

Parallel Willows



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**Metambesen
Annandale-on-Hudson
2023**

*Parallel Willows
is the eighty-second
in a series of texts and chapbooks
published by Metambesen.*

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to Stanley and Lillian Freund

“Elms”, my grandmother said.

And the word sounds as old as they are.

When you look up leaves shiver
as if someone cold tries to say something.

Standing under them remembering is easy,
even if, everyone else forgets

like Mom, who when I ask, looks like
she’s running through rain

or Barbara who twirls her hair for a moment
then loops two arms of our plastic monkeys

Aunt Thel who speeds me in her new Corvette
onto the Atlantic City Expressway

or my grandmother who now stares into branches
so I can’t look into her face

until we bend to pick Queen Elizabeth’s lace,
blow cotton off of dandelions,

sift clover to where violets grow, hidden
in the same way as Mom's amethyst earring

found in the garbage between leaves of lettuce
the morning after I last saw him.

The Stranded Seal

What happened to the stranded seal?

Did waves rush in and carry her,
thrusting forward as if to say,

I'm here, I'll save you!

And all that was left for her
was to float away from spindrift.

I say her, not knowing the sex
of the seal I spotted, but, because
beseeching eyes reminded me

of a woman who wanted to be saved,
who longed for something to carry her,
whether wind or waves. I know her--

She is morning's sky.

It wasn't death she craved.

She wasn't in that way suffering,

Instead, she found herself
a seagull slanting leeward
to a place she didn't belong.

When wings failed there'd be only sand
with its rough particles, hidden fleas,
not to mention, empty cupboards.

Soon she'd be unable to breathe.
Not with the contented ease
of the infant laid beside her.

Words of a Willow

I've forgotten myself, a self I knew when I was a sapling, forgotten as my roots stretch beneath a house. Once I yearned for rain and in the wood of my being sensed a rush of water below soil.

I say forgotten, for lack of a better word to describe no longer feeling my leaves lancing through wind, or in green of sleep admitting soft breeze. I'm more a keeper of secrets now. Too tall a guest to enter a house, too silent to be spoken to, until a need for solace draws them to my shade.

"I've seen you cry long after the rain. Sun shone on your branches. Your tears didn't stop", the youngest said.

She rests her back along my trunk, not expecting a response. Regardless, my roots require I give one, even if it's not heard.

"I don't recall crying. As I say, I have forgotten. Crying in itself seems an uncertain thing. Is it thunderclap followed by storm or the hours of dawn when moisture from clouds fall? In that case, part of me might be always crying. I often prefer rain."

I hear ocean in my roots. Sea spray from waves coated my leaves, salted the water I drank. In strong winds my branches swayed, grazing the ground, bending like sails I saw much later when I towered over rooftops to a view of the sea.

What is the Coo of the Dove?

Is it a plea to the girl alone on porch steps wondering why a rainbow appears in a puddle hours after the storm stopped, or why lights seen from a dark street, a kitchen lamp or the yellow glow of the fishing pier make her happy?

She doesn't want to go inside but prefers to wait like a fruit in a bowl not yet ripened, a hard peach from somewhere in the South brought to spring on the path of a migratory bird.

Dawn is the hour she prefers. Her heartbeat, a gull breaking clamshells on sand. Sea and horizon one curtain---alone she hears the call of the dove, long three staccato. A single flute breathes on the nape of her neck before she knows the words to tell of it.

The Lighthouse Girl

Did you know the girl who lived in the lighthouse?
She had a way about her not unlike the structure itself.

On the school bus she sat upright,
looked out to what seemed a distance,
a place you thought there were mostly clouds,
not so many buildings.

No matter how many students sat near her,
she appeared alone and this place she searched for,
you were certain was not the school she went to.

If called on she answered a question;
was known never to ask one.
Her sentences started with the word *if*;
ended where few could continue.

They say she had lost her mother.
Her father was a fisherman and lighthouse keeper.
His eyes squinted to a place no others could see.

The girl too looked long at the waves,
so long she found a friend in a Harbor seal
and another in a child named Ella.

Ella lived in a cave with stalactite
hangings and plenty of books.
She too had no need for questions.

In summer the three swam to a reef,
a half mile or so from the beach.
Seal dove for fish, Ella played a wooden flute

and the Lighthouse Girl,
knowing the sky as she did,
knowing it as well as she knew her mother,
shared with them her most revered dream--

to live on a boat with white sails,
sleep where the stars felt close
and in all the years that might pass

when and *if* she became an old woman,
never view from the sea the same land twice.

Before the Talent Show

Their legs dangle over boardwalk rails
Where they balance themselves
Sitting at the foot of the Steel Pier,
A wooden peninsula jutting into ocean.

There is a red headed girl who can sing,
Belt high notes that make an audience clap,
A lithe one who bends into shapes of a pretzel
Or from standing throws herself into an aerial.

