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



*Rendered
into Paradise*

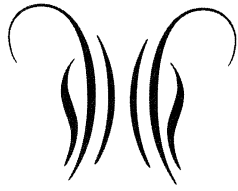


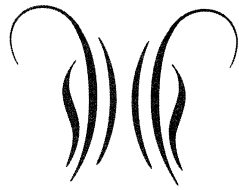
POEMS BY JEAN FERACA

JEAN FERACA is an award-winning poet, essayist and public radio broadcaster. A world traveler, Jean grew up in New York, earned a Master's Degree in English language and literature from the University of Michigan, did doctoral work at the University of Kentucky, and worked as a free-lance reporter for National Public Radio before joining Wisconsin Public Radio in 1983. Jean is host and co-producer of Wisconsin Public Radio's nationally recognized news and cultural affairs call-in program, *Conversations with Jean Feraca*. Her writings have been anthologized in *The Dream Book*, which won the American Book Award in 1986. Winner of a Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship and a NEA grant, as well as *The Nation's* 1975 Discovery Award, Jean has published two books of poetry, *South from Rome: II Mezzogiorno*, and *Crossing the Great Divide*. Jean currently resides in Madison, Wisconsin, with her husband.

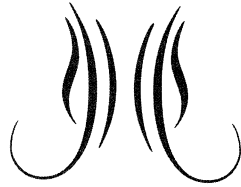
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JEAN FERACA



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I am grateful to the Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission for its support in naming me lead poet of its Isthmus Poetry Series. An earlier version of “Bacchus at St. Benedict’s” appeared in the Dec. 13, 1996, issue of *Isthmus*.

I am grateful to Molly Peacock for her guidance in support of these poems; to Donald Hall, master teacher and mentor; to Ken Frazier, boon companion and friend to poets.

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FIRST EDITION

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Happiness

It was Swami Satchadananda who set her straight.
You are the source of your own happiness, he told her
out of the blue, looking her straight in the eye
and tapping it into her chest.

Then came the bridegroom, pressing his suit.
Are you capable of happiness? he quizzed her.
This was serious. He had put it to the test.
She checked the box marked *Yes*.
A choice. A deliverance.

All this came as a great surprise
to one who had pressed her face against the glass.
Happiness had passed her by like the boys on their flexible flyers.
It was a shock to have it show up now like her mother in a nightgown
standing on the schoolbus steps waving a lost lunch.

Once, in the middle of the night, lightning had struck the iron lamp
on her desk, summoning her father to the threshold like Zeus.
If happiness came at all, she thought it might come like that,
a thunderclap that would strike hard,
or bounce around on the ground like pearls and be briefly lost.

The wonder was that it would have so little to do with sex
or God; be more like a game of connect-the-dots or
pick-up-sticks she might have played with a friend
sitting cross-legged on the bare wooden floor.

That it would return her to the peace of pebbles in her father's yard
where she had played as a child under the leafy ears of the oaks;
to a sky the ragman tented with his cry each spring
restoring columbine and larkspur to the fieldstone wall.

That maybe—ah, now here's a thought—it had been there all along,
invisible above the clouds, a plane
that went on humming on a summer afternoon,
droning on over the bounce of a red rubber ball,
the crash of jacks on gray plank boards,
the perfect ring a tumbler left, lifted from the silt.

That it would forgive the day she squatted in the shade
of Mrs. C's garden, too busy to run indoors,
thinking that the little pile she'd left
steaming under a still-swaying branch of bleeding heart
was soft and brown and beautiful as the chestnut nose on the
ragman's horse.

The Dinner of Everything Gold

on the autumnal equinox

Greedy for gold this day of black rain
I cut into Katherine Keller's yellow tomato,
so darkly ripe it bursts, spurting seeds
across my palm. I dig in the plump ottoman
soft as a womb, paring a gray gum
from the cave. Inside, it is all smiles
in the place of ribbed light I enter
under the dome
where the golden lyre is hung
and the queen has hidden her first-born son.

The tomato thumps in the pot, bronzing
carrots plundered from a monastery plot.
I slice a Hungarian pepper into the caramel.
Then I remember the woody taste of roasted
sweet potato left from last night's supper
and melt in a medallion or two. The mashy
pulp thickens. I have my palette—
copper, cinnamon, saffron, and a twist of the
wicked red licorice stick, *Corno de Toro*.
Now I am committed.

