



LIBRARIES

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

The required accompanying cover letter: poetry. 2011

Fein, Richard, 1944-

Madison, Wisconsin: Parallel Press, 2011

<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/RDDBNJTRCSRVC8O>

Copyright 2011 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All rights reserved.

For information on re-use see:

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/Copyright>

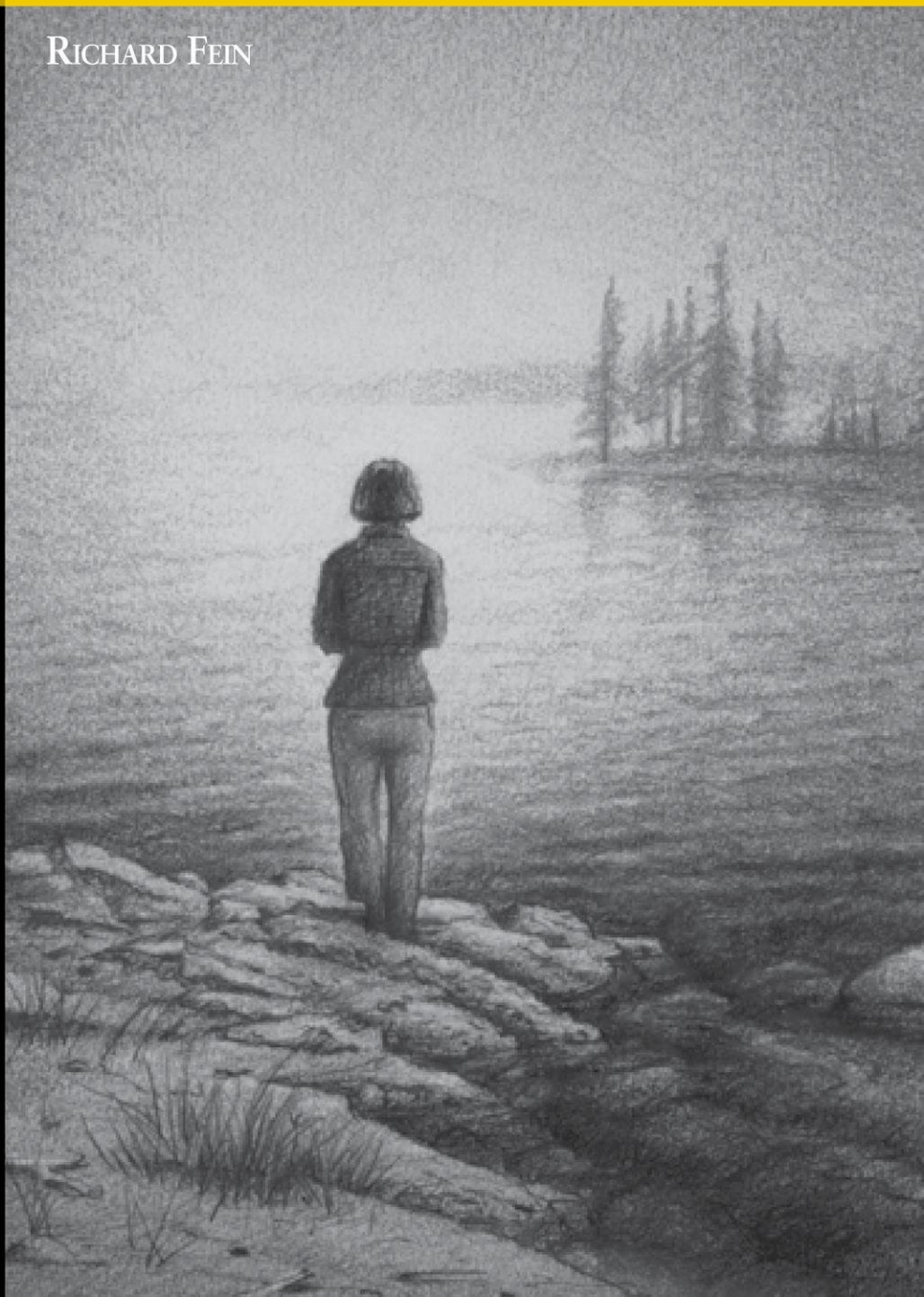
The libraries provide public access to a wide range of material, including online exhibits, digitized collections, archival finding aids, our catalog, online articles, and a growing range of materials in many media.

When possible, we provide rights information in catalog records, finding aids, and other metadata that accompanies collections or items. However, it is always the user's obligation to evaluate copyright and rights issues in light of their own use.

