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Driving to Heaven



Poetry by Tracy S. Youngblom

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

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Driving to Heaven

Poetry by
Tracy Youngblom



PARALLEL PRESS 2010

Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries
728 State Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706
parallepress.library.wisc.edu

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ISBN: 978-1-934795-16-3

I would like to acknowledge the following poems, which appeared previously in these publications: “Men and Women” and “Secrets of the Bowl” in *North Stone Review*; “The Poem About Cows” in *Briar Cliff Review* (first place contest winner); “Growing Big,” “Hard Work,” and “O Earthly Zion” in *Shenandoah*; “On Sunday Morning the All-Men Worship Team Takes the Stage,” “Child’s Drawing,” “Release,” “Joseph” (reprinted with permission) in the anthology *33 Minnesota Poets*; “To Carry the Child” in *The Slate*; “Meditation: Slow Life” in *Loonfeather*; “Jochebed” in *The Poet’s Pen*; “Joseph” in *Kansas Quarterly*; “The Bull,” “The Boys Bring Home Birds,” and “Driving to Heaven” in *Minnesota Monthly*.

For my mother—with gratitude and admiration

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Men and Women

At first the alignment
was perfect. Kissing

was great, sex
juicy, two halves of fleshy

peach clinging
together, um-hm.

Then something shifted
on account of desire,

he grew taller or she
grew shorter, nothing

matched up. Now
he reaches for her cheek

in the impossible space
above her head

while she longs for his voice
but sees only his throat,

stark bony knuckle sliding
up and down.

The Poem About Cows

after Ted Kooser's "Pasture Trees"

Oh, I want to be in the poem about cows, be a presence
to their stiff-kneed two-stepping, steady rhythm
of their constant chomping, dance of the moderately
smart, of the mostly happy, feel the rough tongues
of the calves as they lap grain from my palm.

I live with a vision of their perfect teeth, triangular
hips, hair that sprouts from their ears like the old man's,
my grandpa's, who once carried the black and white
geography of their hides with me. We laid our arms
across their bony backs, drew our hands down the length
of nose to the place it turns silk, talked with them
as if we were animals, or they were not.

Eventually they knew his absence by the pressure
of my grandma's lean cheek against their variegated,
living sides as she tried on her widowhood
by assuming my grandpa's life. She loved only
the hard regularity of their need to be milked,
once with the sun glowering from the east
and once as it sulked away to the west. She measured
time by gallons sold, said nothing to anyone.

She kept them, borrowing little—sleep from an easier year, maybe—strength from the memory of her husband’s love for animals, even the stupid ones, the few cows who once tried to cross the swollen river too soon, floated, swirling away, huge ballerinas, their tails rising like skirts in disarray, his arms waving as he ran along the bank, crying for help and getting none, not for the poor dumb cows and their awful mistake or the ones who never needed them, nor for his wife who later in the day would not understand his grief.

Secrets of the Bowl

We thought if we did our math
we could solve her: elbows

angled out, stick
straight spine, ridiculous small

orb of a head. All her lines
and points bent around her

work, her body a barrier.
She stirred, intentional

circles, secrets of the bowl,
her cakes and cookies turned

out on the table. Summers
she stacked the freezer full,

nothing mattered except eggs,
shortening, flour sifted down,

its veil of perfection. Her floury
cheeks runneled, the formal

presentation of her back.
All the forms of her hands: opening

to rub a stomach in bed, clenched
around coffee, cupping a face. We

walked shapes around her, found no
access, her circumference impermeable,

took refuge in her corners, sharp
with mystery, waited long days

for a key to the map
of her hollow bones.

Growing Big

Thumbelina my mother was born small
and grew even smaller.
Then my father the narcissus saw her
and lured her inside his petals
and kept her for years.
She sipped his nectar and bore his children
and occasionally peeked outside
but always came back at night
to the comforts of darkness and
sometimes lies.
He held her close and whispered,
“No one else wants you.”