The zest I grate from an orange brings back the tang
of the air on Paros where octopus tentacles tangle
over the transoms like tongues, and the harbor
at Nausa still reeks *Barbarosa*.
This is no sauce I am stirring.
It is the alchemist's fire of molten gold,
the pudding in the painted bowl we spooned back and forth,
the child in its yolk-yellow sac we might have begat
had we not decided, instead, to eat it for supper.
I swirl in a dollop of butter.

See how the red horn of the bull softens in the gold?
What matter that the sky weeps like Magdalene?
That the year augurs disaster?

We have our ambergris. We have our alabaster.

Dare I say to you after all that has happened,

Take. Eat. Child, boat and bowl.

Let omens abound: Tonight we feast on tortelloni
crowned with a sauce that crows like cocks on Kauai,
no matter how close the rivermouth, the sharks,
or the waves blown backward. We've set our course.

Think of the grace that guided me home this noon

to the gift of a golden tomato. Think of the table

I have prepared for you, the guest of honor.

Haven't I seen you through murder, betrayal, dishonor?

This is the year, I tell you, the farmer who lashes himself
to the tracks will get up and go home to his supper.

The boy who turns in his father will turn again to seek his favor.

The expedition of diabetics will reach Mt. Aconcagua.

The felon who sleeps in a cell on a gunmetal pallet
will burn with his bloody red lover from Bratislava.

Bacchus at St. Benedict's

I

Three days after I settled in at the monastery
Bacchus paid me a visit in late afternoon.

I had been waiting all day under the slick leaves of the oaks,
pacing from porch to pool in the heat.
Even the great bell lost its claim on my mind.
I was tuned
to a subtler meld—the faint crush
of gravel on the dirt road.

He was out in a flash, teeth, shades,
sun shining through his red hand, upraised.
It gleamed, waving the wine.
"I found a 1983 botrytis Sémillon!" he sang
to someone who'd been chanting psalms three days.

2

The first surge was the pool, waking up
to his wide plunge.
Big-eyed, I watched the water seize,
rocked to its knees.

We set out along a meadow sliced by swallows
when the sky was turning ruddy.
The road, studded with apple, pear, and mulberry,
veered, and we lost
the red, dipping
into shade below the Sisters' cemetery.

He nodded at the oratory, approved
the icons, but when we came
upon the chapel, and I explained
holy wine inside the tabernacle,
he had to be restrained, thinking
In there, at least, I'll find a decent wineglass!

3

On the porch, he poured the Sémillon,
then a Gewürztraminer
he matched with salmon, pink slabs
of watermelon, white rinds
lined with green grinning from black plates.
Delicacies he presented two at a time,
now a crown of garlic
now a round of bread. . . .

He was ceremonious, stirring the strawberries,
his red hand cool,
too classy to disgrace this novice.
It was she, in fact, who finally did it,
setting down her glass to pose the question,
"How long before we take off our clothes?"

4

Midmorning the day after, he's gone in a spurt of gravel.
It's noon before I can resume my life of measure
heeding the bell that calls us to chapel.
'thinking on death every day.'

Jesus and Bacchus, Jesus and Bacchus, what am I doing?
I'm writing a poem about the god of wine.
Does a wine thief wound the barrel?
Does it matter which vat
(*red or white?*) we dip from
if it's rapture
we're after, why not be drunk by noon?

Hiding Out In the Hourglass House

for my son, Giancarlo

These days steal by as soft as latchkey clicks
in the lock, stroking us with the regular tick
and chime of five clocks, telling the hours
of secret exile here: we're hiding out
like burglars in a lair, or lovers' rendezvous.

So finely tuned to whirl and hum, as fingertip
to pulse, we're close as clockwork falling into sync.
How sweet this rain of sticky crumbs and kisses
I keep sweeping from your lips for fear
some Jay might follow here, and gobble you up.

This is a church, you chirped that Sunday we arrived,
staring up at the window staining you pink.
Inside asylum walls we wind five clocks
and slide a bolt across the double door
leaving wide-eyed owls keeping watch.

Such simple things make up our daily round—
your dewy cheek, the feathered down I trace
along your spine, your head above the claw-foot tub
waiting as I mount the stair and spy you
in the skylight there—my butterfly, my catch.