The Required Accompanying Cover Letter

RICHARD FEIN

parallel press **poetry series**



A Parallel Press Chapbook

The Required Accompanying Cover Letter

Poetry by
Richard Fein

Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

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

Copyright © 2011 by the Board of Regents of
the University of Wisconsin System

All rights reserved

ISBN: 978-1-934795-26-2

Poems in this chapbook appeared previously in these publications:

“The Required Accompanying Cover Letter” in *The Southern Review*;
“Rocking Between Subway Stations” in *Loch Raven Review*; “Second
Funeral” in *Megaera* and *Limestone*; “Follow The Wise Spelunker” in
Wilderness House Literary Review; “Cetacean Creed” in *Small Pond*;
“Letters And Spirit” in *Penwood Review*; “Rhetorical Questions About The
Ultimate Cause” in *Twisted Tongue*; “Dead Wires” in *Snakeskin*; “Aisle
Of Improbabilities” in *The Horsethief’s Journal*; “Lady,” in *The Morpo
Review* and *Adagio Verse Quarterly*; “A Question Of Thirteen Seconds”
in *Mississippi Review*; “Snowflake” in *Ariga*; “Crosscurrents” in *Windsor
Review* and *Kansas Quarterly*; “Cossacks” in *Sugar Mule*; “The Clown
Who Juggled Starfish” in *Forge Journal*; and “The Champion Retires” in
Stone Country, *Miller’s Pond*, and *Snakeskin*.

Cover illustration by Barry Roal Carlsen

To Jill Sophia Fein
for her appreciation of my poems.

Contents

The Required Accompanying Cover Letter	9
Eschewing Intimacy,	10
Second Funeral	12
Cetacean Creed	13
True Valentine	15
A Scratchy Radio Salvation	16
God The Geek Is Lonely	17
Rhetorical Questions About The Ultimate Cause	18
Dead Wires	19
Narrowing The Meanings	20
Aisle Of Improbabilities	22
Lady,	24
Jazzwoman Nature	25
The Imitative Ability Of Cuttlefish	26
Snowflake	27
Teeth	28
Crosscurrents	29
Cossacks	30
Coronation	31
The Clown Who Juggled Starfish	32
The Champion Retires	33
The Breakdown	34
Follow The Wise Spelunker	35
Letters And Spirit	36
The Poet Photographer Captures The Bridge	37
Rocking Between Subway Stations	38
A Question Of Thirteen Seconds	39
Rear-Ended	41
Still Life	42
A Guilt-Free Sorry	43

The Required Accompanying Cover Letter

Dear Editor:

I'm no ancient Hittite toady,
no genuflecting, groveling supplicant
hugging the ground and baring his back
to serve as a carpet for some parading potentate's feet.
I lick nobody's black boots,
unless it's Mistress Olga's
in her luscious House of Discipline.
Nor am I a fallen gladiator pleading for mercy
before the financial backer of the game,
the first editor,
the Roman progenitor of your professional title.
The arena may now be publishing,
but the contests are just as bloody.
Submit. Submit! Submit?
I should submit a manuscript so you could turn thumbs up or down?
Never! Not this pen-wielding Spartacus!
I don't submit to anyone, and I'm sub to no one.
And so, you nabob of the somewhat erudite,
high priest of the semiliterate,
Charon of the slush pile,
I'm not submitting to you.
But accept my
blessing
and offer up prayers of thanksgiving,
that from an industry jam-packed with jaded eyes
I deigned to pick yours
to behold my immortal scribbles.

Eschewing Intimacy,

he
studied geometry
and pondered the logic
of pawns and kings on checkerboard battlefields.

He
reached out and touched
the world around him
by tinkering with engines
and marveling at the meshing of machine gears.

He
felt warmth
from the glow of incandescent vacuum tubes
of his own design.

He
found companionship
playing with ant colonies
putting sugar on his finger
and watching them crawl for sweetness.

He
found faith in the certainty of computer circuitry
and the accuracy of the output.

He
always bought bonds with a fixed rate of return
whenever he possessed a principal
finding them a lot less worrisome
than chancing those mercurial investments
that only might yield high interest.

He,
of course,
neither loaned nor borrowed much.

He
needed no friend and no friend needed him.

His assets
near the expiration of his term
remained pretty much the same
as when he started, but
he
was satisfied at the final audit that
he
made proper and prudent investments for himself.

Second Funeral

Miss Jane Somers probably died in Switzerland in 1929 of TB,
I surmise, though not from her words exactly.

Her words were couched in hope, but
with each succeeding letter her handwriting seemed weaker.
Always, she wrote, the doctors were keeping her a bit longer,
but she'd be back soon in Coney Island.
No letters dated after 1929.

