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This Small Breathing Coincidence

PAUL TERRANOVA

parallel press **poetry series**



A Parallel Press Chapbook

This Small Breathing Coincidence

Poetry by
Paul Terranova

Parallel Press

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I gratefully acknowledge *Wisconsin People & Ideas* (formerly *Wisconsin Academy Review*), in which the following poems previously appeared: "An Apology to the Poet Laureate of the United States from the Poet Laureate of 1236 Spaight Street," "Bliss," "Peaches," "This Isn't As Easy As It Seems," and "This Small Breathing Coincidence."

With gratitude to my family who ignite that part of my soul
from which poetry sometimes emerges,
and to Michael Van Walleghen who taught me to
recognize it when it does.

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Bliss

It doesn't matter that you
just came out of the bathroom,
he runs across the kitchen
like it was a field of flowers
and you were his lover just
back from the war. You have to
be careful, he leads with his
head, and he hasn't learned
the importance of groins.
In the NFL they call this
spearing and you get fifteen
yards. In our kitchen you
get to console him, apologize
for scaring him with your
gasp and slow descent
to the floor.

-But once you understand,
you bend, catch him under the
arms and lift in one motion
out of an old movie,
swing him up over the
Legos and the Elmo cell phone, over
the apple peels on the cutting board
and the apple peels on the floor,
pull him close to your chest and
count the two and a half
seconds until he pushes off,
rappels down your body
and lunges for the cat.

This Small Breathing Coincidence

Lying there with my nose pressed to
my son's forehead breathing on his
closed eyelids, he pats his blue bear's
back unconsciously and twitches once.
This close he begins to blur at the edges
like the electrons are coming loose,
mingling with their blue bear
brethren, and I suddenly remember that
while they try to tell us that we are
seventy percent water, if you look more
closely we are mostly vast spaces
between hurtling planets. Our
electrons collide to keep us from
overlapping, but you have to wonder
if they occasionally pass, dance, and
part more amicably.

That my beautiful boy
is nothing more than a coincidence of
subatomic particles who will some day
part ways and reform (as algae or roots),
a piece of the universe arranged temporarily

to contemplate itself—or at least the blue
bear part of itself—brings an ache...

An ache... an ache

is not electrons bumping
into one another, and my mind,
shackled by the English language,
sees a crack. What is an ache?
We are mostly the spaces between,
charged with desire, something
more basic than electrons—
what moves them, sends them
spinning on long orbits or
frenzied dances—and all the buzzing
spaces in me, all the twirling points turn
and pull a little more toward this small
breathing coincidence of dust and
love asleep on my chest in the spinning
infinity of our living room.

When I Die

Hold the funeral
in a stone building. It can be
small, a park shelter, leaves
blowing in, something with
dirt nearby. No drywall. No
plastic chairs or music piped in.
Let there be sunlight or rain.
If it is cold, build a fire
among the stones. Touch
them, the stones who sit
still as stones until some
upheaval moves them,
then settle back into their
meditations on wind and rain,
the feel of earth pressing
them up or down, the silent
joy of stillness. Let the
stones sit around us and
smile like grandparents. Let them
take in the sorrow as they take in
everything else, and remember.

Cherry Tomatoes

We are in the days of cherry tomatoes. As soon as the car stops, booster seats eject the boys straight past the garage. There's no use saying *Not now*, they're already behind the plastic lawn chairs reaching through leaves and shoving tomatoes into their mouths.

That one's not ripe. Yes it is.

No it isn't you can't pick those.

Mommy said I could.

No she didn't.

I am never sure how these arguments end, how they end up racing for the soccer ball with tomato seeds on their chins and shirt fronts

or how sometimes they agree the last one is for Mommy, carry it solemnly between a thumb and two fingers, *Mommy, we got one for you*, wait while she eats it, wait until she says thank you, and then pound jostling into the garage for the ball.

My Cat Did Not Vomit Last Night

My cat did not vomit last night.
I notice when I wake up from a
night uninterrupted by retching,
the leap out of bed, scramble after
sound more than sight, those seconds
when it seems desperately important
whether she's on the rug, the
linoleum, the sofa. Actually Nancy
is usually quicker off the futon,
intuiting where to step even
without glasses. I console myself
that I'll get up with the kids at
4:20 or 5:35, so I roll over and
listen, try to gauge the level of
profanity from the next room.
In the morning I prepare her
medicine in tuna as if it will
make a difference today.
She's not dying, at least
no more than the rest of us.
One of my oldest's first words

was *Pook*. My youngest got up this morning and kissed her on the head, as if he noticed too. We will take her to the vet again this month. It's time for her shots, and they will tell us about small bags half full of hypoallergenic foods for twenty-six dollars—remedies that have provided endless variety in the shade and consistency of her vomit, remedies that remind us how much more we spend on our cat than Bangladeshi parents have to spend on their children. We will probably try a new one this month. The rug could use some more color, and it would seem callous not to keep trying.