Then he saw his reflection
in the bottle,
thought himself more than lovely
and withered down to a seed
and blew around forever.

While she flopped into the real world
like a penny into a fountain,
came up sputtering and reaching,
always reaching for: clothes on the line
phone on her desk her own name
her full height.

I sit in my house,
partly my father's lovely worthlessness,
partly my mother's stubborn refusal to be small.

To the Lion

His power over you is so fragile—
who invented it? Did he wield
that skimpy chair, that limp

leather cord, and hope that you
would believe that owning them made him
stronger? Bigger? When he has to stand

on a stool to look you in the eyes
or check your teeth? Somehow you ate that,
have been eating it now for years

from his guilty hand
like scraps of bloody meat,
have begun to crave it,

to rely on it, to think perhaps
it was your idea,
allowing him to scratch your divine

golden forehead, getting his glory from
hiding his head in your delicious warm
mouth. That you are finer for stooping

to his need. Well, even so, mother,
he doesn't have to command you anymore.
Just rise up to your full height.

And roar.

Jochebed

Whatever God whispered in your ear that night
convinced you to do it quickly. Besides,
your beautiful baby floated only a short time,
bobbing in his hollow cradle, before Pharaoh's daughter

hauled him out of the river like a bucket
and fell in love with him immediately.
You got him back in time for the next feeding,
didn't have to feel that ache of milk in your breasts

or hear the first screams as he woke on the water
without you, nor his wail, thin as mist,
persisting as he rode the cold waves, finally
reduced to ragged breath. Then he was lifted up,

lulled to sleep in a stranger's arms. Somehow
you managed not to give yourself away
as he settled in to nurse, to drink your relief,
faith and fear churned to simple milk.

O Earthly Zion

From the crisp and final
mouth of the Almighty
gold streets roll forth;
and trees tall,
golden,
hard-edged and ripe and real
put down roots
to the crystal water
that shivers with its
own sufficiency
as it begets the fruit,
sweet and satisfying.
The leaves flutter themselves dry
on the wind that has now
no weight of grief in it.
They float radiantly outward
in the incessant brightness
of day and night,
carrying in their veins
the whole face of God.

Touching Tongues

The only time I ever wanted to die
was after the musician
who asked if he could kiss me,
who tuned me tight as a guitar string
for a few weeks,

left with no explanation,
left me screaming in the car, windows
open, a warm St. Paul night.

I never had a chance to tell him
it wasn't just love that made me crumble
over the steering wheel,
it wasn't just that kiss
(those kisses)
or what he said to me in Spanish,

it was my now naked and shivering secret:
I want to fall helplessly
into the mouths of men who sing,
stay there, wetly,
touching tongues with music being made,
with tongues that make such music.

I would have followed him for years,
eating the dust the humble eat,
waiting for the next song.
I would not have asked him to sing to me.

I asked him nothing,
just sat in the avalanche of hope,
wept in the car and later
glared at the glorious morning sun
with suspicion,

went exactly where I was supposed to go
with a sort of stubborn, dry-eyed thankfulness
and no other desire except to remember.

Family Psych

My sister says that men are pigs
and she has the scars
to prove it.
Deep in the hot tropics
of her body. A creed forms there,
*Let me be fast and funny
so far ahead
no one can get close enough
to touch me.*
Amen.

My other sister never laughed
to dilute her pain.
She let them have it
full-force, complete, standing
over one friend
screaming, *If you ever lie to me
I'll never forgive you.*
He disappeared for three years
but came back shyly
to browse on the tough grasses
in her meadow.

