency / we dropped in to see if they needed nurses
and might consider my recently licensed wife / i double-parked outside
their upper east side office and / while waiting / watched a solemn black
man in a brimmed cap wash his plush limousine and thought / what
a great city / even the traditionally disadvantaged can get filthy rich
here / the word chauffeur was just that / a word / cap or not / that never
occurred to me / as i marveled at that / jackie o walked up and strut-
ted past / all alone / no doubting it / it was her / and since the rich man
was busy washing his limo it was just me and her and i thought / what
a city / celebrities you could just go up to wandering everywhere / the
word secret in secret service hadn't made / i guess / enough impression
on me / moments later my wife reappeared with an amazed grin and a
job that started whenever she chose / we didn't know then that home
care nurses were hard to find / and also with the address of the person-
nel director's apartment building where she knew a cute studio had just
come available next door / thirteenth street in the west village looked
good enough to us / it was cheap / we took it / so in that day of mere
reconnaissance secured a job / a lovely apartment and a nearly personal
welcome from an inspiring self-made man and the ever-approachable
jackie o / pushing our luck / i sat-in at a funky jazz club that night / my
playing recklessly stoked by the unlikely triumphs of the day / the guys
said to call them for help and recommendations when i decided to come
and stay / we came right away / and since then i've learned how in that
charmed day we exploited the one mercy in notoriously merciless new
york / a day that can't happen after you've lived here as little as a month /
a day spent wielding the genuine / wonder-working power / in this lion's
den where cubs / out of game-pride / don't count as kill / of genuine /
wonder-stunned / naive

Snow Angels

The old, brute New York skyscrapers built
in the 1930s and '40s, blocks of brown
bricks blocking light, canyon-making, wind-
making, lyric-making. And the newer glass
towers constructed since the Second World War—
insular, proud, future-breasting, stripped of
adornment as polished headstones: all turn

gentle and accessible by so simple a thing
as this: soft lines of snow delineating each
windowsill or sealed glass casing rising up,
bringing the whole gruff or haughty building
down to us, domesticated, humbled by this
cold quotidian

that (my own coat and wool cap softened by snow as I walk)
flake by flake, consolingly, befalls us all.

walk with me
BY OUR POND

Floating Leaves

Pork chops and pearl onions
simmer in a skillet
after
love in a bunk bed,
snug under covers,
the lake cabin chilly off-season.

The last pick of summer squash
steams in a pot. Bakery
bread falls in slices.
Too young to buy wine,
we clink chipped mugs
of farm stand apple cider.

Hungry from love, we peek under
pot lids, then, clinking them, too,
accidentally,
laugh in the stove steam,
kiss in its haze
while outside a fall wind
twirls leaves to the lake
where they float
on the skin of its darkness.

We settle to late lunch
in mismatched chairs
and talk quietly of our
un-mourned-for high school years
and of leaving, next week, for college—
dictionaries and toaster ovens; boots and bus schedules—
and, more carefully, of how maturity demands we be open
to new friends and interests during our forced separation.

A lonely church bell tolls
from across the lake
and, as if scolded for our insincerity,
we fall silent,
letting the solemn peal
declare what we dare
not ask of each other:
the promise, come what may,
of love.

Then the space heater, sparking blue, blows out a fuse
and we search for a spare in drawers filled with bent spatulas,
linty pacifiers, flat tubes of glue, busted toy guns...

It's important: if her parents ever
found out we used the family cabin...

But from a tangle of rubber bands
a new fuse peers out like a cold, alien eye
and, giddy with relief, we retrieve our power
though, spooked, set to washing dishes, tying up garbage,
smoothing blankets, plumping pillows, reaching across each other,
touching and bumping until it's too late, our hands shift purposes,
the couch colder than the bunk bed but anywhere will do in our haste,
a fumbling haste unable to wait for birth control so trusting rhythm.

Then a tugging on of jeans and a hurry
to final tasks: setting keys back in the bird feeder;
loading the old, borrowed car.

A pause for one last, delicate, luxurious kiss.

Then, turning the car engine, worry at
the sun dipping low: we can't drive yet
after dark.

The V

Always skinny,
one morning you couldn't
button the top of your jeans.

The zipper wouldn't go
the final inch,
leaving instead a little V

of belly where the stamped
brass button fell short
of its rightful place,

forlorn
button and buttonhole
curling gently toward me.

And our baby,
starting to claim its own space,
became staggeringly real.

From that humble start
our boys grew one by one
to occupy your body

then our entire life,
leaving us, in their aftermath,
overwhelmed, buoyed, wrung out, amused, overjoyed.

Leaving each of us,
and us together,
staggered, but real.

the day trip

safety seats / juice packs / buckets and shovels / picture books / sunglasses / gasoline / crackers / string cheese / *wet ones* / cooler / pillows / flashlight / whatever cash we can muster / a bag for garbage / bags to throw up in / an empty peanut butter jar for pee / wiffle ball / frisbee / beach umbrella / swimmies / sun block / boogie boards stretched across the rear windshield / flip-flops / beach ball / beach chairs / beach blanket / towels / newspapers we'll never get to read

how long till we get there / will the water be cold / is god real or just a name for stuff we don't know / i think my leg died / i want a pet ferret / mom / dad / what's a quick blow job

then we park / arduously unload and / carrying everything at once / advance like an ambulatory pop sculpture to a clear beach spot and / exhausted / drop it all

stressed / exasperated / patience worn thin / we look up as the boys / darting quick-footed in the hot sand / rush toward the cold waves / rolling to meet their clean little bodies / gleaming in the sun / and we know / just before running to save them from drowning / know in a moment that / like a sea breeze / cleanses us

this is bliss

Fog

The dusky beach held fog ideal
for tossing high a pinky—
a small, hollow, pink rubber ball.