Before you sleep we sip from tiny glasses
you think just for you—I watch your amber eye
in the crystal you hold up enlarge
and multiply, both of us laughing at the trick.
Contentment numbs my sense. I'm stupid with it.

I nuzzle you under my chin, my syllables
simmer in your ear: *uccellino*,
piccioncino mio, *sweetness, sweetness*,
my fat little squab fallen into this lap
of days, I whisk you up! O windfall, gathered in.

We should be hurrying on. Outside the gates,
an ambush waits, the engine in the alley droning
through our sleep. I dream we're shatterproof.
No woods at all, no witch, no stinging heat.
We sink through time. We're trapped in Hourglass House.

In the Japanese Tearoom

for Dominick

I

This is not where you wanted to turn eighteen.
You had to leave your jungle boots outside
and wedge your backpack sideways through the door.
Now you sit steaming like a slagheap
in your socks, eyeing the sushi that's just arrived.

Animal heat leaks through the black leather jacket
you wear like a shield, suffusing this ricepaper room
with a slow sulphurous perfume. It makes me queasy,
watching from the low table in the dim light
your weight shift and rock from side to side,
to think, like a toad in magma you might blow up.

We poise along this fault line, sipping saki.
Shouts of the samurai chefs reach through the wall.
You are about to tear into the big bag
beside you on the floor, crumpling columns
of boxes, wrappings, ribbons, like Samson smashing
the temple. You were always such a roughneck.

2

I was the first box you broke, my body
the canvas you dripped and splattered with ribbons of blood,
your big shoulders riding the tide, you tore
free at thirteen minutes to midnight,
and delivered yourself, nobody ready but you.

You dug a trench to China, and then began,
to haul boulder by boulder the neighbor's retaining
wall from one backyard to another.
You sent a hellish din up from the cellar.
You painted your shoes, your pants, your shirts, your walls
in starry intergalactic swirls; outgrowing that,

you assaulted the world with a clawed hammer.
Now you upset other orders
making easels rumble in 2D,
hacking valentines from beefsteak hearts
with a box cutter and a blowtorch.

My boy, is the world itself too small?
Too tight a container?
Are the colors in the paintbox too pale?
Were you sent to shatter every border?

August I

Cicadas chew the eye of noon.

Joe-pye

high as I am.

Orioles in soundless pairs over the goldenrod
rise.

The air, stabbed like a saint with sorrow and desire
shrills.

This is the sound love makes.

Love's apple

lets go the bough,

drops

to earth with a *thump*, round and rosy-cheeked.

My mother's dead three weeks.

August II

The hollyhocks unbuttoning behind the house
fumble with their stiffened shirts.
They crash and fall like drunks across the drive.

Somebody throws the dice hard.
Walnuts pock the roof.
Grasshoppers thrum their thighs like punk guitars

as the din, ratcheting upwards, tightens like a scrotum
and it's hard to breathe the thick air
plush as plum-skin.

The cat twitches its ears at twilight, a black spot
pinned into quivering gold, holding alive
the light that dies in the rabbit's eyes.

I slip a mask inside my mother's coffin.

Vigil at Mt. Vernon Stream

Casting over the water, breathing out
breathing in,
I held that slippery bank for days.

She was the trout I sang to, as the line
poured out, *Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra*. . . .
Just a song at twilight. . . .
I dream of Jeanie. . . .

She was sly as a smile
as she kept rolling over, flashing a nipple,
and the flies kept hatching out.

It was a game of nip and tuck, hook and lip.
At last, as the grassy stream went dark as a dream,
a bell tolled.

We played each other out.

Mater Dolorosa

I

Mother most sad
Mother most silent
Mother afflicted
Mother demented
Mother transfixed with grief
Mother given to the Lutherans
Mother bereft of her children
Mother left to die alone

Mirror of patience
Seat of wisdom
Well of calm
Smiling tiger
Lady from Niger
Eye of the storm

We children, that you might hear us
We children, that you might spare us
We children, that you might bring us with you into heaven
 to share in the company of your mother
 and your sister and your brother and our father

From your wrath, deliver us
From your scorn, deliver us
From your mop and pail, deliver us
Mother, have mercy
Mother, have mercy
Mother, have mercy
Remember us, O Mother
Now and at the hour of our death.

