

The choreographer of raindrops: poems.

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the choreographer of raindrops

POETRY BY CARL LINDNER



PARALLEL PRESS

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

The Choreographer of Raindrops

Poems by
Carl Lindner



PARALLEL PRESS 2008

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These poems have previously appeared in the following journals: *Sackbut Review*: “For a Sleeping Daughter”; *Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream*: “Ballerina”; *Parallel Press Anthology*: “The Firefly in the Bedroom”; *Poets On*: “Helping My Son with Algebra”; *The South Carolina Review*: “The Doctor”; *Aura/Literary Arts Review*: “Pissing Out of Doors”; *The Cream City Review*: “A Certain Way”; *Root River Voices*: “Living the Poem”; *Free Lunch*: “On the Line”; *Northeast*: “When He Hears ‘How to Get Out of Death’ as the Next Topic on *Good Morning America*”; *The Literary Review*: “Duo.”

FIRST EDITION

For Norman Adler, my “Uncle Normie”

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Helping My Son with Algebra

At first, you
are in a wood.

Runes cut in bark
look like splits in skin.
Some are scratched
in stone, the lines
white as knucklebone.
Others, drawn in blood,
grow black,
dry as your mouth.

Inside, outside,
you are alone.
To go on,
go back to signs.

Until then,
you tiptoe round
the perimeter
of a rectangle where
the width is three
less than twice the length.
You are given the perimeter.
You are always given something.

The Dancer

1. For a Sleeping Daughter

Your lungs are little
bellows, matched,

pumping in the dark.
You are doing a slow burn.

And so am I
who cannot help

seeing wrinkles
etch a baby face,

hair curl to a singe,
skin peel back

in a slow striptease.
Even as I tug

the blanket to your chin,
here, in the hearth's

glowing bed,
in the red eye

that winks and lights
the way to ash,

I say: Daughter,
born of liquid flame,

be a salamander,
dancing in the world's fire.

2. *Ballerina*

Daughter, where
did you learn
to turn
your bones to water?

The Firefly in the Bedroom

No sooner did the light go out
when one came on, the slow
winking of a bright green eye.

At first it was a child's game
("Find me. Catch me.")
then an S.O.S., a ship
tossing in dark waters.

I watched cool fire
come and go,
lighting up like a lover's face,
then turned on the lamp
to let him out into his house,
the night, but he was gone
like the last breath
and I returned to dark,
falling into a dream
of caves and night lights.

Waking at dawn
I found him again,
stiff and curled against a wall,
and I cradled him in my palm
to see him glowing still,
lit from within, and I remembered
how my father's heartbeat quickened
even in that coma when I touched his face,
whispering "I'm here. I'm here."

Making a Place

1. Garden Voices

“Mulch, you’ve got to
mulch,” declared the opening

page of the guide.
It never spoke of how

mulch refuses to be still—
how sawdust speaks

of severed wood, the first
step in loneliness, the grinding

of years, how grass clippings tell
what it is to be sheared, the cost

of outgrowing, how coffee grounds
moan of nights, long nights.

And eggshells? The cry of emptiness
breaking out of baby skulls?

I don’t want to talk about it.
If not for the whisper of seedlings,

I don’t know what I’d do.

2. *Living the Poem*

You spend years in a house,
a shell, before you see

it's wrong, the lines making
a draft going nowhere.

You call a carpenter,
a joiner of wood,

and he raps at the door
before you hang up.

He looks into your eyes
and knocks out a wall.

You tell him your name
and he raises the ceiling.

You shake his hand,
he cuts holes in the roof.

Before he covers them
with glass, the two

of you float through.

3. *A Certain Way*

When I sit a certain
way in my swivel-

rocker, I can see
the bird-feeder, and,

as the wind blows,
it turns so that I

sometimes see the back,
and sometimes the only way

I know there's a bird
on the other side

is the slow rain
of seed

falling into light

Starlings

I see them on pavement,
always next to windows
that cut short their flight.
One lies outside a bank,
suddenly locked in a vault
without a combination.
Another stiffens
on the other side
of my window at school,
having learned a hard lesson.

Over and over
they fly into glass,
stunned by what
they cannot see
or glimpse too late.
En route in open space,
heading to safety,
they sail into panes
and crack their necks,
a bubble of blood
on their beaks
like a last word.