Questions About Enlightenment

The morning air was colder than you
might expect in North Carolina. I sat
alone in the monks' living room
with the television on
waiting for my breakfast.
I tried to help in the kitchen,
but he shooed me away like my
Italian grandmother. So I sat wondering
about the correct etiquette for eating
breakfast with a Buddhist monk.
The night before a young Lao man
took off his shoes and sat on the
floor next to Samsak's chair,
but they did not do me the favor
of modeling a traditional breakfast.
No sense asking, he would just answer
like he did my friend who, fascinated,
pursued him all evening with questions
about Enlightenment. Finally Samsak
turned to him and said, *Enlightenment*
is like Raleigh. You know where it is,

but it is very difficult to get there.

So I sat there in the cool house
in my socks surrounded by the
smell of spices, the sound of Bryant
Gumbel talking about the latest
developments in laser eye surgery
while a golden Buddha listened
quietly. I ate my eggs and rice quickly,
said thank you far more than necessary
and held myself back from any attempt
to wash my own dishes. It would be
weeks before anyone explained
that in Thailand the monks don't
cook, even for themselves. People
bring offerings. Sometime since
Samsak came to America, he
met my grandmother, and now he
pads around his big kitchen with a
wooden spoon and his orange robes,
and no one leaves without a little bag of
something and that heavy feeling
that makes you walk slowly and
sigh as you ease into the car.

Fretting

You are like my cat who,
walking across the room, stops,
sits, juts out his back right leg and
sets to work licking a spot
just below his flank but
not yet his paw. He licks
gnaws, gnaws, gnaws,
and licks some more,
jerks alert at a toddler's
scream and decides to
investigate the bookcase.
He proceeds like this all day
zigzagging through the
world and cleaning randomly
on the statistical probability that
he will end up clean and
waste none of his precious life
fretting.

The Moon

All I could hear was an airplane,
some traffic a block away and
the neighbor's furnace venting
over our driveway. That and the
shush of my shovel on the pavement,
the soft thud of snow on more snow.
The moon, bleary so close to dawn,
hung low with one bright star. Later
my son would say one bright planet,
one bright Jupiter, but in the quiet
morning air, ignorant of the facts
and wrapped against the cold,
I caught the moment the moon
lay itself down and opened
its crescent arms
to the gods.

Early Morning Train

Trundling across vacant streets,
the train never got closer than a
half mile from us, but my boy,
almost asleep as the sun rose,
heard it moan *Nooooo* like a
grown man, balled his fists
and screamed.

That was years ago.
Now he sits across the table
eating cereal too early like me.
But I still hear the trains and
remember that somewhere
a child is crying in the
half-dark while the
rest of the world
sleeps.

Five a.m.

I've become accustomed
to five a.m., numbed by the
same few stories on the
early morning news—not even
wondering that only three
important things happened since
I went to sleep, and one of them
involved a dog foiling shoplifters
at a convenience store in Trenton.
The air blows cool in the open
window, and the insects tick so
fast they almost hum. I have to
concentrate or I will forget
that I am hearing them. My
three-month-old is struggling
against sleep and the steady
rock-tick of his wind-up swing.
Even now he knows there is
something we're missing.

The Mourning Dove's Question

Some kind of warbling bird
has been dancing past my window
twittering and skittering back and forth
while the mourning dove on the roof two
houses down asks *Who?* again and again.
They quiet at the approach of the large male red-
blooded teenager. He says nothing, then lets loose,
two fingers in his mouth, a shrieking whistle heard by
kids and dogs for six square blocks. I don't know if
he is calling his mate or staking out his territory,
but before I can lean out the window to note
his gait and markings, he stops. Soon the
twitterer returns, but the dove's
question has been answered.

History

I'm lying here thinking of a girl in a cave somewhere scribbling with a stick in the sand.

You see my son asked me who made up all the languages in the world. I told him to go to sleep and we would talk about it in the morning.

He said he thought it was the first person who ever lived, *Is that right?*

I told him to go to sleep before he woke up his brother. He said that person had to be a "she" so she could have lots of babies and there could be more people. When I didn't respond, he mumbled a bit, rolled over and went to sleep.

