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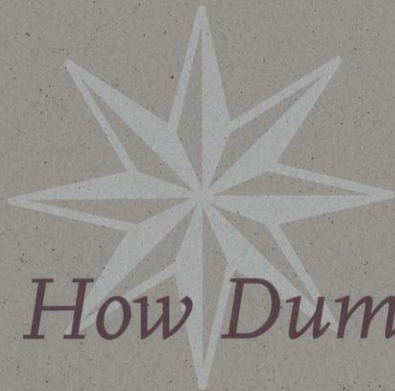
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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK



How Dumb the Stars

POEMS BY FRANCINE CONLEY

FRANCINE CONLEY completed a Ph.D. in French literature and Theatre at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Besides being an actress and director of multiple productions, she has adapted and performed her poetry into four one-woman shows, *Cocu Couple* (1992), *Whole People* (1995), *Truth or Dare!* (1998), and *The Purse Project* (2000). She has also been the recipient of a variety of awards, including the George B. Hill and Therese Muller Creative Writing Award (1996), and a Fulbright grant to write and do theatre work in France (1998–99).

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FRANCINE CONLEY

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was); Joel Brouwer (for his plod and edit); Natasha Ventsel (my witch); and
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Contents

- Where I Come From · 7
No Woman Here · 8
Desire · 9
Virginia Slim · 10
There's Always Romance in Bars · 11
Tongue · 13
Two Doves · 14
Spring · 16
Chimes · 17
Slick Back · 19
Trigger · 21
Ramada · 22
The Basement · 24
Still Life · 25
Tulips · 26
Violet · 28
Los Angeles · 29
Amber October · 30
It · 31
What we think. What is. · 32
Kin · 33

I know there is a person
who looks for me in her hand, day and night,
finding me, every minute, in her shoes.
Doesn't she know that the night is buried
with spurs behind the kitchen?

César Vallejo
Poem to be read and sung

For my father who brought me to writing

Where I Come From

Where is that thread of gold in me,
the oh-so-beautiful, the spun
clockwork of the organ player,
a lost pier that remembers
each morning's twisted mist?

When was my face stolen,
body hollowed into reckless shapes,
pitiful whistle, each eye filled
with the suddenness
of a wish, an eyelash blown

off a wet finger tip, a hand clung
to the earth, the past?
Born like a flag to bear disguise —
Where I come from:
a face vanishing from a mirror.

No Woman Here

Not the silk dresses,
straps thin as rice noodles,
shoes high as Liberty.

Not the milky voice,
mango lips, Modigliani neck,
wrists slim as sugar cane.

Not the dark lashes,
freckled nose, button-eyes,
diabetic smile.

Maybe you thought these pearls were teeth?
Or this lace, woven skin? Look:
there is no woman here. Just wigs.

Desire

I have kissed the prostitute,
begged her for money

to burn down my body,
make it little and fragrant,

let it grow again into a riot.
From ashes I kissed her,

felt at home in her breasts,
plump and dozing, half-

sick of love and its gun.
Her legs a road map,

eyes two open books,
hair a drunken mane,

she kicked me in and said
I am not at home. . . .

I took the woman in my arms,
whispered nothing sweet,

gave her cigars
instead of the sea—

but she rolled me back to fog
and sighed, *Get thee gone!*

And though her lips
bit bright and deep,

I kissed them,
and haven't tasted milk since.

Virginia Slim

You can't look too closely
at the woman who's so big
she can barely walk. Carol
is her name, and she lives
on the corner of Grand.

She's got slippers on her feet
and a shower cap on her head.

Her neighbor, Donna, wears
a hockey helmet with wire mesh.
She's protecting herself
from the rest of us and is known
as the best goalie in town.

Carol and Donna sit together all day long,
staring in opacity and smoking *Virginia Slims*,
the long cigarettes designed for women
with Time and that faraway look.