The pinky disappeared
into the pea-soupy distance
between us and our two vacation-buzzed boys

then reappeared the moment before it nearly—
or did—smack a toe, bop a shoulder or thump
the soft sand behind us or them, making someone jump.

The boys loved this game; loved anticipating the pinky scare;
(hated being faked out, waiting and waiting, when I appeared
to hurl but hurled nothing at all);

loved scaring us back with their amazingly accurate shots;
loved, most of all, hearing their mother's high, girlish scream
at the pinky's unheralded, grenade-like appearance:

this pinky thrown with equal parts love and mischief;
this stream of pinky projectiles—each year traveling higher
and landing harder—coming at us.

walk with me

OVER UNCERTAIN TERRAIN

The Necco Factory

In Boston, at eighteen, my faith
collapsed and left me free-falling.

Snowy nights, I often walked alone over
the Charles River Bridge into Cambridge,

the water below
cold and seductive.

Looking back, the lights of Boston
appeared as something from within:

remote, vivid, unreal.
I would then wander

past the old Necco candy factory, the sweet-sick aroma
of flavored sugar settling over me, clinging to me for blocks.

And I, unsettled, tumbling in my fall,
waiting, as in a dream, for the crash

that wouldn't come, clung to that smell,
to its sure reality, to its simple presence

as evidence of my own, like a cartoon character
grabbing a twig jutting off the face of a rock cliff

just before he looks at you and—the twig snapping—
drops out of frame.

Nearness

Things are close
to me again.

This espresso cup
snug

on its saucer doily.
This tiny silver spoon.

Not far away.
Not behind a dark,

distancing,
grief-spun veil.

Only patience cures.
Only the slow death

of mourning
restores.

Eviction

This simple café, home
of my convictions, where,
one afternoon after pea soup
and crusty bread and red wine
and bitter espresso; after idle chat
with the Colombian college student
bussing tables and the pert, post-visa
Polish waitress; after rising and crossing
the gently tattered room decorated like a French
neighborhood bistro and just as I opened the door
to the funky bathroom
I suddenly
knew

that the person
I had become—this
loosely knotted bundle
of frayed human needs—I could
live with, even like, maybe come to
respect and defer to over the insistent
voices of those who owned me for so long,
my occupants, those I took in for protection
or to learn from but who then stayed because
they liked the extra room, liked talking to each
other about improving the accommodations, liked it
not one bit when I, on that common threshold, realized
that I was quite content to be me alone in this humble café
so free to boot them out: for by the time I returned to my table
they already stood outside the café window, looking in, aggrieved,
plotting.

Luminescence

“Human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away.”

-W.G. Sebald

If so,
life is pointless.

Yet—
it's amazing to be luminescent.



Mark Belair is a drummer and percussionist based in New York City. A graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music, he has recorded with jazz greats Bill Evans and Joe Lovano and performed with the New York Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He was the drummer in the original off-Broadway production of *Little Shop of Horrors* and the percussionist in the Broadway production of *Les Miserables*.

His poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Atlanta Review*, *Fulcrum*, *Harvard Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Poet Lore*, *The South Carolina Review*, *The Texas Review* and *The Sun*. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and his diary of the week of 9/11 appeared, during that crisis, in *The Guardian*. For further information, visit www.markbelair.com

PARALLEL PRESS POETS

Mary Alexandra Agner	Doug Flaherty	Carmine Sarracino
Marilyn Annucci	Allison Funk	Lynn Shoemaker
Mark Belair	Max Garland	Shoshauna Shy
F.J. Bergmann	Ted Genoways	Austin Smith
Richard Broderick	John Graber	Thomas R. Smith
Lisa Marie Brodsky	Barbara L. Greenberg	Judith Sornberger
Harriet Brown	Richard Hedderman	Alex Stolis
Charles Cantrell	Rick Hilles	Judith Strasser
Robin Chapman	Karla Huston	Heather Swan
Jan Chronister	Catherine Jagoe	Katrin Talbot
Cathryn Cofell	Diane Kerr	Marilyn L. Taylor
Temple Cone	John Lehman	Paul Terranova
Francine Conley	Carl Lindner	Don Thompson
James Crews	Sharon F. McDermott	Alison Townsend
Paul Dickey	Mary Mercier	Dennis Trudell
CX Dillhunt	Corey Mesler	Tisha Turk
Heather Dubrow	Stephen Murabito	Ron Wallace
Gwen Ebert	John D. Niles	Timothy Walsh
Barbara Edelman	Elizabeth Oness	Matt Welter
Susan Elbe	Roger Pfingston	Jacqueline West
Karl Elder	John Pidgeon	Katharine Whitcomb
R. Virgil Ellis	Andrea Potos	J.D. Whitney
Fabu	Eve Robillard	Mason Williams
Richard Fein	James Silas Rogers	George Young
Jean Feraca	Michael Salcman	Tracy S. Youngblom
Jim Ferris	Kay Sanders	



Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

parallepress.library.wisc.edu
ISBN 978-1-934795-28-6