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Presences

Poetry by
Caroline Collins



A Parallel Press Chapbook

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Parallel Press

University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

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Some of the poems in this collection, in slightly different versions, first appeared in the following publications: “In this Season,” *Arkansas Review*; “Evening” and “Hunger,” *Big Muddy*; “Nostalgias,” *Fox Cry Review*; “In the City’s Oldest Cemetery” and “The Doe,” *Picayune Literary Magazine*; “April Morning,” “Early Morning,” “Indian Mounds, Mississippi River Bluffs,” and “The Fox,” *Seeding the Snow*; “Hawk” and “Buffalo Pen, Late Summer, Illinois Veterans Home,” *Wisconsin People and Ideas*.

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to Floyd

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I

Buried History

At the Ceremonial Mound

The surfeit of mosquitoes and sweat,
the endless calls of jays and crows
were forgotten when the three
whose ancestors built this place
walked up the tallest mound
to kneel, speaking by turn
in low tones until centuries
fell away in the thick sweet smoke,
in the silence. Here where the doe
fed her fawns in the still green dawn,
where the last of the autumn twilight
touches the young maple, I remember.

Buried History

Now autumn begins its excavations,
combing the leaves away, wind tunneling
into the longest grass, always seeking . . .
Under the swing sets and tennis courts
where we first learned to play, under the old
Union building, highest on the downtown
skyline. And under the park roads.
Under the old bridge that crosses the bay,
where the great blue heron sleeps.

And on the island, on the other side:
where the Potawatomies crossed the river
on the Trail of Death, after burying
the old one who could not last the night,
after Fr. Petit had put away his stole, wrapped
and reshooldered his chalice, his heart
already half-spent by the journey
to their new home in Kansas. Under
the statue of George Rogers Clark.

And in what our parents remember
or what the other old ones have said,
whatever we piece together:
mouseclick and pagescuff,
earthseep and rainlight and windturn
scouring away at the edges
of a history lodged deep
in the earthworks of memory,
here long before our own.

Evening

When dusk begins to paint the sky, they come
carrying the dust of their old villages,
treading the worn trails down from the bluffs,
striding the ancient sandstone shelves
down to the bay, where they used to trade,
their heels turning the water luminous,
their voices curving in the last skittish,
fragmented arias of daylight, their drums
thrumming in the wings of nightbirds,
their laughter rising with the swifts
until morning has burned away the mist
that hovers so lightly over the fields.

Nostalgias

(after Derek Walcott)

I.

I am not home until I wake
to train whistles crescendoed at first light,
until I have turned in the clank and lurch
of boxcars, the rhythm of their passing.

I am not home until I scent
the sour dregs of feed grain
dropped by rumbling trucks and blown
into the north bottom road's narrow shoulders.

I am not home until the Mississippi sings
its lullaby, hushed and steady, insistent
as its name, strong brown waves drowning
the traffic that plays across the bridge's harp.

I am not home until I stand beside
this mile-wide tide that trumps all others,
rolling along slowly, until I breathe
this ancient, mud-thick, fish-rank river.

II.

In these Georgia pines, I hear them
again, the Cherokees of New Echota,
restless souls seeking their country.
Driven out of the mountains,
walking one state after another
in the worst kind of weather,
they left their homes and families
never to return, forced to live
in an alien landscape.

They arrived at the Mississippi
in the dead of winter, hungry and cold,
stranded by islands of ice, for weeks
unable to cross, weeping on its banks
for the old warmth they knew,
for the sun-hardened clay of home
and the tall pines, filled and swayed
by the slightest wind.

What can I add to centuries of grief,
to what has already been lost?
At this moment, snow is falling
on my native land. It sweetens
the onions, it covers brown grass.
When morning tinges the pines
with rust, I walk the red earth
the Cherokees loved, I turn my face
to unseasonable wind, searching again
for the least sign of spring.

Hunger

(for Black Hawk)

Me-she-thi-po-wi, the big river,
She-ka-ko he-ki, the place of wild onions.
Lexicon of hooftrack and wingbeat,
weather and light, familiar as the feel
of your tools, supple enough
to render the world you knew
before the iron horses thundered,

before my kind staked the earth,
their oxen and wagons hauling
the abstract nouns, the absolute phrases
they would marshal to take what you had,
first by stealth and then by force. On paper,
such words could never be unsaid. This English
was hard, its vowels dark like caves,
its promises like limbs that never heal.