The wrecking ball did its work,
an entire neighborhood was modernized into broken bricks.
In the tangle I found the box, in the box the letters,
always, "Dear Father." She was 19 in '29.
The box was in a closet,
dusty letters from a long dead daughter.
Now light shines on them one last time,
a final viewing;
the mourner—a rummaging stranger.
Rat droppings, I must wash my hands.
Can't keep the letters, no masterpiece of prose,
and Miss Jane Somers never made the news,
no lost diary of the famous revealed,
nor was she anyone at all to me.
I put the letters back in the box, put the box on the curb
and leave them for the garbage men.

"Dear Father,

*. . . miss you . . . can't wait to come home . . .
write please . . . wait for your letters . . .
hope you wait for mine . . . I'm sure I'm in your prayers,
you're in mine, always."*

Cetacean Creed

Imagine our fantasies about them are true,
that they really had refined their songs
into a melody of words,
merged their herds into tribes,
invented politics, became aware of death,
and now yearn for a faith.

All their feelings are expressed lyrically
and through the flux of pressure waves.

Comrades swim in tight formation.

Soon a whale messiah, a supreme bard, summons the wayward,
singing that none should swim alone,
each should buoy the other in his slipstream.

In a world of motion,

this messiah's call travels the deepest currents across the oceans,
and all whaledom gathers and sways as he moves,
and is anointed by the gentle touch of his fluke.

The common prayer, a breach into the air.

They feel the winds which, by their creed,
sail upward to the inverted blue sea.

The clouds are worshiped as the sprays of ancestors.

Purgatory is the rocky shore,

the shoals pressed hard against their breasts

in a world where hardness is unknown

except at the end of their lives.

But their bard sees

beyond the dry terrain to the most distant shore
where the heavenly sea curves down to the land.
He sings of their loved ones who have washed ashore,
those ancestors who crawled on earth,
their sins scraped away by sand and stone
till they reach the horizon of the heavenly sea.
There they rise again, swimming upward,
breaching, spouting, filling the air with clouds,
while below those left behind
swim together with their bard.
In their world the living and the eternally living
swim in concert across parallel seas.

True Valentine

When Aztec priests ripped one out
with obsidian blades and held it high in the sun,
it still pulsed atop the stone altar.
The heart is acted upon but is no actor.
It confers no love, but love can coax it faster.
One can lose heart and surrender,
but injustice can whip hearts into pounding frenzy.
Hollow center, four convulsing chambers,
if left alone it would race to bursting.
It's the brain that slows it
or pushes it beyond its natural frantic beat.
It's the first working organ in a congealing soul.
Cardiac cells contract immediately upon creation,
then quickly link to conceive a harmony of lub-dubs
played even before the brain spawns the mind.
If pierced by Cupid's arrow this stubborn muscle might yet work.
So no valentine candy box portrays it truly.
Show it as it is, an oblong slab of tenacious red tissue.
A mindless but obedient pump stirring the bodily fluids.
Mindless, obedient, obsessively beating, surging fluids, the heart
truly a proper metaphor for love.

A Scratchy Radio Salvation

Broadcast voices sputter through white noise,
momentary clarity in a matrix of mumbling.

All stations are misaligned,
a soft voice from Canada, a harsh one from Maine,
stock market advice from New York,
10 percent off is being offered somewhere for something,
and between the crests and troughs of radio waves
Jesus saves everyone everywhere.

The world intrudes as uninvited static
on one loner flat on a flophouse cot,
half asleep, cigarette drooping from his mouth,
with burning ashes falling on the disheveled bedsheet
as dreams go up in smoke.

God The Geek Is Lonely

God the geek is lonely, all geeks are.

Hours a day touching nothing warm except a computer monitor and reheated pizza.

Of course, all the algorithms onscreen are his own creations and that's the cosmic irony, for he's a misfit programmer among his own programs.

And they're buggy, most freeze and eventually all of them crash.

Then there's that desperation when users press the reboot button, as if reboot could cancel their botched histories.

But god's flowchart calls for video games run by random number generators rather than the predictable spreadsheets of accountants.

Yet even the divine geek wearies of fingering his joystick and so like Adam seeks an Eve.

MatchMakerDotCom was promising at first, but no profile qualified as god's soulmate.

AllFaithsSinglesDotOrg, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, even Pagan were likewise disappointing.

For their subscribers were inept hackers badgering him with playful FAQs.

And the Satanists were a joke for they also worshiped him, but only in his darker moods.

Besides, he had no desire to share S&M fantasies with misguided list members.

It's lonely being the ultimate answer to all questions.

Wikipedia doesn't help when he's stumped.

And the googols of Google links form a vast network of circular reasoning.

SingleAtheistsDotNet is god's final hope.

