

We nod our dark heads: poetry. 2008

Brodsky, Lisa Marie

Madison, Wisconsin: Parallel Press, 2008

<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/4PBQABEU4BBEC8A>

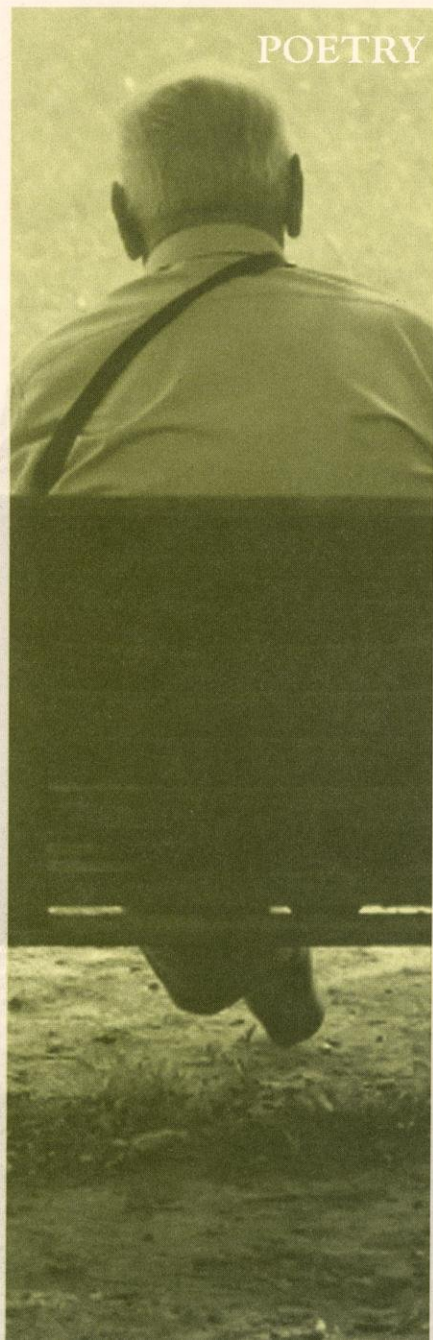
Copyright 2008 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin

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.

we nod our dark heads

POETRY BY LISA MARIE BRODSKY



PARALLEL PRESS

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

We Nod Our Dark Heads

Poems by
Lisa Marie Brodsky



PARALLEL PRESS 2008

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

Copyright © 2008 by the Board of Regents of
the University of Wisconsin System

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-893311-96-1

FIRST EDITION

This book is dedicated to my place of employment in summer 2005 —Harbor House in Middleton, Wisconsin—and all the Harbor Houses, residents, and families who are dealing with this confusing and debilitating illness. It is through my love for them that I wrote this. Even as a witness to the fog, I can clearly learn so much.

My appreciation goes out to Darren Swift who lovingly and
honestly edited this manuscript for me.

Contents

Admittance	8
One Account of Memory	9
Dance	10
Lila	11
Job Duties	12
Tabitha	13
Second Account of Memory	14
Color Stains	16
Redwoods	17
The Deathwatch Beetle	18
Carnival Day at the House	19
Visitor	20
The Bebe	21
Dialogue	22
Summer Sausage Sandwich	23
The Curious Marriage	24
"I'm sorry it's difficult, any easier would be a lie"	25
Music Box	26
Fragile	27
I Practice Saying Goodbye	28
Rebecca	29
Thief	30
The Resurrection of Evelyn	31
I'm Going Downstairs	32

Admittance

She was never a woman to care for.
She thought she was done feeling bad.
Remembering the sun in her eyes, she resists the shade

so when the House admitted her
she raged, she cried, she hid
in her room, crocheting, painting and re-painting
her nails a blood red. Coat after coat
people would knock
and knock and she would sit,
one loop over the other, remembering
the temper tantrums she'd had as a child,
stomping, yelling.
Knock, knock.
One loop, two, three. . .

One Account of Memory

When I was looking the other way,
a beautiful woman slid next to me at the counter
and asked if I wanted all my pain erased.
Her eyes looked like crocheted starlight
and in all my years I'd never seen such blue.
She was my age, perhaps, but she wore her gown
like a young model. On her fingers were rubies
and garnets that sparkled me hypnotized.