Deep within my words lie the ancestors
that Tenswakawa knew: rigid jaw
and dug-in heels, weapons leveled, voices
rising. The grudges carried to the grave.
The hunger that nothing can glut.

Crossing

I.

Indian agent Thomas Forsyth
to William Clark, Superintendent
of Indian Affairs, from Rock Island, IL
April 5, 1832

Dear Sir,
General Gaines has come and gone
from here to no avail, having talked
to Black Hawk for three days,
unable to make any headway.
When April came, he camped
beside the river and swore
he was going back to Illinois,
saying the Iowa soil was bad,
saying the corn we had given
when theirs wouldn't grow
tasted bitter in their mouths,
saying the Mississippi beckoned.

Keokuk was furious, calling him
a foolish old man. (There has never
been any love lost between them.)
I implored him to think of the people.
We've seen this sort of thing from him
before, so naturally we thought that this
was just another standoff, like last time,
a ritual to soothe his wounded pride.

We were wrong. This morning he set out
in a hard rain, hundreds with him,
crossing the water, moving slowly
in the cold, the old warriors taking
the outside, to keep the young ones peaceful.
Now they are winding silently through the valley,
stitching a dark line along the Illinois frontier.

II.

*A hunger
deeper than any river.*
His people
strip the trees
of their bark
and dig for roots,
making
shallow graves
for those who perish.

*So deep there is no room
for anguish or anger.*
They wander
for weeks,
turned away
wherever they ask
for a place
to plant corn,
shunned by those
who fear the whites'
vengeance, the Prophet's
promises exposed.

*Too deep for anything
but fear and sorrow.*
Now they seek only
to cross back
before they can
be found, stopping
only to bury the dead.

*A hunger that nothing
can quell.* Black Hawk
stands somber:
no way to console
his famished people,
no words to explain
this dark betrayal.
*A hunger
Too deep for anything
but this quiet despair.*

III.

General George Atkinson
to William Clark, from Wisconsin Heights, WI
August 2, 1832

Dear Sir,

Yesterday we engaged the Sacs in battle,
surprising them on their way to the river
when our Indian scouts found their trail.
They adjusted quickly. Black Hawk
never joined the fight, but played his part.
Above his men, out of range, sitting
on a white horse, he chanted for hours,
commanding them. But they never
came at us directly, although they
rained down some very serious fire,
raking our main force again and again
while his other men menaced our flanks.

We knew, by how hard they fought,
that beneath and behind their flaring guns,
unseen in the blur of fog and chill rain,
Black Hawk's people were setting out
on their woven rafts, taking the wide
and shallow Wisconsin, crossing
and vanishing again as we fought on,
the time passing dreamlike and slow.
Their fighters finally gave up the ridge
but still held, sunk deep in a ravine,
aiming up at us in the wooded knolls.

As darkness approached, I resolved
that the most expedient course would be
to take up the battle next morning.
The ground had not been of our choosing.
We had little knowledge of our surroundings
or what the enemy might do. We retreated
beyond their reach and did not answer
their fire, surrounding our own camp
with a huge ring of fires that blazed
all night and magnified every shadow.

I awoke at first light, ready to summon
the men and resume the fight, to find
that the Sacs must have slipped off
to the river one by one, before
we could circle them. Surely you know
that I had planned to write with good news.
We will catch up to them again today,
tired and hungry as they are. The Hawk
has evaded us again, but not for long.

IV.

Certain that the Mississippi would lead them home,
Black Hawk's people pressed on to the Bad Axe.
River of lamentation, water of wild grief.
Cries rose from the women swimming
with children on their backs, from those
tying their babies to cottonwood bark,
hoping the current would take them.

River of no escape, no retreat or surrender.