Now in a greenhouse,
a hot room of glass,
I hear a flutter overhead.

And I try
to shoo it
toward the broken
pane it came through,
fail, then raise a row
of windows, look again
to see if it will make
for this narrow door of light.

It is already gone.

The Call

1. After Seeing a "Feral Express" Vehicle

Every hair
comes to attention.

Your tongue lets itself out,
unrolling, lolling.

No more
the collar
buttoned tight,
your throat tied in a knot.
Adios to the tiptoe life.

Now your ears prick up
to clouds and shadows,
the blinking of a falcon's eye.

Suddenly
fluent in silence,
you translate prairie grass,
decipher trails
leading nowhere,
trails that double back.

On a track all your own
you devour gullies,
dried-out riverbeds,
hungry for the lair,
the murmur of water.

Your path remains unmarked.
The signs could not be more clear.

2. Pissing Out of Doors

The moon and you
are full tonight.
In the yard you take it out,
the world's axis in your hand.

One or two
owls and cats
stop and look your way.
You want to call the skunks.
You're dying to invite
the bats to drop by,
to fly in a circle over this pole.

A full moon brings you out.
Unable to hold anything back,
you're spilling out a song.
Moonie-Moon, shine
upon my stream of gold.
You sigh and sigh
and arc it high
and swing it in a lazy curve.
How easy to give
when you have so much.

Let yourself rain
upon the land.
Piss, I say,
piss without end,
your downpour drowning out
the hoots and cat-
calls, all
the flap on every side.

By Degrees

1. The Doctor

The Doctor is out
and about, taking
our best parts

back to his castle,
back to his secret lab
behind the shelves

behind the sliding wall.
He never shows his face
and no one has seen

his diplomas
but he's studied in Vienna—
majoring in life-

science with a minor
in home ec.
He was especially good

with needle and thread.
Perhaps that's where
he got the idea.

Now, by degrees,
he's come to focus
on a project you wouldn't believe.

The man is gifted.
From his vita alone
you'd have to trust him.

So let us hope
he knows what he's doing
back there

with all those pieces.
Let us hope
the Doctor is in.

*2. The University of Wisconsin Regents Demand a
Five Year Plan from the Faculty*

I am fifty-five.

In five years I plan
to be sixty. I plan

to leave my phone
off the hook, to refuse
to be sentenced

to meaningless sentences.
I plan to look
more closely at women,

cats in the night.
I plan to listen
to thunder, that heavenly

applause. Wearing my
moonlight tuxedo, I plan
to dance with raindrops,

join the chorus
of mourning doves,
knit a yarn

no one can unravel,
telling after telling.
I plan to take

the low road,
the one that goes
from dung to grass,

faithfully
minding my business
every step of the way.

I plan
to pursue this course
for as long as it takes.

Doing Business

1. On the Line

You have reached
the number
you have dialed.

If you want
to mate outside your species,
press one.

If you want
to make a down payment
on an elected official,
press two.

If you want
an autographed picture of Jesus,
press three.

If you want
to invest in a healthcare
or tobacco company,
press four.

If you want
to purchase a confederate decal,
press five.

If you want
to sell a kidney
or a testicle,
press six.

If you want
to purchase a hand grenade
or a small nuclear device,
press seven.

If you want
the home addresses
of pro-choice doctors,
press eight.

If you want
to tighten your buttocks
or perk up your boobs,
press nine.

If you want
to speak with someone real,
hang up now.

2. *When He Hears "How to Get Out of Death" as the Next Topic
on Good Morning America*

It's a grave concern,
a difficult noose to slip,

but have faith, America.
In God you trust.

Cash on the barrelhead,
there's always more

where that came from
so don't sweat it, America.

Don't worry when you dig
a hole and dig it deep

and then jump in.
Upon your upturned faces

dirt rains down like coins.
America, do not despair.

You can always buy
your way out. Sell

the dirt. Rent the space.
Steal the shovel.

Take the credit,
put it on your card,

and when it's time
to pay, change your name.

America, you are all ears
when the prophets speak.

America, good morning.

After a Student Asked "Why Poetry?"