She placed her hand on mine,
such wrinkled silk,
and said she'd have to kiss me.
So over a half-cup of coffee and a bran muffin,
her face neared mine and I felt her lips, soft
as a rose petal.

Then I felt electrical shocks
—You seem so familiar —
all through me, from my scalp to my toes.
“I don't want to die in the war,” I think
I mumbled and she shook her head no.

“Gertrude?” I looked around.
“I'm not Gertrude,” she said in my ear.

She straightened my shirt collar
and stood up, so shimmering in. . . what material?

“I took it,” she said, touching my temple.
“It'll be easier this way.”

And then I saw a family of ten to fifteen
standing by the revolving door, looking
sad and forlorn.
One said, defeated, “all right. Let's take him in.”
And they approached.

Dance

A group of us who still walk
are urged to get up and dance
when entertainment comes.

We hold hands and move
in a circle.

Lisa Marie and Carrie dance behind us
to make sure we don't fall.

They hold us up as if we are
overgrown dolls.

I sway softly, but Lila loves to dance
and once became so joyful that
she jumped into Stan's arms,
Stan not minding when any
woman jumps into his arms.
Lila smiled radiantly.

I often wobble, but Carrie holds
on to the elastic of my pants.
We are toddlers learning to walk:
dumb, ignorant half-
remembered legs.
We are fallen trees
and the ones in their prime
bend over to catch us.

Lila

Oh Lila who loves to hula dance, who leapt into
Stan's arms, Lila from the German prison camps,
the abusive step-father.

Lila of the left-behind Norway,
the New York City girl, glitz and blitz girl.
Piano girl, humming girl. There are so

many stories you have yet to tell me
before the mice burrow into your brain and chew
the wires. Lila of dancing electricity
who must watch the others lose the ability to eat;
you think,

once upon a time we had to ration.

Job Duties

I choose to walk into the fog
every working day.
Theresa in the pink, printed skirts
clutches a doll with only half her hair.
I smile at her and she smiles back,
toothless, and in her Italian accent,
delightfully says, "I have-a no teeth!"

These men and women wander through dark rooms.
We reach out for hands
and we take hands.
These hands are dark; the dark embraces
the dark. We all nod our dark heads.

When Susana hears her door open,
she thinks her mother is coming
in to wake her up and so all through
breakfast, medication time, lunch,
she struggles to get out of her
wheelchair: "I must get to Mother."

We pull her shoulders back
so she sits.
We feel the resistance
of a newly-charged woman
recognizing one of her own.

Tabitha

Today I gave the elders a hand massage. Tabitha, who couldn't be left alone this morning, took her pill and sat in the chair, half-sleeping. I rubbed the lotion onto her hands and began to sing every lullaby I knew. I rubbed each finger, caressing the skin that moved with such elasticity, skin that seemed to move over the bone.

Such a pill, Tabitha, such a pill took away your questions, your demands; it took away your mischief and your calling me Dorothy.

I sang to you as though I was your mother and you were my overgrown white-haired baby, sorry that the world was so hard that we had to silence you.

Second Account of Memory

I didn't lose it all in one day;
it happened over months and years.

I'd be talking about one thing
and the next minute I'd repeat it

or I'd ask what I was talking about.
My daughters were patient

and let me put sticky notes
all over the house,

but I eventually forgot to put
sticky notes all over the house

and left the oven on,
the cat with no food

and forgot to load the laundry.
I still believed

I was young enough to do this.
When they told me I had Alzheimer's

I felt the floor give way and swallow
me whole. I wouldn't end up

like *that*, would I? A vegetable
with no memory of loved ones

or the meal I had just eaten?
But when I went to the House

the girls were so nice
even though they had to assist

me in the bathroom and call-bells
rang every five seconds.

I miss my cat the most. And am ashamed
that I did not feed her that day.

Color Stains

There are red marker stains on their fingertips
while pictures of clowns and horses
sit on the table in front of them.

Mary always sits with her hands clasped together
in what looks like prayer; she opens her eyes
long enough to see the picture of the white flag
wave in front of her. Her trembling hand accepts
the blue marker and she draws
a staccato line across the page, then drops it,
resumes her position.

Charlotte carefully examines the marker. I pull
her arm down and, together, we draw a circle.
Can you color in that circle?
Yes, she says
in a voice so assured that you'd think she was
free from dust and feathers.