A flatboat bearing a cannon blocked the mouth of the Mississippi, a new steamboat named "The Warrior" edged in to shadow those who hid in the shallows or buried themselves in the sand, moved out to grind the others under its wheel. Soldiers turned its cannon

on those caught in the open, caught in the sights of more soldiers, just arrived to crowd the banks beside the unkempt, unshaven, hard-looking men of the Illinois and Wisconsin militia, men who fired at anything that moved until the bodies lay scattered, until the river ran red, carrying the dead for forty miles. *River of death on all sides, river of no mercy.*

The few who reach the Mississippi will have to fight again, where the Sioux wait, eager to slake old hatreds. *Valley of endless mourning, river of last resistance.*

V.

George Catlin to his wife, from Jefferson Barracks,
south of St. Louis, MO
November 1832

My Dearest Clara,

How are you? The weather here
is good, and we arrived quickly.
Behind these limestone walls,
Black Hawk says little,
so bowed down with grief
he scarcely seems the same man
I painted at his surrender,
bidding farewell to his glory
in phrases worthy
of Shakespeare's Othello,
dazzling as the sun
in the fringed white robe
the Winnebago women
made for him.

I paint him and the others
in their chains, as they
insist. (Since the surrender,
they have worn leg irons,
except for the few weeks
they suffered a mild form
of cholera.) They are bored
with making new pipes,
missing the preparations
for the winter hunt.

Each day another group
comes to gawk and ask
which one is he. What are they
looking for? Magic? Defiance?
Some of the others oblige:
his young and handsome son,
Whirling Thunder, roars
and laughs, shaking
his chains at the crowd.
The Prophet murmurs
quietly and strokes
his long mustache,
denying everything
to anyone who listens.
Black Hawk says
little to anyone.

Last week, Keokuk came
with a handful of their people
to plead for his release, declaring
they are too vulnerable to raids
from the Sioux without him.
The general sent them back,
promising protection. The soldiers
all say they have heard nothing
about when he will be released.

When I finish here, I plan
to paint his old home,
Rock River Valley,
the most beautiful country
in all the world, for soon
it will be much changed.
Had it been mine,
the place where I was born,
I tell him, I would have
fought for it, too. But I know
that is scant consolation.

The only way he can sleep,
he says, is to remember
the smell of the grass,
the rippling cornfields,
the sound of the river
shearing its banks
in the spring, high
and wild with snowmelt,
and the post that stands
at his father's grave
in the burial grounds
across the water,
until morning comes
to shred the garment of dream.

VI.

On that early October day
he moves beyond all pain,
nothing left but one more river.

Borne off by fever,
carried into unending fame.
His people bending to gather

his British medals, the other gifts
ever at hand. In the encyclopedias,
it ends with his body covered,

the bones on display, the soul
left to hover, the details written out,
swept under the rug of history.

Time severed the men
who fought him from their deeds,
turned their names to towns

where children grew old
never hearing how fire, the judge
and ravisher of all things,

took the building—each flame
rising higher, roaring like water
as Black Hawk crossed over his last river.

Questions from the Living in the City of the Dead

What is the price of resistance?

misery and defeat

What is the price of obedience?

misery

What may be gained by patient endurance?

the fate of Quashquame

the lot of Shabbona

the wealth of Keokuk

What is the meaning of home?

the land where the bones of my

fathers are laid

Where is the hope of going home?

buried under concrete and asphalt,

under the gambling boats moored

on the water

Who symbolizes the price of defiance?

Black Hawk's body, dragged from its grave

What rewards may be gained by those
who strive for peaceful coexistence?

epaulettes given by their Great Father,

fitting attire for their deaths

bright cloth snapping above their graves

*the sound of the wind, wearing the years
to ribbon*

Signing the River Away

In their fathers' time, always, it was
a buffalo robe, spread out over the grass,
but also the sounds of birds, of water
and leaves, the immensity of sky.
Now it is this room in Washington,
windows locked against passing breezes,
blinds pulled tight to shut out the sun.
Now it is this desk, massive and heavy,
dark as a coffin, where the youngest man
in the room, the last signer, sits writing
his name meticulously, his scraping pen
the only sound in the tense, endless silence.

Behind him, all in suits and ties,
their handmade silver belt buckles gleaming,
the elders, with their hair cut short,
and the other government men
stand watching as the last signature
unrolls, a long wave sending the tribes out,
flooding the land and driving off the salmon.
And now, at the signer's right elbow,
one man covers his eyes, his face stricken:
a century beside the Columbia
so quickly come to an end, the man
behind him already turning away.