One day in eighty degrees I saw Donna
carrying tomatoes to her door, her helmet strapped on,
body floating in a silk bath dress painted in roses.
She had a rage eye on,
told me that in her sleep people were throwing pucks at her
like words, cursing her.
She said the roses on her dress grew thorns,
then showed me the scratches.
She said that some men came
and tore her window sill to the ground,
that she smoked all her cigarettes with Carol yesterday
and couldn't place where the time had gone,
or that maybe Virginia had lied to her,
because the cowboy she dreamed
in a name like Slim told her
she wasn't today's kind of woman.

There's Always Romance in Bars

The blond with bifocals on, her crepy hair lit up
and buoyant as a tutu flinched at the man who sat facing her,
his face like an overstuffed closet, so many folds in their silence
that it sat there between them
like a block of baked brie.

Their forks poked at a plate of crudités,
as if caged chickens
forced to feed on mash to fatten up our ease.

She clocked her head back and forth, a weathervane
caught in a storm, her eyes flying saucers, *anywhere out
of this bar but here, anywhere out, but here.*

She shifted in her seat, wool coat tucked under her romantic thighs,
a despair under the table showing in her foot that shook faster
and faster like a horse in the lead: bridled, mouth buckled down
and frothing—the whip on the flank, spurs in her sides.

He just stared back like a blackboard,
occasional stalactites shooting out of his eyes,
“sorrys” spat out like olive pits, one by one stacking
into a mound of darkened, sucked seeds.

Is it the flock that loses the bird, or the bird, flight?

She nicked the smiling bartender for a doggie bag, and he brought one,
a cardboard dixie with daisies all over it, pastel yellow, baby blue.

Her hands worked that food into the foil like a burial.

Somehow she'd told him everything—was it in the way
she'd cut the ham for him? tore the bread from her fingers?

She took coat and scarf, swigged her last sip,
slinked through tables and chairs and out, she went, like a cat.

He didn't look up; instead, took the menu,
eyeing the drink list like a dictionary—for where, in Merlot, Cab Sav,
Pinot Noir,
would he find his tongue? Swore to himself
he'd have another drink come hell or high water, anything
to wash this night down, the comet trail she left behind,
the sight of her coat floating by the bar window like a letter in the wind,
the lost, the floating, the free—

Tongue

Old ruins, great silence,
night that has brought black
and blue. How dumb the stars.

Me, in the footprint, you
on the edge of a cobweb
slowly chewing the heavy barge.

Trembling, the water at night
curses the sleepless, blesses
the small, black of us, running

here, along window panes, speaking
with a leaning tongue the back
of a ghostly and lazy language.

Two Doves

For K.

Once, a soft mouth bit less.
Once, tears had stories.
Each one, like a dream, owned
a beginning, middle and end.

He woke up this morning
and found in his palm the studded
marks of bird feet. He remembered
his dream and wanted to save it,

keep it in his glass of pebbles,
as if they were her, small dream
stones. He was used to having
a stone be more than a stone.

He wanted to marry a woman,
wrap around her finger a stolen wheel,
dress her in feathers, each one
malposed as a wish beside a promise.

How could he not have known that skin
has seasons, freezes as lakes do,
that ice is dangerous to walk on,
dangerous as sleep-walking?

While he dreamt last night
he heard far off the doves' coo.
The bedside wall he grazed
with his hand was the white

of her inner arm. At midnight
his eyes were open, big
as silver dollars. He swore
he saw her but by the thin

moon he found instead feathers
on his bed, freshly plucked.
He saw in the window her milky gaze
flush in a dove-tail, heard her voice

flutter, her image eluding him,
quick as the pulse of silk. Standing,
his face moon-bit, he looked suspect
at the stallion sky, its cities of stars

and asked *How does it happen
that a swan's neck can be broken,
that a bird misplaces its nest, that her face
I saw behind glass becomes my own*

*startled image? Did my hermit dreams
search for crabby shells
and find bottle-caps instead?*
I said to him, someone left you

last night and painted a shadow.
It's there, on your face, a knot
below each eye. When you wake up,
you can see two doves lifting their heads.

Spring

I've been feeling the bow's curve,
the whirlwind in the streets.
I've heard of suicide in spring air,
each day waking in corners.

I've followed the wrapped
old woman who limps
on a three-legged cane, the one
who looks like silk in the wind.