II

Grassy Mound
Chicken Little
Clammy brow
Mother of the clean sheet
Hole where I came out
Hole where my sister came out
Hole where my brother came out
Mouth that my father kissed
Mexican Hairless
Font of bliss

Blue Rose
Baby rose
Pressed rose
Primrose
Rock rose
Rosey the Riveter

III

Steam iron
Sweating kettle
Rising scum
Rocking cradle
Boiled egg
Rusty ladle
Mother of vapors and rubs
She who kept us alive
She who did not dash our brains out.

Broken tooth
Pearly gate
Bloody root
Mother of maggots and moths
We praise you, we bless you, we call your name.

Mother of liniments and cloths
Mother of iodine
Mother of gauze
She who bound up our wounds
She who painted our thumbs
Mother of ovens and stoves
Rubber glove
Mother of cloves
Mother of the clean steps
Hear me, look on me, remember me, O Mother
Now and at the hour of our death.

IV

Rosy ghost
Vapor trail
Baby's breath
Face veil
Freight cargo
Motherlode
Flashgun
Silver bullet
Screaming Mimi
Loose cannon
Shining path
Vacuum cleaner
Third rail

Panorama in the Anza-Borrego Desert

This is the only thing
as big as my mother's death.

At Long Last

A Meditation on My Mother's Dementia

Your flowers arrived the morning of the April snowstorm while the flakes were swirling thick and fast through the astonished trees. They kept falling all day and on into the night so that by late afternoon, I had to kneel in the frontyard and dig through six inches of snow to rescue hyacinths that had only just bloomed. It was an amazing thing to be on my knees led by the perfume that was coming right up through the snow. I found the first hyacinth face-down on its thick stem as if it had swooned on its own scent. You would have thought it fragile, but no; it was still fresh, perfectly intact, preserved in all that packed snow. I thought of Heathcliff unburying his Catherine— how he must have exulted to dig her up and find his prize still uncorrupted.

The bodies of the saints are incorruptible, or so we were taught. It was one of the signs by which you knew they were holy, like Mother Cabrini. My mother used to drag me around to all the shrines in New York City while she was trying in vain to stanch her sister's dying. I saw Mother Cabrini laid out in a glass coffin just like Snow White's. Instead of the stench of decay her body gave off the odor of sanctity, or so they said, a scent I imagined as delicate as violets.

My mother said she felt like a chaired relic that Mother's Day I pushed her around the arboretum in her wheelchair as we made our ritual rounds to see the lilacs in full bloom.

Like Heathcliff who couldn't give up his dead, there was a man in Adams County, Wisconsin, who slept with his wife a full week through a cholera epidemic before he could bring himself to call in the coroner. I heard of an Englishman from Devon who keeps his mate embalmed in a secret drawer he opens whenever he's had a bad day, just a touch against his cheek. And who could forget the nurse in the AIDS documentary on the morning of his lover's death? "Just look at David," he said, gazing at the wasted corpse with its grizzled head and mottled skin, "Isn't he beautiful?"

So I can't quite bring myself to give up your bouquet, even though it's over two weeks old. I love finding it again each morning in the middle of the massive table, a fresh scattering of tiny buds left on the doily overnight. The sweet-peas are paler now, bluish at the tips and reddening toward the center, but they still branch upward into the vault of the ceiling like candelabra. And the coreopsis let go only this morning, twisting as it fell. Throughout this spate of gloomy weather, the whole thing has seemed to darken rather than wither, keeping its essence so that its soul goes on singing *I am, I am*, as pink as my mother's cheeks. "Rosy," my father used to say with that glint, "you still have your shape."

The tulips were the first to go. They were naked as knitting needles without their pale yellow petals. I left the stems in place longer than I should have, admiring them for their pure form before drawing them out one by one, the way you might draw out the last good thoughts from a brain.