But their URL reads ACCESS DENIED if without proper password.

It's human and superhuman nature to want what you're denied.

Besides, atheists must feel so claustrophobic in a network without any links to the beyond.

Surely their moderator needs more list members, lest one by one they die off leaving the supreme nonbeliever to pay for the unused site alone.

How depressing such a site with so few hits can be,

god knows this and feels deeply for this webmaster

and so seeks to fill his page with spiritual spam.

Thus yea verily like a demon possessed

the divine fingers furiously input the omnipotent keyboard

with incantations of password letters and numbers that will put god on the same page

with those who claim, with those who boast,

"We need Him not."

Rhetorical Questions About The Ultimate Cause

Is my bare foot cut because of a single glass sliver.
Or is my foot lacerated because I was too distracted
to put my shoes on or do a careful job of sweeping.
Is my blood now on the floor because she said we were through.
Am I now in pain
because I did everything to drive her away
or because she did everything to make me want to drive her away.
Was it her seeing her father in me and my seeking my mother in her
or some permutation or combination of such passions
that doomed us to disappointment and anger.
Or was it simply a reflex of my arm
that threw the bottle on the floor.
Or is all this bleeding, this painful wound, this cut flesh
simply the result of a careless broom that jostled the glass shards
away from the dustpan and towards me,
as I tried to sweep the shattered wreckage away.

Dead Wires

Now the quiet pedestrians are the odd ones.
But just a few years ago,
those who talked to themselves or screamed at phantoms
or literally laughed out loud at their own jokes
were given wide berth on city streets by the silent multitude of passersby.
But change has charged the air with electric oscillations
plugging into ever more breast pockets and pocketbooks.
Loneliness is being shouted down by cell phone cacophony.
The world grows noisier.
Today, the mumbling majority walk the streets in supposed perfect sanity.

So now it's the silent ones who haunt the sidewalks,
the odd wanderers who need no phones,
those to whom no one wants to listen,
those who have no one to listen to,
the disconnected, the never connected,
the brotherhood of the ignored,
the sisterhood of the shunned,
the figurative deaf mutes who travel
beyond all the service areas,
those isolated circuits,
those shaggy frayed dead wires
dangling off the network of the modern world.

Narrowing The Meanings

Were I to say I love you what precisely would I mean?

Love, the word is used too often.

Don't the sages of conscience dictate that love
is what I should feel for all humanity?

So how can the same word cover
what I feel for both you and them?

Take a gold brick, a good solid piece,
it has weight and depth
and all its worth can be embraced
in just one hand.

Now exploit its malleability,
hammer it, hammer again, and again,
pound it to a sheet a mile square.

What results?

Tissue

almost transparent, with hardly any weight or depth.
Try covering a multitude with such a sheet;
a twitch of a finger, a drop of rain
and the sheet shreds.

What other word could I use to describe
my feelings for you?
An honest, lawyerlike accurate word?
Exhibit A,
this wide angle photo of you at Coney Island.
My eyes become telescopic,
so many other faces surround you but I
focus
sharply and instantly
on you.
My eyes resolve
the design on your blouse
and even the freckles on your face.
The surrounding faces are blurs.
The objective eye would discern different details,
but to me
you
are my focus,
my focus.

Aisle Of Improbabilities

Glimpses of Elvis on Mars,
a two-headed baby baptized twice,
a world of improbabilities reported
by brazen tabloids stacked neck-high
on the checkout aisle racks.
I pass through this world
with a basket full of toilet paper, cookies, and pickles.

Her cheeks are shrouded by her long brown hair.
Her deft, long fingers move the merchandise,
the cost quickly rising as the laser scans.
She pauses and offers me a smile,
revealing a slightly crooked tooth among the pearly whites.
She scolds me with her delicate fingers.
They point to an expiration date.
The cookies are put aside.
She has rescued me from a stale sweetness.
Her graceful fingers get back to business.
Deftly she processes my purchases.
I give her dollars; she gives me change.
Her fingers press my hand
longer than needed to exchange currency.
But the coin is cold with no time for warming.

Our skin must separate,
for the sum has been totaled and paid.
A line of commerce waits behind us.
Her eyes are blue. Her hair is brown.
Her fingers have touched and moved me.
Nearby, movie stars cavort on metal racks,
arm and arm at VIP-only gala events.
But right before me stands,
a long-haired girl with one slightly crooked tooth,
and blue eyes that almost wink at me.
Beyond the glittering Hollywood doings
one more tabloid solemnly proclaims
that aliens from Venus are invading soon.