Because, now and then,
God needs a confessor

Because cats,
despite their elegance,
can be at a loss for words

Because, on the darkest
night, lightning
longs for illumination

Because the squirrel,
pawing at the winter ground,
has gone amnesiac again

Because shit
has gotten a bad name
and needs a champion

Because the raindrops
are looking for a choreographer

Because the statues are tired
of the silence of droppings

Because fire speaks in tongues
and longs to be understood

Because the moon,
that scimitar,
is about to split the night

Because the salmon,
swimming against the current,
want a brother by their side

Because Jesus and the Bodhisattva,
after all the tears,
thirst for water

Because the boy goes mute
when the dark-eyed girl
smiles with her hips

Fish Tale

For years the water
swallowed my line.

Sunup to sundown,
where the sinker sank

I spent the day alone,
casting about and reeling in

only to come up empty.
The baited hook went under,

the naked hook came back.
Laying pole and tackle down,

I turned the boat around
to find my eyes

were caught
by water's way with light.

A glance was all it took.
And now, don't ask me how

the speckled trout leap up
or why

the wall-eyed pike are quick
to fling their silver out of blue.

I swear it's true:
salmon struggle up the sides

as if the wood were water.
What do I know?

With every fish
that comes aboard,

the boat and I grow lighter.

Horses

He didn't know
he had even one

let alone a herd,
a remuda that ran free,

until in the dark
he heard them splashing

through the shallow streams,
beheld them leaping fences.

Nothing could pen them in
or shut them up. How they drummed

the earth with their hooves—
flying heartbeats—

every mane a flag
proclaiming

country all its own.
How they galloped and dashed,

more than he could count or name,
and not a one had known

bridle, bit or lariat,
none had been hobbled,

tethered, saddled, spurred.
Palominos, mustangs,

roans, sorrels, chestnuts, bays,
milky white to midnight black,

and, leading them all,
the Appaloosa.

Duo

"I have a personal relationship with God."

—promotional statement for the book *Power For Living*

We have an im-
personal relationship.

Flying like light—
sometimes wave,
sometimes particle—
He goes His way.
Mine is a lone meander.

Now and then
our paths cross
and I nod, half-smiling.
He undrapes the sun.

I do not look to Him
to ease my bruise,
to clarify the riddle
or pull me from the pit.

He does not look to me
to kiss the heavenly
arch of His foot—
winged though it is—
or put into His hand
this flowing, my life.

When I cry out
"Oh God!"
in the middle of sex,
He knows it's not
an invitation
to a ménage a trois.

He neither barges in
nor hovers
in the heated air.
Such discretion,
bordering on the divine,
goes far to win my gratitude,

and I wish Him well
in His amours,
becoming one
with the blue spruce
or the grubs in moist earth,
or tasting the will
of the spawning salmon
or the ache to pierce and crush
in the barracuda's teeth.

And when I imagine
His liaisons with stars
I wonder whether supernovas
signify His coming
along with waterfalls
and quakes, the wasp's sting,
sirocco and the solar wind.

And I wonder about loneliness,
time and space a house
where any being might feel small,

both of us knowing
what it is to be
one of a kind.

Night Sky Over Mesa Verde

All day the sky
was high, unmarked,
a blinding blue.
Your eyes ached
to take it in.

Now it wears another face—
diamonds flung
on velvet black—
and your eyes overflow
with stars, light
pouring through
a curtain of dark.

Mesa Verde is a place
as Sinai is a place.
The fingerprints of God
are everywhere. Here,
a mile and a half
above the sea,
where mesas meet
like the fingers of a hand,
the night sky is a book
spread out before you,
glowing letters, words,
all coming into focus.

And as you join
one point of fire to the next,
you come to see
what you have always known—
this book has always been
yours to read,
yours to write.

Everything connects
to everything.
You've never been
so close to heaven before.



Carl Lindner is emeritus professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–Parkside, where he taught courses in American literature, creative writing (poetry), and composition from 1969 through 2007. He has won several teaching awards. He was recognized for his poetry by the Wisconsin Arts Board, which awarded him a fellowship in 1981, and by his university, which honored him with an award for Creative Activity in 1996. He has published three chapbooks of poetry: *Vampire*, *The Only Game*, and *Eat and Remember*; two full-length collections: *Shooting Baskets in a Dark Gymnasium* and *Angling into Light*; and more than two hundred poems in various literary journals. His life has been blessed with two children, Jennifer and Peter. At present he lives in Racine with his cat, Jesse James.

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