I've been unable to shut
the dream out, where I breathe
like a monster, lung engine
dried up by the words no more,

not me, can't take this anymore.
I've been drunk by scorpion faces,
by eyes that write poison
on my walls and love to kill

for territory. I need to find
the tulip's heart. I need to find
the tornado's spine,
the lines of sleeping seeds.

Chimes

For B.

Unintentional as wind chimes we struck
that spring evening when on a whim

our bicycle legs pumped breathless miles
through a pulpy dusk, two spears headed

toward a field that might separate us
from all that was true. Bottle of wine

opened under cherry blossoms,
we counted our friendship on each finger,

the many times we'd shook hands but held
longer. With each gulp words slipped down

our mouths and left stains purplish yet
invisible in the dark. Confessed by midnight,

we bounced around the grass, two drunken beach balls,
until we spied moth catchers through the thicket.

They were grouped in silence near open glass jars,
whirring their nets through the fluttering night

and waving their flashlights as bait. Several stray beams
skimmed over your face, branching shadows

like the ocean's surface. It was then the air grew
greater than both of us and sang, our lips sang,

and your hands, two carved shells strung on strings,
chimed, opened me to the singing wind,

and we sang, while the leaves wrestled
against the moon and filled us, with a slow

wilting, a sinking song, two candles meeting
and melting each other down from within.

Slick Back

He was like
silk milk,
he was like
slim-stuff—

His back was like
a rivulet,
a narrow brook,

his spine,
a writer's bone.

I was like
bent wing,
I was like
waxed arrow;

I was leaning,
perhaps sloped,

even mis-
aligned.

He was like
a jagged vision,
a sun-storm moment,
a fire-fly blink.

We met
like breasts,
we met
like Amen;

Our faces
were ravens,
our strokes
like rasure,

Our body
was sawtooth
next soap bark
next quill. . . .

And we left
like signatures,
like pauses,
like Iris bloom.

We were like
cast water,
we were like
cast lines;

and it was mi-
gratory idle,
like Indian-
summer kiln—

And time was then
like desert,
suspended
cerulean sky. . . .

We could catch
red-handed—

we caught quick!
like heat and copper—

But when we cooled,
it was cadenced,
like a quick-
tempered dog.

Trigger

*Asked why she had murdered her husband, who had beaten her,
the defendant responded, "I don't like him."*

Your Honor, the difference between
my finger and the trigger
lies in the black face of this field,
first deep green, now
barren and dried up.

Look at me:
these bruises I wear
are weeds from the field
my husband tilled
into a fruitless plot
where anything that can grow
will. My story began
Saturday when I loaded
his gun and went
to tell him

I'd served my time.
I suprised him—
his thick fingers
stuck in an other woman,
every drawer open
except one.
I screamed, felt the trigger
and my eyes bloom,
each shot singing out,

*Let the stars stay silent
while I make the first noise*

*I want a brave life and those hands
of his under my feet*

*so that I may stand upon him
Proud as a milked cow.*

Ramada

For David

Long before we reached California, days covered
each other like blankets and my parents' patience
dimmed. Nights seemed darker earlier, and the car

so tired from fights and stomach aches that hotels
were picked strictly for proximity. Still,
we had our preferences. When the question of sleep

came up—Budgetel, Motel 6, and Holiday Inn flashing
past our windows—my brother and I fidgeted in back,
pulsing the word RAMADA off our tongues

like a desperate mantra between Italian lovers.
We searched for the sign, bulls spying the matador.
As it rose over the midnight highway, red neon glow

and curly letters creeping up our car hood, our kid voices
forked together like demons till they caved in
and took the exit. Ramada was dizzying, a web

of orange and brown carpet, a sea-bound ship
with countless rooms to hide from reprimand,
hallways to bolt and sail around like pirates in search

of surprise and treasure. One night we found it:
a heated pool lit by globe-shaped lights that made
our swimming bodies luminous impressions from above.