Lady,

look at that cattail reed, there, by the lake.
Its cylindrical tip tips sideways
and without underpinning its head
bobs and sways when blown by every crisscross current of wind.
It seems to bow
before another member of its species
which still stands tall and is seemingly faultless.
Our broken reed tries to reach its neighbor,
perhaps it will brush against it.
But the same wind which blows our crooked stick so close
also blows its faultless friend away,
so like swaying cilia
they touch only briefly at their tips.

Lady
my fingertips briefly brush your hair
but you bob and weave away so skillfully.
Lady, lady
I confess love
but
all you do is listen
so courteously.

Jazzwoman Nature

“Intelligent design is mama nature’s cool improv.”

In the grand composition from amoeba to man,
big mama nature improvises like a jazzman playing his riff.
A jazzman flows with the notes, taps out rhythms,
yet varies that first fugal theme,
by blowing a horn, fingering a keyboard, strumming on strings,
and always on the fly.

Jazzwoman nature also swings in a forever present tense,
playing on flesh and bone rather than bongos and vibes
but striking chords just as hip
and recalling only enough past to play the current phrase
without wondering how or when the coda will sound
in this upbeat, downbeat, longest earthly gig ever.

The Imitative Ability Of Cuttlefish

Protean masters of chromatic deception,
brains directly controlling complexions,
chromatophores obeying neural pulses,
orange, red, green, brown, iridescent blue
swirl like turbulent currents across mercurial skins.
Cuttlefish can flatten themselves to glassy smoothness
or pucker to sandy coarseness.
They can even meld with yellow sunlight streaming down.
Quick-change artists behind inky clouds,
their beauty is indeed only skin deep.
Biologically honed hunters ravenously hungry,
they wear their hearts on their sleeves or rather their grasping tentacles
with their inner softness hardened to cuttlebone.
For them true emotion is shallow watercolor on a chameleon canvas.
They can't love, for one can't recognize another as unique.
Yet it's contrast between lovers that truly cements love.
Their nuptial embrace is a fleeting give and take of sperm packets.
They're sharp enough to navigate mazes.
It's what they need to know, and all they need to know, to survive.
They never question where they came from or are going to.
Like psychopaths, they know only anger, fear,
and spasms of serenity in between.
They live and die alone.
Their mothers are dead before they hatch,
and they'll be dead long before they can eat their own young.
Generations, disconnected from generations,
lone predators in the ever present sea.

Snowflake

Catch one on a cold slide,
lay it out like a corpse on a gurney and pursue the autopsy,
focus your squinting eye through the eyepiece
while aligning the entity over the hole—
and before the rising light,
under an objective lens
lies a translucent singularity,
a crystalline pattern
not quite like the other falling billions.

But its unique complexity is brief
for the heat of the light and a steamy breath
reduce the pattern to a drop,
a drop among drops
that are all disposed of in a beaker
to splash randomly against the clear glass.

Teeth

Exemplars of biological hardness, one of the first,
fish scales that inched forward to the jaw,
all that will remain of a fifty-foot shark.

They create

the oxymoron of a love bite,
skin tracings of frustrated possessiveness
and consuming passion.

They're used by mother mammals to chew away
the apron strings of birth.

They should be sheathed when kissing a child.

Baby ones create good fairy dreams

under a child's pillow,

but also dark omens when a troubled grownup sleeps:

a razor sharp vision in a nightmare

falling out one by one, an old man's worn gums,

marble tombstones that age fungal green.

Fulcrum point of contact, to puncture or caress.

Yet such easy prey to sugar,

which eats into the pulp and scoops out the nerve;

the hardness of the ages sweetened to decay.

Crosscurrents

I curse, cradle him.
How dare he wither to such a state
that the bathroom recedes to light year distances?
That fecal smell, he averts his dimming eyes.
I give him a rare kiss.
"A man's a man," he always said,
but now pain parts the curtains of our proprieties.
"A man's a man," once with one arm
he picked up a seven year old who had scraped his knee,
"A man's a man," he said
and no tears dared come from me.
But now the crumpled bed sheet pinching his back brings groans.
On the back of his hand, five freckled spots
have measured his age with an ever darkening hue.
I link hands and see my inheritance;
his fingers part around the same design
that now faintly dawns in my skin.
I jerk my hand away.
Now mother comes, I yield my place.
Ever tidy, even now, I see her silhouette
against the sterile hospital lamp.
Napkins here, water glass there,
"Damn it woman for fifty years you've never stopped."
Then he winks at me and touches her.
Their arms link to form an L
which half frames the lamp
that now glares much too brightly.

Cossacks

Years ago I was a dabbling pilgrim without a true faith,
a mosque for one month, a synagogue for the next,
and for a while I tried a Russian Orthodox Church.
Under an icon of the Madonna and Son,
a dark-skinned altar boy held up a crucifix during Mass.
I heard an unwanted whisper in my ear
that his mother had been raped by a Negro.
The priest was singing hymns.
The gently swinging censer perfumed the air.