I stand back, admiring the pictures, admiring the circle
they make as they sit at the table, smelling
of orange peels and antiseptic. The further
I step away, the more I am out of the fog that surrounds them.

I am on the other side of the room now, in crisp air. I know
I leave for home in an hour. I will cook spaghetti for dinner.
I glance over at my lovelies, my group of tarnished gold,
my people sitting in their fog,
quite content because they don't remember
what a clear day feels like.

Redwoods

Know, my dears, that age is about perspective.
We don't tear down the Redwoods
just because they're old.
And some of us aren't even ancient trees;
even the young can fall.

Lynnie lived in Hutchins Corners
and drank to make up for the drought.
Slowly, her brain began to reject reality.
She now swims in alcohol-induced
dementia; she is forty-nine.

Howard's only problem, on the other hand,
is that he sometimes forgets his daughters' names.
He is ninety-four and asks the ladies to go
down to the city for a drink.

We are a forest of many. And then there
is me: sixty-four. By this age, I'd planned
on retiring and traveling to Kosovo
to do charity work, but I am in the first
stages of Alzheimer's, perhaps,
the most frightening one.

I can see the road I will go down as
I look around. The slipping, the fall.
It's hard to see the dark hall I'll be
walking down one day, no choice
to go back, my body failing me.
But I will never forget the old trees
in the woods who are still
standing strong.
I will keep walking for them.

The Deathwatch Beetle

—after *Linda Pastan*

Sharlene likes insects
and has pictures and diagrams
hanging in her room.
She calls me in and pats on the bed
beside her and tells me about
butterflies, grasshoppers, cicadas.
She shows me the graveyard of
Asian beetles on her windowsill.

And the deathwatch beetle, she says
smiling, is not about anything frightening;
it does not have a stinger that poisons,
it does not watch you in the high, un-
reachable corner of the room; it simply
gets its name from the ticking
sound it makes.

“It’s a timekeeper,” I say with a small smile.
She answers, “It’s a witness.”

Carnival Day at the House

I'm dressed as a gypsy: long, purple lace
dress, gaudy, sparkly jewelry,
a handkerchief.

I walk in and some of the residents
take a second look at me; maybe now
they wonder if they're going mad.

I wink and take out the Velcro ball and board,
place the plastic lily pads on the floor, set up the mini-
basketball hoop. Blow up balloons, dump the tiny
chocolates into the bowl.

Line up, I say as I wheel them closer. The mobile
ones walk slowly. Anna is the first to go.
Usually so sophisticated and solemn,
her face breaks out into a smile when the ball sticks
to the board. I take a picture and for a second
she loses 70 years.

Nadia is next at the lily pads. She speaks only
Russian and misunderstands the directions.
Instead, she steps on the pads in her satin
slippers, her own slow-dance.
We must let her do this.

The lasting picture is one I took of Lila
holding the string of a pink balloon.
Though her eyesight is poor, she looks up
at the balloon with such gratitude, thanking it
for buoying her up.

Visitor

—for Terry, so dedicated

For you to visit me on Wednesdays
I must intrigue you greatly.
You brush my hair, chat away,
paint my nails.
One day I even saw smoky eye-shadow
on my lids.
You stand between me and the TV
urging me to lift my knees
for exercise. You massage strawberry lotion
into my hands, oceans of wrinkles
waving you near.
I vaguely hear Dean Martin
and Rosemary Clooney as you lift
my arms like a pretty puppeteer.

Before dinner, you leave, kiss me
on the forehead, tell me you love me.
I watch you walk out the door
and into your car.
Why do you want to visit me?
I have not answered any of your questions;
I cannot speak. I have not clinked
Coke-a-cola cans with you; I cannot
move my arms.

I remember you for ten seconds after
you leave and then you are a stranger
in my guestbook of strangers who just
happens to come again next week.
Those words you utter as you leave—
I cannot say them back because
I see my cup and pills coming
which reminds me of Baltimore which
reminds me of dinner.

The Bebe

Theresa never wears her teeth.
Even as she naps in the chair,
her tongue darts in and out
like an excitable, fat, fleshy
snake. She mumbles things
in Italian, no doubt orders to
her children or long-lost songs
from Venice.