Now here I am. With her. She is scribbling in the sand, waiting for the cheetahs that are raising her to come back from the hunt. The other cheetahs whisper about her, the slow hairless one with flat claws, but her parents loved their sweet deformed kitten ever since they found her mewling with the rest of the litter.

Without much hope of ever catching a gazelle, she stays home, tells herself stories, creates new selves to tell stories to, creates new

languages to tell stories in to her many selves, and sometimes her selves will translate for one another. They say the old seers could tell stories that went on for days, but hers go for weeks, and the din of internal simultaneous translation comes out in a low hum as she scribbles in the dirt and stares. Of course she grows up, narrows down to twenty-six or so selves she talks to regularly in different languages, and these become her children. Immaculate conception after immaculate conception, the cave fills with the clamor of children running and screaming and laughing, twenty-six lingual. Of course they grow up too, have no other examples, no role model of a normal family, think this is the way things are done, children make up languages, they grow up and have large families of children who all speak different tongues. By the time Lucy—as I've begun to call her—is a great-grandmother, the chaos is unbearable. She sends her offspring to the far corners of the earth. She retreats to her cave to retell herself the stories of her life, cradles her cheetah great-nephews and nieces as she rocks, and the low hum that comes out sounds a lot like a purr.

Holding the Moon

Long before the alarm,
my son calls me. Not fully awake,
he takes my cold hands in the dark,
presses them to his cheeks and ears.
He will run his hands over the
backs of mine, pressing to
make sure no part pulls away
from his sleep-hot skin, even
my little finger laid
against his eyelid.

Once he put my hand on the
back of his neck, then pulled
the other to the front, but I
couldn't, even gently,
measure that slender
pulsing.

So I tend to his temples
and cheeks. We stay there
wordless. In other rooms
sheets rustle, the floor creaks
and a toilet flushes, but here
in the dark room of
almost sleep, I lie
holding the moon.

El Parte Duro

I'd like to tell you what happened to me
as I rode my motorcycle to the liquor store,
but I don't drink, and I don't have a motorcycle.
The only time I rode a motorcycle, hanging on
to the boyfriend of a girl I thought I loved,
I got a bug in my eye before we left
the parking lot, spent most of the ninety
mile an hour ride winking, tears
streaming down my face as I
measured the distance between
my knees and the pavement
whipping by.

If I had
ridden a motorcycle to the liquor store
like the guy who just passed me on the
sidewalk, helmet in hand, I could've
caught a look, smiled at the weathered blonde
in the beat-up Impala that pulled up
next to me. Or I could've swerved
when the bastard in the Range Rover pulled
out without looking, sped around him and
yelled a string of obscenities about his
mother, her dachshund and the true
nature of their relationship.

Instead I wracked my brain for an
answer to the latest question my two-year-old
fired from his rolling throne. *How do
you say "the crusty part" in Spanish?*
Does it depend on the context? The
crusty part of what?

Settling on an answer, I slow my
pace, feel the breeze on my neck,
and listen to my son singing,
Eh patay duwo! Eh patay duwo!
over and over.

The Chair

She put out the chair, back to the street,
carefully upright, between the sidewalk
and the curb. It will break the set, mean
three matching chairs and one from the
thrift store. But it's the one he always
used, laughing loudly at first and later
not at all. She can see him sitting there,
staring at the door he won't come through,
but she can't make out the look on his face.
She imagines him sitting there hours from now
in the morning sun as the truck pulls up,
a large man hoisting him and the chair
into the back and rumbling to the next
house. But no, not in this neighborhood,
not a perfectly good chair. He'll end up
sitting at someone's desk staring at
pictures of three sisters and a dog
at the beach, or draped in a t-shirt
next to a bed watching through the
armhole as another couple argue,
make up and maybe get it right.

Dinosaur Bones

As I lie face down on the floor,
my son leans over me,
ready to administer CPR on my
lower back like a misguided EMT.
He puts all of his weight
slowly onto the heels of his palms
and my dinosaur bones
ratchet into place. They will
slide back over the next few hours
so we can do this again. I will pull him
away from his paper airplanes or his book.
He will lean heavily, feel the clicking of
bone on bone and say, *Was that it?*
I will say, *Yes* and *Thank you*.