Years later in a Ukranian-American bar in Queens,
one drunken dark-skinned man dressed in military camouflage
called himself The Cossack and said,
"I'd rid the neighborhood of niggers
the same way Cossacks tried to free Ukraine of Jews."
A warning was whispered in my ear
that he had almost decked a guy,
and a hunting knife was strapped to his leg.
The ersatz Cossack eyed me and asked if we had ever met.
I dared not walk away.
But armed with ad-lib lies, I called myself Igor, the White Russian,
and that I had been raised in foster homes
and didn't know who my parents were, or cared.
Our reflections were in a wall mirror
behind the bar between the scotch and vodka bottles.
He sat next to me, bought me a beer and bragged,
"We're both descended from Cossacks
who once rode the steppes, taking all kinds of women,
Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, Jewish, Turkish."
Then he raised his mug as high as he had once held a crucifix.
And also reflected in that mirror, between our two faces,
a Christmas-season print that hung on the opposite wall
of Mary holding her child.

Coronation

There,
within the cloverleaf,
the wide circling ramp folded
around the grass, seemingly
gathering all the green in sight
against the expressway, which I
had just left,
compelled
to drop my speed
as I veered south,
there
I had to notice
first the profiles, then
closer swinging east,
a face-to-face view
of the mother
and her daughter's brown hair,
as over her little girl she held a paper crown,
while even my knocking engine went quiet
so I could hear,
"I dub you princess,"
then swinging north,
I saw the daughter's smiling face,
and I stopped
a bit longer at the stop sign
than I really had to.

The Clown Who Juggled Starfish

Dedicated to the poet Elizabeth Weiss

It's not my image; it's not my line; it's not my title; it's not my poem.
But I'm not plagiarizing; I'm preserving.
I'd tell you the poet's name if I could.
I recall it starts with an E or B, or maybe a G.
Recite the phrase "The Clown Who Juggled Starfish"
and her face appears in my memory, but not in yours.
She would read her poems in every Beat coffee house in the Village
but was drowned out by pretentious conversations,
hip waitresses taking orders, and the awful gargles of espresso machines.
I'd speak to her at every Thursday reading.
Once she whispered to me that her prayers would be answered
if just one of her poems lasted
even as only a footnote to the Beat Generation.
Then one Thursday evening she wasn't there.
Or the next Thursday, or the next.
And so I've become the harlequin bard who half answers her prayers,
the bumbling curator of her literary accomplishments.
After all those Thursday evenings
I can't remember even one complete poem,
only the title of one "The Clown Who Juggled Starfish."
Thus the title becomes the entire verse, her unabridged anthology,
a lost garland of poetry recited by her lone biographer.

The Champion Retires

Pity Goliath, scarecrow of the Philistines,
wide shield that hid a thousand quaking men.

Baal's champion, he made thunder
on command.

Skin tough as a shark's, nine feet tall,
he was condemned never to look up at any man
even his king.

Trotted out like a standard before every battle,
he saved the hides of all the warriors
who would wet their pants in secret.

How many times did he answer the call,
"Hey Goliath, front and center"?

Caught in the workaday rut of killing,
how many times did he yell
his carefully rehearsed threats?

Never could his knees buckle, never
could anyone see his sword vacillate in his trembling hand.

And that shepherd boy, approaching,
to just inches short of his long shadow, that shepherd boy,
surely Goliath must have seen the stones picked up,
surely he must have seen the sling swung
in deadly circles, surely
he must have heard the rock swooshing like Baal's bad breath,
surely he had a lifetime of shunting spears and arrows
with a flick of his mighty shield,
a shield that became too heavy to lift.

The Breakdown

He'd tear paper
to pieces smaller and smaller
tear paper, eat the pieces.

He'd always come on time
lateness was almost a crime
obedience, of course, his virtue.

He'd file files alphabetically,
figure figures accurately,
draw profit-loss graphs fastidiously,
and chew paper clandestinely.

Then one day one day on a subway train,
summer shirt stinking with sweaty stains,
the train broke down, a long delay
it was time, he thought, to do a musical play.
He stacked his clothes in a very neat pile.
With his nude costume on he performed with style
whistled, sang, did a jig,
used the morning paper like the leaf of a fig.

Then he tore the paper piece by piece
chanting while he had a cellulose feast
chanting loudly, me, me, me
chanting loudly, free, free, free.

Follow The Wise Spelunker

Hell is rumored to be a cavernous place below,
with a gaping dark mouth of an entrance,
that shrouds stalactites and stalagmites
looming above and below like crocodile teeth.