She dresses in pink and yellow,
not quite baby, not quite lady.
She plays peek-a-boo when provoked
and laughs when you wiggle
your fingers at her.

She stole one of the other women's dolls.
She swears it's her baby; like the woman/child
she is, dragging it behind her wherever
she toddles. She squeezes
the air out of her when she hugs it.
"Ma bebe," she says.
Who are we to separate mother from child?

Dialogue

It's not your time, but I shall hold you.

You try living in cobwebbed fog. Losing mobility—losing dignity

It's not your time, but I shall hold you.

but you're holding on to a lost and wordless woman

It's not your time, but I shall hold you
I shall hold you.

Summer Sausage Sandwich

His favorite visitor was the snack girl
who pulled cookies, pretzels, apple and
strawberry juice on a cart behind her.
Sometimes she'd made summer sausage
sandwiches with just a small piece
of cheddar in between two Ritz crackers.
He liked that with lemonade; it reminded
him of hickory smoke and barbecues, of
kids playing tag, running in and out of his legs.
The kiwi juice reminded him of her
for he had never had it before.
Her sitting on the edge of his bed
dressed in a spotted white apron,
all promises and smiles.

The Curious Marriage

Roselyn died three months ago and
Kenny looked away quietly and fixed
his eyes upon Charlotte.

In her, he saw his Rosie at the Grand Canyon,
the birth of Angeline and Richard,
her orchid garden. Even her hands
had the same wrinkles in the right places.
Kenny was sure that, were he up to dancing
as he normally would be,
she would know the exact steps.

Meanwhile, Charlotte is one who
always has her hair done up in curls
and looks like anyone's grandmother.
But her fog is thick. She examines everything:
the plastic plants, the arm chair cover, the
hem of her skirt which she holds above her head.
It's a challenge to get her to eat as she shreds
her napkin and pours her apple juice
over the Tater Tots.

But on the couch, they hold hands
and she often leans her head
on Kenny's shoulder.
So he gets his wife and Charlotte gets
a body to rest against,
and they are both young, naïve
newlyweds who we try not
to bother with reality.

"I'm sorry it's difficult, any easier would be a lie"

—Brenda Hillman

I looked up from the newspaper
saw something that looked like
her girdle slung over the chair
Something that looked like a
strand of her white hair on the couch
Where is she?
At 6:00 I get my next pill

Music Box

In the music box a delicate
melody plays; she watches the plastic
figurine twirl, her tutu
suspended in air.

Her grandmother gave this to her
when she was a young one
in the early 1920s.
Grandmother was blind and

only spoke Yiddish but she
handed this music box to her
with such pride that language
did not matter; it was only

the sound of the melody
taking them far away,
away from Chicago slums
to a concert featuring

the beautiful ballerina
in a standing-room-only show
perhaps in Paris or Moscow;
it could be anywhere.

Grandmother and granddaughter
could understand each other's
speech through the arabesques
and leaps of the thin wispy wind

of a girl dressed in pink.

Fragile

dinner repetitions
eat and eat
sleep expectations
sleep and sleep
ten Chinese lanterns, all in a row
not coming out of it
a fall that stays on the ground, in the hip
night lights that light the way to Hollywood
to the bathroom with the toilet chair
teeth floating in the plugged up sink
a string to pull
yank
trying to come out of it
a fall

I Practice Saying Goodbye

I sit everywhere; wherever I can,
the foot stool, the floor;
I perch quietly.
I sit at the foot of your bed
watching the buttons of your nightgown
move up and down.
The nurses feed you downstairs
where you so often
fade in front of the TV screen.
You sit on the couch
with a child's sewing card in your lap,
similar to the one you once taught me
when I was little and unable
to take care of myself.

Rebecca

You found in me a good Jewish girl.
Your voice was barely there like my
cat who spoke too much.
Such a tiny thing you were with your
white pixie hair.

3:30 P.M. became our chat time, so you told me
of your two husbands, your mother,
as we sat on your bed, dining on crackers,
strawberry juice, and

on the day I came to work
frazzled, anxious, sad,
you mentioned that I made
life here bearable
and I burst into tears.

You took hold of my hands, said
Don't ever let anyone bring you down
and I looked at you and though
you knew nothing about what
was then wrong in my life,
I thought, "grandmother"

you thought "friend," and I'm relying
on your bad memory to forget
that I crossed the boundary that day
and cried,
my head buried in your lap.