I watched a nurse's aide wash my mother the other day—turning her from left to right the way you turn a lamb in a roasting pan—my mother was just that indifferent, just that turned away. I watched the hand in its see-through glove trace down along the crack between her buttocks and thighs like crushed chiffon, applying the salve, then turning her over to wash the pale mound where the scant hairs have gone blond and white. "I'm a Mexican Hairless," she used to joke. Now I know why. I was shocked at my mother's nakedness. I tried to imagine being born, tried to grasp the bald unthinkable thought, *This is where I came out, my head budded out of this vase. This is my source, my Itasca, my snowy alp.*

That hussy heliotrope. The gauzy vase the flowers came in that sets the whole thing off. It glows from the bottom up. My mother had a nightgown just that shade, a shocking violet so sheer you could see right through it when we plucked it out of her trousseau trunk. How we used to love to prance around in those nightgowns dripping in French lace that had been handstitched by her pretty sister. But this one was different. Nobody dared try it on. It had a scalloped neckline

trimmed in ecru lace that was richer and darker than the others, a tea stain that carried a taint. My mother, *in flagrante*.

Now I realize with a shock there was a Janis Joplin in my mother. A vamp. An outlaw. An exhibitionist I once watched drop her drawers in front of a Jesuit priest on a day she just happened to be wearing her Alice-blue panties. *Is that what's keeping her alive? Her un-lived life? The wild woman never let out of the trunk? Is that why I can't let go of her?*

Your flowers must have come from the bottom of your heart, just as it said on the card. Nothing so perishable could possibly last this long if it hadn't come right out of that muck. The mulch mat where we all get our start. And the place, too, where we finish, when the stalks that reach up into the vault, the anthurium and the coreopsis, have all gone soft.

The Queen Anne's lace lasts longest. I think of my mother's brain making itself into lace. The holes left by the strokes. The tiny platters and plaques and bundles of neurofibrillary tangles torn apart and knotting. The dendrites twisting and turning until what's left settles like a shrug, a white hairpin lace shawl she might have worn to a concert on a summer night, not something that thinks at all.

Is this, then, how it will end? Is my mother's brain turning into the child she never wanted to be, dutiful, obedient, plying her needle? Will it go on making lace like those island girls off Venice who worked until their beautiful blownglass eyes went blind, and their minds went white as plates? Then, will I throw your flowers out?

"Mrs. Feraca, if we come into your room and find that you've stopped breathing, do you want us to do something?"

A River of Ice and Sapphires

My father's ram's-head ring she always wore
spilled from her hand to the floor
one day as she lay dying,
but the marbles in the blue glass jar beside her bed
stayed, like the eyes in her head.

Those eyes! Cracked sapphires.
I love those eyes!
You can't have them, she said.

That was no surprise.
Hadn't she come from a tribe that kept what they prized?
Hadn't she once told me about the old lady
who locked herself in when the house caught fire
and died with her fists full of jewels?

Fire and ice twitched together
in my mother's head where a dangerous river
would sometimes start to melt and move,
like the day she slammed the iron down hard,
and started to curse. *God Almighty!* The iron reared,
hissing and snorting on her upraised arm like a thunderhead.
I felt the steam kiss my cheek.
I was a child.
I hardly looked at the iron.
It was the ice in her eyes held me riveted.

Stop looking at me! I can hear my brother cry.
You've been looking at me all my life!
Hawkeye, I called her.
That gaze went through you like a laser.

But I couldn't get enough of it.
I kept hovering, hoping that a fish or a star
might slide through, something with flash
to warm myself by.

Staring into those eyes, I started out across the Ohio,
the river melting and rushing downstream,
the current hurrying me under.
Whatever it was held me up, willy-nilly, wasn't me.
I would have gladly drowned drinking that water.

Three days before my mother died, her mind cleared.
Her cheeks and forehead shone like snow on silver.
Oh, how beautiful you are! Look! How beautiful!
I kept exclaiming standing beside her.
She gave no sign she knew me.
And then without any warning, her eyes locked mine.

Like the thousand slippery dimes my father once poured
into my outstretched hands, I gasped at the force
of that surge. Our two densities met and merged
emptying into one another beyond mother or daughter,
her blue into my brown, and we flowed that way together
until I felt everything she had ever withheld
flood into me,
faith, fortune, forgiveness,
as I swam through the blue electric river of my mother.

Open Letter to My Body

I love your greed. I want you to know that right from the start. All they condemn in you, the raptore and the tiger, I love you for. The way you tear into the box and rip away the tissue in your quest to get at what's inside. Your stripes. I love their licorice gleam. The gun that is you, with its load. The way you can lie in the dark for hours and then suddenly explode.