A winding path leads downward,
and as the terrified soul descends
a distant pinprick of orange light
grows wider and brighter until
it lights the cheeks of that damned one
with a rouge of shame.

Would even the bravest spelunker by his own free will
dare enter such a fiery black mouth?

But hell is painted with much prettier makeup,
the luscious lipstick of the tempter whose smile
betrays with a perfect articulation of false teeth.

And with a soul kiss that seducer entices the lonely to rush right in.
Then the real fangs slam shut and the victim's tongue is gripped,
leaving that seduced soul speechless,
or too ashamed to speak even if the tongue could rip free.

*Follow the ways of the wise spelunker and leave a note behind
telling which new opening you're exploring.*

*And always come equipped
with the brightest flashlight, most accurate compass,
and longest lifeline.*

Letters And Spirit

"Whosoever toucheth the dead, even the body of any man that is dead, and purifieth not himself—he hath defiled the tabernacle of the Lord—that soul shall be cut off from Israel; because the water of sprinkling was not dashed against him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is yet upon him."
(Numbers 19:13)

And if the parent cares for a child who is passing, or child for the parent,
or a friend for another friend,
or even a stranger who happens upon another who's mortally sick
and puts a damp cloth on the feverish forehead
and becomes the last human face to be seen
as the darkness that too soon will settle on everyone
falls over the eyes of that child, friend or sick stranger,
while the tightly held hands of comforter and comforted at last release each other
and the body heat of the one just dead dies down,
then at what point do the neatly inscribed letters of the law
decree the comforter to be a leper who would defile the tabernacle.

Or does the damp cloth yet hold enough moisture
or the hands that tried to comfort have enough dexterity
to cleanse away any stain.

Or if a mourner wants to hold on till all warmth leaves the departed
or if he wants his lips to taste that last kiss for just a little longer
would the comforter's flesh be made unkosher by skin now turned eternally cold
or does that final loving rite of parting by itself wash all impurity away...

If strict rules are broken during sorrowful days
are the curves and swirls of the letters of the law
wide enough to allow a keyhole
for ministering hands and loving lips to become
the keys that open the door back into the house of Israel.

The Poet Photographer Captures The Bridge

The photographer pulls his car over and reaches for his camera bag
but the poet within him puts the bag away,
and instead takes out paper, pen, and then composes
not by capturing light but by writing enlightening words.
Suddenly the bridge is an impossible cantilever,
for the far tower is shrouded in bay fog,
while above him towers a steel Atlas holding up the roadway,
that asphalt causeway disappearing into the distant mist.
A lensman's vision is constrained by the actual, and reduced
to photons captured on film or megabytes electronically moored to a compact flash
and framed in that artisan-technician's eye as repositioned architecture.
But as a poet he's free to run rampant in the darkroom of his mind.
Suddenly the gray Verrazano Bridge morphs into a yellow brick road
winding into a fogbound Oz.
The pen becomes the camera and the paper the film.
And so what the photographer composes need not be what the poet recites.
The photographer is a craftsman in the arrangement of light,
his easel and paints are hi-tech, heavy-to-tote-around gear.
The poet is a developer of ethereal mind shots
not with premium glossy photographic paper,
but with plain notebook pages, cheap ink, and a leaky pen.

Rocking Between Subway Stations

In a dark subway tunnel parallel trains rush forward
while I stare out the window.
A double exposure in the sooty glass,
my reflection hovering over a Chasid on the other train.
His bearded face stares down at his leather-bound book.
He never lifts his eyes.
Probably he's reading a holy tome,
while my image hangs over his shoulder,
seemingly reading it also.
I raise my head towards the actual heaven,
but above me
is only the subway car's steel ceiling
with its flickering lights.
Both of us sway as the trains move,
but he is davening to his own rhythm
while I am rocking just to the jarring of the train.
Workaday motormen and not divine angels
speed us on our way,
two parallel profiles hurtling forward.
Then the tunnels diverge,
and we are no longer traveling in the same direction.
But then we never were.

A Question Of Thirteen Seconds

*"After your head is cut off by a guillotine
you have 13 seconds of consciousness . . .
13 seconds is the amount of . . . energy. . .
in the brain to keep going. . . not only can you blink,
but you can do two for yes and one for no;
and it is said to have been done."*

Dr. Ron Wright, Chief Medical Examiner of Broward County, Florida

Now no pardon is possible even from God.
Now the wind in the lungs will be forever stagnant.
Now the lungs themselves will dissolve.
Now the Platonic ideal of mind free of body is almost realized.
What is proper etiquette for you—the executioner—
when all the condemned's debts have just been paid?
What to do for the already but not yet dead
at this socially awkward moment?
Are you, at last, forgiving?