I stand between them, arms folded
in comment.
Is it necessary to speak?
I have this to say:
*The really great thing about love
is that it can only kill you once,
after that you're dead
and it's a lot easier to take.*

Desire

peony petals drop,

whole hanks of them
mound on the counter,

pliant and graceful as ballerinas
settling in their skirts,

and the remaining flowers lean

down toward them
dripping over the vase's lip

*On Sunday Morning the All-Men Worship Team
Takes the Stage*

Shoulder to shoulder on risers, three tiers
above the congregation, they lead
songs, clap and sway, unified, undifferentiated—
except for one hip, pink-shirted male
who crosses arms on his chest in rapt devotion,
one older man at the mic whose right knee buckles
and unbuckles in time to the music.
They could be the packed, persuaded
standing-room-only crowd at Pentecost,
or a tribunal of the disciples and all their male
cousins, but I see them as I saw
the man in my dream the other night:
He wouldn't hold me—or more correctly, held
me once, a wonderful melting, then withheld
the tenderness that was the center
of my need. He wanted me
to commit to him, marry him, follow
him (whatever women do in dreams)
for more of it. But without it
I could not move.

All these men move,
are moved by the music. Toward
what? A hundred resurrections, they listen
to their own voices in pure tonal relation,
the triadic chords filling the room, hovering
near the ceiling where they cast
their God-burdened eyes. In their dreams
they get useful information—names of enemies,
important dates—power enough to save
themselves and the women at their feet,
of whom they ask nothing great, only to pitch
their voices in at the foundation
of the chord, to stitch healing
into the hems of their garments, and to bear,
alone, the horror of love, the burden of its insufficiency.

Bypassing Normal, IL—1996

We are the women in the white Fiesta, sisters translating
at 70 mph the unfamiliar bumps of Interstate that wind
through Illinois, pass under our tires like Braille.

We are half-awake in the half-morning, having driven
all night, fueled by Pepsi and a strict devotion
to illumination: our father held up, examined in the bitter

radiance of our memories. In the eerie light that fills
the car we make him fall, get up—a comic actor, a man
in a newsreel—replaying his exit again and again,

stumbling along behind sniffing at his trail of lies. Speed
permits this talk, prevents his intrusion; finally
the deliberate motion of outstate travel stops the indifference

we adopt and protect, his other child, the one we were born
to listen to. For it is true, we have learned to read the manifold
voices and gestures of men, plotting our courses

within their fluctuating desires. Yet for this time
we have left them behind, guided now by the faint electrical
kingdoms of rural Illinois, the moon's shy persistence,

the predictable path of reflectors dividing the road.
An occasional severed one swerves in the updraft, tumbles
crookedly under the car. Semis line the entrance ramps here,

housing sleeping men, drivers whose confused exhaustion
is visible: the rectangular marquees of their parking lights
announce their inert presence. What about the man who lies

now on my pillow, in my absence, denying the implications
of sleeping in my imprint, not admitting the full spectrum
of his action? He rests, perhaps, under a halo of puzzling

blessing, convinced of the temporary beauty of stasis,
like this calming certainty, trucks marking points
of entrance, nothing further.

The road stretches on beyond sight. We follow it, intent
on the speed with which we pass Normal, bear down
on other cities whose names we don't yet know.

Trip

It's driver-choose-the-music as we head south on I-35 at midnight, my mother's new Jimmy loaded: CD player and air, suitcases, family nerves. I lie on the rear seat because I'm supposed to sleep now, drive later, and because I have a bad back, a pain someone can name. But my mother and sister fill the front, they are large in the way that only blood can make you, their voices drift back to me, mixed up with lyrics, lights strobing across my closed eyes, everything distilled, filtered. I float in and out of dreams, across Iowa, borne up by the hum of tires and crickets which I believe are outside the windows, though I can't hear them.

We are trying to reach the place my mother calls home, the place we only visit now, into whose rhythms we slip, boats nudging the dock, a temporary mooring. We don't remember what we want from such trips any more than she remembers why she wanted us in the first place. We drive and talk and breathe, synchronized, corded together, drawn along by curiosity or a fascination with force; my arms pinned to my sides, I wait for sleep and resist it, listening for signals from the front, that other world, hanging on for the word that will drag me out the door where I'll stand up in a strange land and take my turn at the wheel.