Once in, waves swished us around, my mother's hairdo trying
hard to stay dry above the surface like a lampshade.
My brother and I swam to the bottom to watch them kick

and tread, my father pulling at her soft feet, making her scream
and at least wet her ears. We invented a secret, underwater
language, did somersaults, even bet who could dive deepest.

Water let us be R A M A D A, R A M A D A, R A M A D A,
a loose paddling of arms and legs, a holding
of one's breath, and the bubbles that follow after.

The Basement

Greg Knutson, RIP

I don't know what lives down here,
but part of my heart—a blackened bit —
must have got stuck in a muggy cove
that smells of soot and old water.

I live beneath these stairs, near a mis-
match of socks and shrunken shirts.
It's dark down here; I wish I could find
someone inside the drain pipe.

Instead I find this night that moves over me
like a snail.

Why do my footsteps against
these wooden stairs seem too heavy?
What is this nagging hair in my mouth?

And the thoughts sift in their hourglass
*As if this jet-black were all, as if each clumsy step
up were a new story to tell.*

In the dark kitchen, I reach for the light switch.
I grab a glass at its stem and it breaks in two:
my eyes slice the corners for a witness.

Still Life

Tree, the phantom of vanity,
Leaf, the drift of doubt.

Memory, the rescued horse's hoof,
Squirrel, the hidden and climbing man.

Algae, the sweltering, punctured breath,
Green, the eye-lid of horizon.

Crow, the numb, religious echo;
Wind, the whisper of skin.

Morning that eats mandarin,
Midday that tastes pulp,
Evening that sharpens knives. . . .

Tulips

For Z.

Was that Spring wearing her shoes on the wrong feet?
Or April ice cracking, May rains taking
apart the earth letter by letter? Who were
those two birds
tripping through the fast night,
wings thrilled over a field
of sealed tulips?

I watched his beak tear one
from the ground, twist it around her neck,
its pulse-red staining
her white neck in a tattoo locket. The wind carried a hushing

Remember the tulip

This morning, I waited for them to emerge
from the budding green tree. First I saw her blush up
like wine, then his Rimbaud face appear in a silver language,
metallic gaze piercing the world
like a needle through skin.

I heard his short-circuit voice,
his song spilling over her
like a glass confessing booze

*Somewhere among our drunken boat,
Spring's disappearing act
and Je-est-un-autre,
I remember a tulip,
how your ghost hand,
like a poem, sunk into me without age.*

*See how your tulip necklace
rises
and falls
in a parachute silence?*

*That's not Spring—it's me—
goldfinch flicker,
blooming in your throat.*

Volet

For G & m

Summer nights you locked the *volet*,
a door-sized shutter that closed and sunk me to bed
like a submarine caught in deep, dangerous waters.

In that unlit room dreams twisted through my earth like a mole.
The wall clock beat its fist one floor below, and I shucked sleep
to match its endless tick, tick, tick, to my heart.

There was the first time I felt the dark: I spied a glowing shape,
a hole on the *volet*. Blind hands edging along the wall,
I pushed the crepe curtain back, unhooked the *volet*'s three hooks.

It crept open, cold air sweeping up my gown to a surge,
and the sky hiccupped with stars. From this high up on the hill
and above rooftops, *Lac Léman* slept below; the distant, sober

Dents du Midi tucked their snowy fangs in an indigo blue.
Sailboat masts clanked faintly on the horizon; orange lights
from house boats flickered about like kerosene lamps.

Near the water's edge the tip of the town's castle tower peeked
through lake shore mist. In La Tour-de-Peilz, smells clung to the breeze.
Our chalet garden-mold stung my nostrils, the sweet apple tree

and tangled grape vines filling me with an airy juice. Slugs slinked
down the thin gravel path, their liquid bodies brave and vulnerable.
In the mountainous murk, apartment buildings sat like bricks.

Every *volet* was pulled tight, covering the night, no window in sight.
I stood there perched as an owl, eyes well-lit, wondering why we shut
the night out—as if our eyes weren't shut enough or the night had
too much light—
as if the darkness in a room weighs less than any other?