Do you pick up the head by the hair
Do you stroke a pale cheek?
Do you allow a loved one to approach and kiss?
Do you hold a mirror before the eyes?
Do you torture the eyelids with a question?
There is time for one.
What would you want to know?
Does the being at your feet know the answer?
Or does even the faintest consciousness blind one to what comes after?
And what comes after—is it midnight darkness or high noon blaze?
Do you ask if it's comfortable?
Is it now reduced to being only an *it*?

Think of something fast.

What is the professional thing to do?

Be silent? Be curious? Smile? Cry? Look away?

Sing a hymn?

Or leave the head in the bloody bucket,
and let the eyes glaze in screamless terror?

Rear-Ended

On the proverbial highway of life
my tailgating past rear-ended me when I had to stop short:
child on road, siren at intersection, oncoming train, a UFO landing,
some nonsense like that.
I lurched against the steering wheel.
Angry, with pains in my chest,
I stormed out of my vehicle and screamed, "You coulda killed me."
I found myself face-to-face with my profligate past,
but he had the nerve to accuse me of being
the most neurotic driver on the road,
and that I was imagining all the dangers ahead.
I screamed that he had been speeding,
that he had deliberately tried to ram me.
He laughed and asked,
"Why would anyone with an open road before him want to run into an
old loser?"
We both made fists and then...
A cop car pulled over, license and registration demanded.
But his was an obvious forgery and mine wasn't a license at all,
but an application for a renewal.
We were both hauled in.
Neither of us were fit to drive on that road.

Still Life

. . . a person in a diner staring at a mirror at 1:03 a.m.,
in a booth among other booths,
all booths claustrophobic rectangular enclosures
in two columns skirting the center aisle
running the length of the greasy spoon—
and all the booths are empty
except for the ones sitting alone, each clutching a cup of coffee,
all of them taking in the lukewarm coffee, sip by sip,
except that singular, first person in a booth among other booths,
and that booth is empty except for that one
whose untouched, unsipped coffee surely must be cold,
and that person's arms are soft pillows for a slumping head
with a hand open and a now motionless pen at the fingertips
and a notebook open to a page pristine white—
except for standard, parallel, blue lines intersecting
an equally standard, red margin line running vertically down the left
with no other markings on the almost pristine white—
except the word, "Title," scribbled to the right of the red margin
with nothing to the left of that line, the page empty
except upon it that word Title and the slumping person's head,
and nothing above that Title and slumping person's head
except the ceiling lights and creaking fan,
while below arms still cradle a slumping head,
with eyes that are not yet closed, but closing,
and through fluttering eyelids the bloodshot eyes
gaze at a wall mirror which reveals nothing except—

a person in a diner staring at a mirror at 1:04 a.m.,
in a booth among other booths . . .

A Guilt-Free Sorry

“Dear applicant, we’re sorry to say no to you.”

But if no brings sorrow why say it?

Wouldn’t a yes salve your sadness?

Sorry? the word’s lack of nuance nags me,

for it’s such a guilt-free sorry.

Your rejection of my application didn’t use words like

repent, atone, contrite or remorse

for such words imply a *sorry* of your own doing,

a *sorry* that screams for undoing.

But there’s no hope of that, is there?

No hope of you including me among you.

You hand me just a perfunctory *sorry*

and of course an insincere *sincerely yours*.

You probably forgot about me the moment you mailed that *sorry* to

“applicant’s address.”

Or maybe you’re still having a condescending laugh over my application,

and your *sorry* is really a euphemistic snicker.

But *sorry* to me is real.

Repent, atone, contrite, are also real,

and I use them now remorselessly.

I repent, atone, and am very contrite

that I applied to you in the first place.

And so I also declare with my deepest guilt-free *sorry*,

that you have not deigned to elect into your grand collegium—

me, myself, and I, the one most skilled in crafting the sincerest sorriest of *we’re sorry*

to all those pretentious enough to apply for inclusion among your minions.



Richard Fein was a finalist in The 2004 Center for Book Arts Chapbook Competition. He has been published in web and print journals such as *Southern Review*, *Foliate Oak*, *Morpo Review*, *Ken*Again*, *Oregon East*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Skyline*, *Touchstone*, *Windsor Review*, *Maverick*, *Parnassus Literary Review*, *Small Pond*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Terrain Aroostook Review*, *Compass Rose*, and many others. He also has an interest in digital photography and has published many of his photos.

PARALLEL PRESS POETS

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



Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

parallepress.library.wisc.edu
ISBN 978-1-934795-25-5