This Cordless Love

I roll the cat off the spot she warmed up for Benjamin, roll him off the spot he warmed up for me, and tuck his blankets between our two mattresses. By the time I slide under the covers, the cat has claimed the spot where my knees should go. On our fleet of mattresses spread across the bedroom floor, any move ripples. I turn, Nancy grabs the covers back and Joseph groans. But then, lying still and replaying an argument in my mind, Benjamin stirs and tosses. Nancy wakes up and says, *What is it?* *Nothing*, I tell her and she rolls back into her dream. I study the ceiling to avoid the clock radio. Benjamin and Joseph sigh in perfect unison from opposite sides of the room. I wonder about the range of this cordless love. Our phone works all the way out in the driveway, and I want to call Panasonic, see what they have to say about family telepathy. Sleep wafts in and my metaphors start to slide into each other, I close my eyes, hold our little fleet of mattresses up to the bedroom light like a glow toy and pray it doesn't fade.

Invisible Clouds of Us

. . .when we breathe, we pass the world through our bodies,
brew it slightly and turn it loose again, gently altered for
having known us.

—Diane Ackerman

We have been breathing each other
in and out, exchanging molecules over
breakfast and on the interstate for fifteen years.
I am sure a scientist somewhere could
model it for us, estimate how much of me
was once you, give the percent body weight,
maybe even generate an image based on
cell permeability and circulation with
concentrations glowing in shades of
purple and rose. But I want more.
I want a satellite map of our love, the
precise places our souls overlap, the vast
rainforests of our children, but also the
cornfields and creek beds we pass at
seventy miles an hour without a glance.
I want to go visit them, savor them like the song
that ended more than a minute ago and yet
here I still sit in my silent car in the parking lot of
somewhere I thought I needed to go. I want to
look at you like we've just left the doctor
who explained that we have at best
a handful of decades left to live. We're
talking about where to have lunch,
but we're thinking more about the beauty
of a gray sky, breathing in the memory of rain
on a street in Cape Town and breathing out
invisible clouds of us.

An Apology to the Poet Laureate of the United States from the Poet Laureate of 1236 Spaight Street

I am writing to explain. I know how fragile poets' egos are, and well, yes, I am the guy with the three-year-old who walked out on your sold out reading twice. It probably wouldn't have been so obvious if we hadn't arrived late, after they opened the remaining VIP seats up front, if the aisles weren't quite so long or the lights were lowered. But I think that you, twelve rows away and five feet up, bathed in stage lights and the gaze of a thousand eyes, flowing from line to line, could not have noticed a boy whispering as intently as boys whisper, *I need to pee...I'm hungry and I need to pee*. We weren't gone long. It's important to a child to bless every royal blue urinal cake with his own holy water, and it takes time to explain an abandoned coat check—all those rows of empty hangers disappearing into the darkness. By the time we left the second time, I wanted to tell you

that really you did pretty well. We stayed the better part of 45 minutes in a warm room with hundreds of people, sitting, hands in their laps, facing the same way while a man read in measured tones and didn't even dance a little or hum a tune. You understand the comment after we left, him riding on my hip, arms around my neck down the sidewalk in the cool evening under the orange glow of McDonalds, the one about liking the way I read your poems better. What you should remember is that earlier, sitting on the kitchen floor reading from your book aloud, I was stopped cold by a Play-Doh boa constrictor thrust between my face and the page—*Look how many eyes it has! Have you ever seen a boa constrictor with that many eyes?* When I closed the book softly to take in this new angle on Genesis, he said, *No Daddy, read me another pome.* Anyway, I've got to get back to my window now. There's a poem stuck in the neighbors' gutter, and it's starting to rain.

Sweeping the Floor

Sweeping the green and yellow linoleum is an act of faith. Like an archaeologist I mark off a square and begin, brushing systematically and listening for the skittering of crumbs and pebbles, flushed from their hiding places. I catch a glimpse of them as they move, dusty shooting stars against a science fiction sky, and then they disappear again. But I keep going, a methodical shepherd with impossibly camouflaged sheep. Only when I corral them by the door do I get a good look, mostly dust and crumbs too small to identify, but here is a shard of kitty litter carried between the cat's toes all the way across the house, and a ladybug wing just makes me wonder about the rest of the ladybug. I will keep it all, sweep it into a white bag with the rest of my artifacts, have the city truck it away and store it to be sorted through later.

That Little Lego Church

The house had yellow and black stripes on one side. My son was finishing the roof, searching for the right pieces. I asked about the part jutting off the top, up and out like the Lego equivalent of smoke from a chimney. He said that is for people to climb up and talk to God. If he is real. They can climb up the steps on the side of the house, walk across the roof and up this thing if they want to talk to God if they think he is real. I didn't ask him if he thinks God is real. He has told me again and again that God is make believe. He is not so sure about Santa Claus, but God is make believe. This little boy walks around singing "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," "That Little Mountain Church" and "Life's a Railway to Heaven," the world's most adamantly atheist gospel singer. Since then the house has become a church.