Los Angeles

The earth is cracking here,
its blond back a brittle lobster
chewing garbage and spitting
sweet meat. Her corners
are begging, her tired thighs
are boarded up. Petal by petal
the aroma of bouquets
floats above all the prettiness
of her metal, all the piss of dogs.

There's no more flesh in LA;
just trimmed skin and bone.
Even the grass has been taken out.
The seasons have gotten bored.
Her breasts have cheapened,
sun laid around too much,
tongue turned flaccid,
streets stripped with needles
and frozen honey.

I thought this city
would taste like apple pie
and spiked cinnamon,
sand and salted wind.
I thought its desert would
drag me underground.

Instead I find myself barking
with the dogs and hydrants

*Hey LA, where's your stink,
that spot of shit on your lingerie?*

*Where's the purple you hid in jasmine,
the sun you used to set?*

*When did you get so lazy that you won't
get up to turn off the lights?*

Amber October

for Steve Timm

This daily bread, cup of rice,
¼ cup milk, ½ cup orange juice.
These ruffled sheets, patted pillows,
inactive socks, eyeglasses resting.

In this season of budding amber
we count our fingers at the altar,
gather the last of the pear's juice.

It is the season for maple blush,
trees that feed and shred their faces.
It is the season for cobbled shoes,
for eyes cleft in their daily genesis
and we who kick the pebble home.

This is for the panting winds of October
that make all hair turn pale; for an aching,
sharper hunger and each drop of light.

This is for amber blindness, insight,
people and their edges, ruffled hearts,
for uncertain geese
whose Southern sense we envy.

This is for the man who feeds his horses early
and the woman who lives next door,
she who draws her blinds and dances alone
with mirrors, pebbles and perfume.

It

Can't you write a poem about it?—Tom Conley

We are growing old every minute.
Gray over gray, cloud over cloud,
a heft of ice and sleet mixes
in your mind. Each day sinks

deeper in the water, a heavy dish
to scrub and not break. One night
the dream is a spiral cliff,
a narrow path and windy feet;

the next, a crowded room
with no doors. Each morning,
your face is full of shadows
and I don't know what *it* is.

What is this, this *it*,
this morning lead, afternoon mercury?

It bobs in you like dead fish, eyes you
like a wolf through wire mesh.

It is the crack of the butcher's knife
the train hitting the tunnel
and that whistle
that blows and blows and blows

What we think. What is.

For S. Bell

Do wind chimes wait on wind?
Is the weight we feel imagined?
Why do you drill the dark for answers,
words that might stare back and explain?

Explain why when Crow bitches,
it feels like he knows you;
why his shoe-polished body
seems cut out from your heart.

And it is morning. Crow caws.
Surely he knows his song is life's torpor,
that some nights, you drive around
and around in search of a street

whose path, like a perfectly peeled apple,
might explain what we think, what is?
Tell Crow you wish to rise before his eyes.
Tell him your questions are endless.

See how he teeters like doubt
on the highest branch. The wind swarms
around him and his cries spit through the air,
inky reminders of what is.

Kin

Underneath my lip lives
a pierced scar with a father
moving around its pale stitch.

This is called six years old; no,
it's called catching father,
like a roman arch straddled

over a woman, their love making
a window to an unsuspecting storm.
In that moment—the basement bed half-

alive—I smelled every fish he'd caught
and felt the crime of the bait.
Standing hidden by shadow and door,

I watched them like a moth,
dumb by light. Did he notice?
Or was it my nightgown rustling

that caused them to look at me
with hooks in their mouths?
I knew then, there are parts of you

you cannot hide. Like breathing.
Or his face. Most of his wrinkles
now match the stories he's told,

but there are one or two hidden
in the corners that refuse to find
a place to settle. They wander

his skin, unsure as that stunned
child who wants to believe
the fish thrown back will live.



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by Francine Conley

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The Perfect Day

Andrea Potos

Hosannas

Katharine Whitcomb

Apparition

Max Garland

Sure Knowledge

Elizabeth Oness

Luck

Marilyn Annucci

A Visionary's Company

Rick Hilles

The Twig Songs

Gwen Ebert

Them Poems

Mason Williams

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What Grandmother Says

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