Thief

Last night, in the midst of sleep,
I sensed someone in my room.
I am quite sure they took something of mine,
perhaps the piece of moon I had captured
from my ten o'clock staring out the window.
I wanted to leap up and catch them, but
felt bound to my bed.

Today we had a cowboy singer downstairs
and hats were passed out—straw and leather,
reminding me of the Arbor farm
when I was a girl, how the smell
of hay and dung infiltrated
my nose as Thomas McDaniel first
kissed me in the horse barn.

Maybe they were trying to steal the hay,
my kiss, Thomas's crooked smile,
the pile of hay we sat upon.
Maybe they tried to steal the moment I looked
out into the congregation and saw Thomas sitting
there, hat in hand. My gaze was broken by
Fred pulling my chin toward him into
our first marital kiss.

Sometimes I feel wind on my lips, wind
in the shape of lips, and I'm reminded
of my babies, of Fred, of Mother's last
dying kiss. My great-grandbabies come
in and give me kisses now and they smell like
new grass and clay. I pray no one steals them away.

The Resurrection of Evelyn

How the flesh resurrects itself
when it sags and wrinkles.
An old, antique woman now,
she looks in the mirror and sees
a resurgence of flesh and heart.
She places a gold barrette into
her long, dark hair, smiles so that
each dimple shows. Her eyes reveal
a glimmer of the smart business
woman she was. She looks down
at her slim fingers, perfect for
the sonatas she played at Carnegie.
The scents she recognizes are
rose, Endust, Oil of Olay.
This is the way out of the world.
One last look back and she'd
see a ghost.

I'm Going Downstairs

The forty of them
who are not my grandparents. . .
I visit them as an adult
the way I could not love my grandparents
as a child.

Wednesdays are when I sit and stroke
snowy hair drizzled with grey. I sing
the lullabies my mother sang
to me and listen to
nonsensical monologues:

"I'm going downstairs," one mumbles
with glassy eyes.
I hold their hands as they
go down. It's a hard job for I can only
steady them, ready them
from up here;

their journey below
is theirs alone.
So their minds cloud over,
they don't notice hair
and teeth falling out;

jelly runs down their mouths.
The air smells of squash and Vaseline.
You think they don't understand?
"I'm going downstairs," one says again.
"Will someone be waiting for me?"



Driven by the twin muses of confessional poetry and theatre from a young age, Lisa Marie Brodsky grew up in Chicago and received her B.A. in English/Creative Writing from Loyola University. In 2001 she moved to Madison, and she completed her M.F.A. in poetry in 2005. She has been published in *Atlanta Review*, *Born Magazine*, *The North American Review*, and *The Southern Ocean Review*, among others. She won first place in *Circle Magazine*'s poetry contest and honorable mention from the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poetry. She founded and facilitates *Inside Out Writing Workshops*, which focus on the benefits of emotional healing through creative writing. Lisa Marie currently resides in Fitchburg, Wisconsin.

PARALLEL PRESS POETS

Marilyn Annucci • F.J. Bergmann • Lisa Marie Brodsky
• Harriet Brown • Charles Cantrell • Robin Chapman
Cathryn Cofell • Temple Cone • Francine Conley • Paul Dickey
CX Dillhunt • Heather Dubrow • Gwen Ebert • Barbara Edelman
Susan Elbe • Karl Elder • R. Virgil Ellis • Jean Feraca
Jim Ferris • Doug Flaherty • Allison Funk • Max Garland
Ted Genoways • John Graber • Richard Hedderman
Rick Hilles • Karla Huston • Catherine Jagoe • Diane Kerr
Carl Lindner • Sharon F. McDermott • Mary Mercier
Corey Mesler • Stephen Murabito • John D. Niles • Elizabeth Oness
Roger Pfingston • Andrea Potos • Eve Robillard
James Silas Rogers • Michael Salcman • Carmine Sarracino
Shoshauna Shy • Judith Sornberger • Judith Strasser
Alison Townsend • Dennis Trudell • Tisha Turk
Ron Wallace • Timothy Walsh • Matt Welter
Katharine Whitcomb • J.D. Whitney • Mason Williams



Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

<http://parallepress.library.wisc.edu>
ISBN: 978-1-893311-96-1