In Praise of Opulence

In the land of my fathers are many mansions:
wide, white-columned, imposing and solid,
fireplaced, chandeliered and stainglassed,
constructed by the now-famous men
of means, presidents, generals, and mayors
who began their long and well-known careers
by hunting Black Hawk's shadow.

With the nuts and bolts of Manifest Destiny,
with the practice of giving the natives less
for more, with the railroads that tore the earth
and drove away the buffalo, on the ground
that absorbed what was left of Black Hawk
after they'd melted him down to the bones
and wired him back together, they raised

each soaring edifice, built them
like churches over the graves of those
who had come before. In such fine rooms,
we stand breathless and silent now
in praise of opulence, forgetting
the villages razed, the wickieups torched,
the lives taken, forgetting the cost.

II

Presences

Origin

Here the glaciers heaved and groaned,
jarring until they conceived a dark spine
that filled with their melting and mingling,
then widened and quickened, ripping
prairie sand and silt, pulling other waters
into its stubborn, furious pulse
as it swelled and deepened, turned
tumult and torrent, roared and sprawled
and cut back on itself as it wound its way
south, glistening strong and mighty and muddy
and forever new, gathering in the birds
and the animals and the first people, gathering us all.

Geodes

Deep in its core,
the earth hoards
its secrets.

Who can know
the mysteries
of its heart,

how the ancient
layers of rock
came to be,

how tree roots
and mud balls
turn, in the slow

seep of ground-
water and eons
of cold, to these

glinting orbs
of light, lovelier
than cut glass

or diamonds:
a wealth
of quartz

bedded under
a thin crust
of rock.

In the shift
of seasons,
these gray-

brown globes
thrust up
into the muck

of pastures
and fields,
holding

crystal born
of stark land
and rich soil.

Indian Mounds, Mississippi River Bluffs

The public pool closed until summer,
park roads gated off for the winter,
I turned into the winding hills
where everything glistened in silence
on the first afternoon of the year.
Climbing against the cold and wind,
the one set of footprints before me
drifted shut, I hugged the rock wall
for the shallow, powdery path, moving
into the stillness of a place gone back
to what it was, its history buried
almost completely by snow.

Reaching the top, I read what I could
of the glaciers that formed this valley.
When I raised my head, a guardian stood
at the edge of the clearing, loping off
into the brush when I turned, aware
of its presence, the yellow-gray scruff
I would be sure of only later, after
the row of tracks and fresh spoor.

Then, in the coyote's quick, faint call,
I could hear the cries of small pups, the voice
of a young girl at play, I could hear
the breathless notes of wooden flutes
in the creaking trees, and I knew
that all around us, under ice
and snow, under grass and dirt,
the bodies of the mound-builders
were slowly turning to crystal.

In the City's Oldest Cemetery

In the right season, in the right weather,
here among the ornate obelisks,
the big trees and the well-known names
carved deep, at the far edges
of each mound, the light, windborne loess,
the flint and chert work themselves up again,
where our fathers who have no names
lie facing the dawn, with limestone coffins
collapsed around them, with necklaces
of claws, with stone pendants, with god masks
carved in mussel shells, with small bags
woven of cord made from prairie grass,
with tools and pipes and small game, food
for the journey across the wide water.

In This Season

How easy, in this season, to believe
what the old ones say, that the earth
remembers us, storing up our footsteps
and our breath until we come again,
as I have, to this same place, my shoes
printing the rich black mud I walked years ago
with yet another layer of longings.

This Vision

(for Coby and Hannah)

Once, the year was not paper marked up
into squares, but a great wheel of seasons
governed by the moon, every month named
for the earth's simple turning.

By those lights, it is no longer April.
This is the moon of last frost and first dew,
of strong rain and blossoming trees,
when wild onions stretch their lean stalks,
blackberries gather their colors,
and the first fledglings try their wings.

I would give you this vision, a circle
that binds us to the smallest lives,
a world where we are measured
not by what we have but what we give.