To Carry the Child

To carry the child
in the summer of 1988
was to be Shadrach in the fiery
furnace of heat and humidity;

was to lie on the couch
with cold cloths on my forehead,
which carried on
its own dance daily;

was to lean on the toilet
for support and to retch
that way for three months while
my son imitated me, coughing
into the sink.

To carry the child
was to float into autumn
on the scent of real food,
once I could eat again;

was to bathe and sleep,
never to be far from
the presence of the jerking
and leaping baby's body
under my ribs;

was to walk around at Christmas
enjoying the weight of my stomach
pressing down on my lap
and the few minutes I stole
to sleep on the bedroom floor.

To carry the child
was to stand and stand
and never sit
for the last two weeks,

to sob into the doctor's room
about my backache, my stomachache,
my heartache
at the length of each day

and when, finally, the hospital kept me,
to change in the bathroom,
wish it were already over.

And then it was over.
They flopped him up on the green drape,
right next to my heart,
he was dark like me.
I touched him with a neutral touch
thinking, not saying,
So this is my baby,
the same as I would say,
So this is the middle of winter,
unsurprised.

To carry the child
is to know now that each of us
is satisfied with the other,

is to watch him stand and laugh,
just throw back his head,
pounding the chair with one hand,

is to hold him months later
while he breathes into my hair,
his open mouth absorbing all these pains
that have brought us haltingly,
but certainly, to love.

Why Does This Child

thump down the stairs
still wrapped in sleep, feel
his way to me without eyes,
and hang close as a shawl

when last night—for many days—
he has dared me to love him,
spitting brittle words? Why am I
mother he wants to hurt?

Now he comes voiceless
to my side and refuses
to touch me
but allows the shadow

of my hand
to graze his hair.

Meditation: Slow Life

Friday, the end of one of those slow evenings
when the children have gone to bed, there is little to do
in our clean house, nothing on TV, no visitors. So I read poetry,
suddenly tired. I have been sick for weeks
and time has dragged behind me, limping along at my heels,
taunting me, *Get better. When will you get better?* I listen for the baby,
who must finally go to the doctor. He is little. I wish
he were older, time is going so slowly, waiting for him to grow,
leaning forward in the back seat, urging, *Sit up, Crawl, Tell me
how you feel.* I watch too much, can't see his progress,
just the endless slow procession of routines.
But he smiles now and I feel my love for him explode,
like the children spilling outside to pick the last few beans,
play baseball a few more times. Autumn is coming, certainly;
I watch for it on tiptoe, thinking it will come quickly, not dawdle,
not click the stick on the fence repeatedly, at leisure.
It may come slowly, though, I don't know. Tonight I killed a fly
that was crawling along the floor, just flicked it with my finger—
it was hardly moving—and I said something stupid about flies
slowing down, and doesn't that mean summer is over?
And even if it is, will fall differ from this season, with all its talk
of wanting to arrive somewhere, anywhere, believing
that I will actually know what to do when I get there?

Joseph

My son plays Joseph in his preschool pageant.
I believe he is typecast: sullen, confused
beside his Mary, who flaps her arms with the angels,
squeezes her floppy newborn, taken up with joy.

Their play ends too soon for my son to be redeemed,
to have his prophetic dream about fleeing to Egypt.
He never makes a decision of his own to settle
outside Bethlehem in the town where people
would later mock his son.

He spends his life there in the shadow of his wife's
blessedness, sanding wood so smooth it feels
just like the skin on the boy's back. He rubs it at night,
still oddly outside the light, an arm's length
from understanding the whole story.

My son gives me a print of his hand. It reminds me
that he will grow up, that it is hard to build
something that lasts, has meaning. On the card
he says, *I hope you get all your work done.*

What does he say at the end of his life?
How much does he know?