It sits on the play counter next to the
play sink and play vegetables,
monstrous carrots the size of four
city buses and a zucchini that could
decimate the whole congregation. He
hasn't decided whether to add a steeple.
Our church doesn't have a steeple,
and he told us this is because it
used to be a t-shirt printing factory.
That is only part of the reason. The
architectural gender politics of a steeple
could rip a small Unitarian congregation apart.
Best to leave that be. And the same with
that little Lego church. We won't put it
away when he's not looking like the
cut up cereal boxes and block towers.
No, it sits there high above the
moose, the rabbit and the puffin,
sleeping in a heap, waiting for
his next move.

The Wrong Way

I didn't see the one cloud
drifting off the wrong way.
Another poet was on duty there.
He put it to work in a poem I can't
quite remember. Only that cloud
stays with me. In my mind it
drifts away from me heading
for some hills while the tree
to my left tries to shake off a
heavy, wet breeze. Those hills
are the kind soldiers come over,
stopping to survey the field
before they charge to their deaths.

I see a young man in the
seconds before that charge, looking up
at one cloud drifting off the wrong way,
the sudden clarity of hills older than
his God, and his feet carrying him
slowly and then with more speed,
diagonally against the tide and
screams of his brothers. I don't know
if he made it, if one of his brothers
cut him down in furious defense of his
own suffering. Either way he is dead
now, his flesh mixed with soil, his bones
tangled in roots, and his blood
evaporated, drifting off
the wrong way.

This Isn't as Easy as It Seems

I saw Nelson Mandela on the subway today.
He was an old Asian man, and he looked
nothing like himself except that
when the woman with the
frosted hair rose to
offer her seat, I saw
in his step, his nod and his
glance into her black sunglasses
Robben Island.

Another man pulls a girl up onto his lap,
*C'mon, come with Daddy, just a
quick beer. That's the problem with you,
I do things for you all the time and
you never do anything for me.*

I look up to see a large man standing
over me, staring out the window at
nothing and wearing "SECURITY"
across his back as if a jacket will be sufficient,
late at night eating leftover takeout
cold and watching Jerry Springer.
I hope I'll see him again tomorrow
wearing "AFFECTION" or
"TOGETHERNESS."

Through all of this quiet commotion
three women sit in a row
legs crossed the same way. The train
bucks and shudders, and their feet
dance in time. The looks on their faces say
This isn't as easy as it seems.

All Together in Airplanes

I stand in the dark in a public bathroom
waving my arms and expecting light.
I have forgotten the old habit,
right hand out, palm backward,
gliding along the wall, or
older still, the discipline of my great-
grandparents, carrying with them
their own means of illumination,
lighting something small and
holding it to a wick under glass
or rags soaked and wrapped
on the end of a pole. All this
waving in the dark doesn't
bode well for us. My children will
yearn for the days when the
coffee maker didn't know
your name and we still flew
all together in airplanes.

Two Trees

Two trees lean
elbow on shoulder like
cocky teenagers in a
black and white picture.
Ignoring the low traffic buzz
of a million bees heading
to work and black flies circling
like taxis, they watch us pass,
tourists who won't last
much longer than
our footprints.

Visitation

In the lush wind
before the first warm rain
our late grandmothers come back,
hands made soft again, to
stroke our faces and wonder
at how we've grown.

Peaches

You forget how peaches smell until
someone gives you a paper bag
full of them a couple days shy
of going off, until you dump them
in a bowl under your kitchen window
and forget about them, until a breeze
stops your pen with a memory of
running in a bathing suit through
your cousin's backyard in Cleveland,
the sun on your back and your feet
flying across the dry grass, until you
pull the thread of it all the way back
to the peaches sitting innocently
in the bowl where you left them.



Paul Terranova lives with his wife and two sons in Madison, Wisconsin, where he works as a community center director. Paul has worked as a youth organizer with immigrant youth; a tenant organizer in low-income housing; a refugee job developer; a public action organizer with the United Farm Workers of America; a volunteer with children living on the streets of Cape Town, South Africa; as well as at most every job one could hold behind a counter.

Paul earned his master's degree in adult education and community development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto and his bachelor's degree in psychology at the University of Illinois. He studied poetry with Michael Van Walleghen at the University of Illinois, and his poems have appeared in *Wisconsin People & Ideas* (formerly *Wisconsin Academy Review*). This is his first chapbook.

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