I am only a small woman in the middle of my life, but you, you are an outlaw. I saw a picture of the two of us once in a National Geographic. It stopped me short. There you were, Jurassic in your splendor, a gigantic femur breaking right out of the frame, standing up tall without a heart or a brain, soaring over your own clumsiness. And there I was, standing proudly right beside you in my khakis and slouch-brim hat, barely coming up to your knee. Me and my body.

What I am about to tell you will be difficult for you to hear.

Last week, it was all Jamaica. The sprawling veranda in late afternoon, the cloud trail, the spangled slide down to the water, tree frogs banging away all night in the frangipani like so many sophomores. And you were creaking with desire, ready to roll off with the first boys to come aboard.

Oh body, steeped in rum and brine! Think of all you've survived. How many times I've pushed you under. So many sins against the flesh. The body denied and betrayed, over and over, the big belly beaten for what it had begat. Is it any wonder, then, this boy you're so in love with has also thrown you over, watched with alligator eyes as you went under.

And here we are, back in the monastery, single as a cell, ice forming on every window. It's January in this place where feelings sleep like stone hands. And I am about to deny you again, put you away quietly like a mad wife. Oh, haven't I heard those howls in the middle of the night, deep guttural growls, coming from God knows where. Don't I know how you love it, the slightest touch, the juice, the jumper cable jolts in the parking lot. How you die for it. How it's never enough

what they feed you, how angry you are to be kept alive on a leash. How outraged you are when the warlords run off with the rice.

We understand you will not be denied forever. This is a grave matter. We understand that.

It is so quiet in this room. The air is charged and thick between us. It is like being alone in a room with someone who has just died. Body still breathing without a heart. Soul shuffling her feet back and forth, not quite ready to pull on her boots and go out forever under the stars.

Oh, come on. You've had your day. You stood there for a whole season covered in tinsel and glitz, this pinch-pleat angel pinned in your hair, these little bears and elves dangling from your arms over that cave with its labial sheep and tiny bud asleep in the hay. Little mound with a halo. Hot spot swimming in the twin streams of the donkey and the ox. Locus of all this commotion.

Just imagine, instead of the Last Judgment, a Big Bash down on the Levee where we all get it on. The drums are going wild. John the Baptist, that maniac, is first to arrive. He's the one who rolls out the barrel and gets us all off dancing with his head. It was only his head he lost after all. Then all the lovers who were banished and torn from each other's arms begin to appear at the top of the hill. Guinevere with her Lancelot. Eloise with Abelard. Francis with Clare. All the mutilated and the castrated are made whole again. All those sent into exile, who were tortured and put to death, return again restored. Joan shows up with her horse and her footsoldiers, and finds another way to enter fire.* Agatha appears with her sweet young breasts. Catherine, let down from her wheel. And, look who's here, isn't it you, come home again, let out after that long exile, and don't we get to dance together all night long. Surely, this is what they meant by the risen life! The earth spinning on the Axis Mundi. Gaia, wading into the river waist-deep, emerging on the other side like Hera at the spring, girlish again, virginal, clean and pink.

*The phrase, which finds another way into fire, echoes the last line of Mary Oliver's poem "Sunrise" (1986), in *Dream Work* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press).

Rendered into Paradise

I ask myself, when did it arrive,
this thing that comes through walls like Christ at Emmaus?

It enters in disguise
seated at the table in the rooming house,
the stranger you never recognize
who never says a word, never lifts his head
until the day he meets you with his level gaze
and asks, *Please pass the salt.*

That happiness hides right out in the open. . . .

Or else, it comes in late, like a father
home from work, weighed down
with gravel in his trouser-cuffs, who tiptoes
in his stocking feet to lift his baby out of sleep.

And there it is, the love that dandles you
against all prohibition,
holds you up before you learn to walk;
Wooh, wooh? love asks,
wooh, you answer back.
And so it goes, coaxing forth the vowels,
the song that teaches you to talk, imprinting bliss,
plucking the notes right out of your heart.

This happiness grows beneath the surface, cell by cell,
accruing over time until it rules
a reef, a continental shelf,
runs deep
as grief, abides
like marrow in the bone, provides
the spoon you need to dig it out.

But you have to really want it.
You have to choose, and then, be willing
to be rendered into paradise like lard.

O Lord, I am willing.



RENDERED INTO PARADISE

by Jean Feraca

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