The Bull

Because I could never look directly at it, it lives
in the corner of my left eye, a suggestion of size,
implication of bone and hide hulking against
the dark wall. I avoided seeing the humped black back,
its ringed nose. Shit clinging to the fresh straw in its pen.
Hearing its swollen bellow. It may be that for a joke
my grandpa once squared his big hands firmly
under my arms, made me taste terror's sour pooling
in the throat. He might have said,
See, he's in a pen, he can't hurt you.
Or maybe he didn't.

It's impossible to remember anything
but what I invented: the bull's escape,
one beefy leg already forced through the boards,
his white-rimmed eyes scanning the barn floor,
searching for only me.

Years later when the bull and my grandpa were both dead,
the cousins would dare each other
to leave the light's warm cloak,
run to the shape of the elm and back. I run
with hands extended, flinching at my sister's shadow
flying past me in the wet grass,
ducking away from the bats' twirling,
dark pinwheels in the air above my head.

Child's Drawing

Though he rests there quietly with all the others,
his black hair rises like smoke from a brush fire, coils
around his head like steel wool, dark nose claiming
the face as usual. When I scrape his outline, a waxy trace

remains. I could take him home, hold his face
over a flame, change it—melted, tilted into the trash,
a colorful new identity could be urged on him, after
the hot passage of birth—children could look at him then

and recognize their dreams. Yet. . . the way he looks
up from his position on the floor! He's laid out flat,
quite comfortably, content with loss and hierarchy.
There he is with the other clowns, smiling.

The whole world still emerges
from that open yet terrifying black mouth.

Undoing

Once my father called me to the edge
of the table to watch him nick
a golf ball with his pocket knife,
peel the hard, pocked coating

as if it were an apple, crisp
but white. He set it before me
and it began to unwind
while we watched it, unable

to stop, shed its many layers.
Some penchant for revelation?
That's what I would think later.
Then I stared at its undoing,

bound. It writhed like a hatch
of snakes—but it wasn't
snakes at all, or any creature,
just a heap of threads

now raveled, its own loose
nest, cradling a dead ball—
whatever it had become. I turned
to ask my father how

and why, but he had left me
to my awe, as he would leave
for good soon, stealing away to live
a story he would tell for years,

to anyone who would hear,
many versions, none alike.
Soon it would be hard to tell him
from him. From every state,

he claimed to be the same,
though each wife was a new
addition to his signature,
scrawled in a slanted hand.

Now I see why I stashed
that ball—what remained of it—
in a drawer. But then? I knew
nothing yet of self-destruction,

its lure and lurid call. I just
wanted to touch it at night,
in disbelief, feel it hum, tiny
heart, small dark core.

The Boys Bring Home Birds

Any wounded one will do: bald,
bulbs of unopened eyes.
When they reveal them to me,
reach back to bring them forth
on their upturned palms,
the birds wave like broken-handled flags,
emblems of crippled victory.

No one understands this catch
in the heart more than I do.
I nested hairless mice
in a coffee can, fed them
with an eye dropper, held
the hamster while its breath
rattled against my hand,
wrapped a bird in a flannel shirt,
spooned it raw egg and worm.

But these boys are not used
to such longing; they wear it
crookedly. That movement
under their shirts is not merely love.
When I insist they let the birds go
they turn and stuff them
in jean pockets where they stiffen
and die, or set them beneath the lilacs
to appease me, only to return later
to claim what is theirs,
what they have already
begun to destroy.

Hard Work

It never hurt anyone, my grandma
used to say. But she meant
more than that, meant it was good
to work all day, work so hard
no hour was specific,
so the loneliness got plowed through
to the end of the day, or the lust or anger
and then you could just go to sleep with it,
pretend you were more perfect than God,
or the neighbors.

She was partly right. I think of Adam and Eve,
whose first job was simple: name everything.
They got right to it, had no time to think
until they fell into bed at night.
But after that life was too easy
and they thought of that voluptuous fruit,
wanted nothing else
until they got it.

My grandma will wear herself out
canning tomatoes and making jelly.
She will believe she is right forever
about not resting, not letting herself
sway with any feeling.
And she will never understand
why other people won't work that hard,
don't want to put off desires,
good or bad, why the world
has always chugged along,
the only ship in sight,
demanding its pleasure.