April Morning

How hard they fight, all the small lives
pushing their way out of the egg,
out of the womb, battering their way
into this world, shreeping in the trees
and mewling their first cries, forcing their way
up through the earth, the red shoots
of the peonies, the unruly stalks
of onions and dandelions stretching
higher each day, all the leaves and blossoms
breaking out of their green cocoons,
nightcrawlers oozing along the blacktop,
the deep blue twig of a snail, crossing
a sodden sidewalk: how hard they fight
to tighten their grip on this world,
taking root and taking hold in the cool
drizzle of this Sunday morning.

The Doe

(for Trice)

She was the one who remembered,
leaving the windfalls and cornstalks
to amble slowly toward us,
her broad ears lifting,
her tongue already tasting
our gift of carrots, her hunger
never sated. She held her secret
close for weeks and months,
the way a child cherishes
a promise, her nose quivering
its way to our hands
as winter kept stepping closer,
fueling her tenacious need,
and her belly suddenly rippled
in the stubble field of her coat
when she came to us, aching
with longing, so ravenous
for the life inside her.

Buffalo Pen, Late Summer, Illinois Veterans Home

Prairie humpbacks, they list and bask
in a vast ocean of grass and shadow,
these three quiet except for snuffle,
snort, or sudden toss of shaggy head,
dozing out the afternoon unmoving
as traffic deepens to the thrum and lull
of locusts, dark boulders carved
against the gathering dusk.

These are the old gods, horned and bearded,
back from the edge of their death, hides
scarred with old wars, shoulders
brooding with power, groundshakers
out of another time who, long ago
in this place, no fence could hold.

The Shield of Chief Little Rock

Achilles would have smiled,
lifting it for the first time,
so magnificent it must have
come from a young man's
dream: the buffalo hide staked
over the pit of steaming stones,
thickened and toughened until
its sinews sang, pulling away
from the earth, its surface
fashioned by a holy man

who prayed that its circle
would keep him strong and safe,
and placed within its outer rim
the earth's four mountains,
a crescent moon, the Pleiades,
and between them, the large bird
who carried thunder under its wings
and lightning in its eyes, surrounded
by other, smaller birds to stand
for other powers, all painted a bright,
otherworldly blue, with clay
from the sacred mountain,

strung with the feathers of eagles
for swiftness and courage, of owls
for good fortune and wisdom. Fallen
in Black Kettle's village, as Little Rock
fought on the Washita to keep the women
and children from Custer's eager hands,
its concave surface strong enough
to banish arrows but not bullets,
his shield must have seemed
ripe for the taking—a beauty that
had tempted fate, a glory worthy
of swelling Custer's own,
as if the spoils he'd gathered
could somehow fix the measure

of a man. Tonight, under
the summer's long breezes
and the cicadas' slow dissolve,
it is Little Rock's shield
I remember as the moon's
bright circle keeps rising,
saying life is but a moment,
saying this was a man.

Hawk

Drawing a skein of bickering crows,
or hovering restless, tracing the shape
of infinity, its dark eyes shear a glittery
landscape. Imagine being that attuned,
your senses razored keen and relentless,
hearing one neighbor's feet shift the leaves
three blocks down the lane, hearing another's
cough a half-mile away, in a different direction.

Imagine yourself methodical, a compact body
narrowed to the arrowed dive, the sudden strike,
the scalpeled precision of talons and beak,
free of fine distinctions like mercy and remorse.
Imagine yourself formidable, wingtip to wingtip,
barb and feather, muscle and bone, so strong
the rich blood tunnels through your surging heart,
your fierce cry rises from the highest branch.

The Fox

Not that flash of sudden light
making a break for the far lane
of a highway at dawn
more than half my life ago

Not the rucked body
lying roadside deep in Georgia
years later, the tawny pelt
no more than a tumble of bones

But this one
padding up the hill
all business, her eyes unswerving,
sure-legged and quick without hurry

carrying the sun on her back,
the long, lustrous brush so taut
as she slips through the heart
of October, moving lightly

over the graves and crossing
out of sight, on her way
to windfalls and torpid voles
in the groves her ancestors knew.



Caroline Collins was born and raised in Illinois. She received a master of fine arts degree in creative writing and a doctorate in nineteenth century American literature from the University of Arkansas. Her poems and essays have appeared in numerous scholastic and belletristic journals. She and her husband, poet and literary critic Floyd Collins, live in Cuthbert, Georgia. She teaches writing and literature at Andrew College.

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