Release

One Friday night I quickly give my love
an awkward public kiss, spin him
dizzily away, speed my children
off to their father, exchange polite criticism,
and leave alone for the grocery,

where I become myself once more, childless
and cartless. My list a secret, I whistle
through the aisles slinging looks
at the young men who dare to look
at me, who topple like a card house

under my gaze. I am exotic, elemental:
wind and light, promising nothing.
Striding past the burdened, I hook
my cocoa and cream cheese with one
short but real fingernail.

I pass up grapes, carrots, anything
on sale, don't stop to look at toys,
balance what I want
in the bottom of my red basket,
steal glances at the families

clustering in frozen foods, children howling
like skittish coyotes. I shy away,
wide-eyed, aim for the express checkout
where Verla smiles past me
and I fit everything I need

in one small bag.

They Say Boys Will Cling to Their Fathers

I wonder what is left for the mothers. My sons
exist only in the fluid motion of absence,
the have-been-there, that trick of light

that marks their departure, swift disappearance
from under my outstretched hand. I know
where they've been by the trail they leave:

balled-up shirts, prints on the fridge, lights
blazing nightly in all our rooms. Wandering
behind them, lost from their sight, I gather proof

of their passing, collect and covet
the open books and dirty socks they discard
only to find them later somewhere else,

neat and completely unfamiliar.

Driving to Heaven

It must be above us. My son expects
the rules to be the same there, gravity
disappointing as usual. He asks why

nothing falls from the sky when clouds part,
where the furniture of angels hangs,
adrift in the indirect glare.

I have to answer this while dodging cars
and my own doubts. *Of course God could make
things stay in the sky if he wanted to,*

*but maybe heaven isn't exactly above us,
sweetie, maybe we don't know where it is.*
He's not buying it, insists on place, position,

his *Above us* firmer than tires or the road,
than my own *Maybe not*. I'm doing my job,
maneuvering him through the crazy

rush hour of his curiosity, but I can't
convert him, this child who loves the idea
of suspension, is propelled by the concept of a God

as big as his belief. Now he says he'd like to see God
from an airplane, he wants the car lifting off, wheels
retracted, on our way up there where maybe

the blue of the sky holds heaven in place, or angels
whisper near that overturned palm,
in cahoots with his kind—young, trusting,

unprepared for the burning truth. But I'm the driver.
I know that old lure. Home is where we're going,
sturdy walls, a roof that blocks out the sun,

the sky, our view
of the all too possible.

Similes for the Morning

Oh, the gorgeous subtleties of creation:
my children lying lost in sleep, curled and damp

as insects poised to break out of one existence
into another, into light that welcomes and stuns them,

while outside the garden greens, grass mats
with late Minnesota summer, vines heavy with Early Girls

droop like palm trees over their frames,
make a shadowed heaven, house for the grubby,

the diggers and stealers of fruit, while inside
coffee begins to perk, one quickening cup

for each leaden leg, whose veins my children
have called *miracle veins*, branching blue-green

rivers, coursing in all directions toward a single
site, a studied meandering, a lovely, misleading

complexity. Oh, I move slowly through the morning
thick with significance like a rock climber

placing a careful toe or an amnesiac regaining
the amazing facts or a drunk face to face

with forgiveness, swaying with confidence
and incomprehension while it spreads

around me: this made world,
before which I stand, before which *I am*.



Tracy Youngblom holds an MA in English and an MFA in poetry from Warren Wilson College. Her poems have appeared in many journals over the years, including *Shenandoah*, *Loonfeather*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *North Stone Review*, *Poetry East*, *Potomac Review*, *Cortland Review*, and others, as well as in the anthologies *33 Minnesota Poets* and *In A Fine Frenzy*. She is the poetry editor for the online journal, *Emprise Review*, and teaches English at a local community college. *Driving to Heaven* is her first collection.

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