And a third who when her hands touch piano keys
Forgets she's on stage, yet, hears at the same time
Wind gusting through rafters, the way the sound
Of a room pervades your dreams

Salt air and breeze wilt the red curls of the girl
Who soon becomes the first "Annie."
From an arcade a mother appears
Carrying rollers and a brush

The acrobat jumps eight feet to the beach
Turning cartwheels on hardened sand,
While pages of a Schubert Impromptu
Fly like wayward seagulls into waves.

The Hawk's Response

While traveling over water,
I landed on the topsail of a ship,
gripped cloth with talons
and surveyed a view,
simply described as vast.

Ocean and sky married in haze,
no object occupied my sight,
no spindrift formed on waves
wide and acquiescing to a hidden
might meters below sand.

It was then I recalled my mother,
thinking myself again a fledgling,
yet unable to fly. I heard the flutter
of her mate carrying worms
to an evergreen nest.

Firmer I gripped the white sail.

It was a moment only, interrupted
by the fractured speech of sailors,
before I spread and shook my wings,
before a sandpiper caught my eye.

The Approach

Four lanes of a turnpike between
Absecon and Lakes Bay

A gas station, Chevy dealership,
House of Miss Julia, the fortune teller

A seedy motel across from a stucco
mansion facing placid waves

and a beach of colored stones yearning
to be tossed to timid water

A place a movie star could hide, the way
Barbara Hutton did until the kitchen fire,

and later where a ten year old boy,
Benjamin Fox, was secreted away

in the main house with a chauffeur, who
drove him on Saturdays to the Blenheim

for high tea along with the British tutor
who played 78s of Mozart arias

in evenings when stray syllables sung
resembled in a fleeting way

Ben's mother's voice, though,
he was certain she resided where lights

glimmered South of Atlantic City,
beyond the island's bridges and marshes,

if not in the sometime trill of cicadas
nesting in the walled garden.

And He Called Him Darien

A space between parked cars formed a narrow stall where for moments the horse waited. No tug to his bridle let him free to roam through North Philadelphia past the Church of Praise and Worship with its gleaming blue and red stained glass and wide steps that led to what seemed a barn door, only shut to him, however, and no saint's name scribbled overhead.

Then again, what are letters to a horse that instead sought the median's overgrown grass. In steel determination not to be late, cars passed, in the way cars do and the animal bolted, charging as if toward something.

In any landscape one can see windmills, even spinning in blocks between row houses.

Despite a bony frame, the horse cantered as far as Darien Avenue where a man spotted him from his front porch. In his hand the man held an apple. As a youth this man had ridden horses inside castle walls of Felipe del Morro and across the plains of Campo Rico.

Because he had ridden, in his own way the man sat higher, seeing over street signs and that line of smog above the Schuylkill, noticing dusk's streak of red in the sky. And if not the sails of windmills, of white vessels turning with breeze on a sea below a Spanish fort.

From Fiction

To spy on a grandmother's wake she climbs a tree.

Muddy underpants visible.

Many noticed the oddness of it.

Many noticed everything she did —

That's what it is to be beautiful.

She thought nothing of squatting in swampy water,
scaling an ancient oak, dirtying fine clothes
her mother dressed her in.

Then again, why was she dressed only to linger in the arbor?

She always smelled of trees.

His heart's darling, Faulkner called her,
a thread he weaved through every panel of fabric
so no character, no Compson, could forget her heart,

the way she held their hand to it, pulsing
like a sparrow that flits between branches
then vanishes suddenly, leaving a landscape

incomplete, leaving memory —
Something never as it was, but as it is,
a scent of magnolias blossoming.

My Grandmother

With Him she didn't drink coffee or smoke
cigarettes like she did with Marie,

instead, she sat on her bed, reciting prayers,
fingering rosary beads,

her hands gripping, as when by ear she played
a Cole Porter song on the piano,

or, held those enrobed cream cherries
from Lilac Chocolates.

If He answered her, or she Him,
I'm not sure.

There was a quiver in words she mumbled
that sounded like someone from Ireland

speaking through Uncle Charles' radio.

Though I suspect, He told her secrets

through static I couldn't hear, important ones,

like when she might die.

Remember the birds

Now, wonder why they linger like the rocking motion of waves. It's hard to think of you flying unless in the stops and starts of land birds, branch to bush, roof to porch rail.

When I envision birds they are traveling over water, over the Atlantic, where shapes of a coastline assemble strewn puzzle pieces in my eye.

Your hand trembled gripping mine at the top of Macy's escalator. And it's not as if you didn't fear water, for that matter. When we took a ferry you ended in the lower cabin ill.

The rest of us stayed watching fishing boats dock, a rollercoaster swirl on Steeplechase Pier, the Haddon Hall shrink to a Monopoly piece.

Behind us a stage curtain of waves rolled in hills three times higher than our boat. You preferred not to look, there where the birds were gliding, tilting wings, turning, swerving in whatever direction the wind blew.

I climbed down to you in the cabin, clutching your purse when we sat alone across from the captain.

"You missed the cormorants", I said.

Mosaic

To think glass intentionally cut
into what looks, instead, like pieces shattered,
thrown from a high shelf height
or against a wall in a fit of rage

To think something so broken
can piece by piece mend to one frame,
inexact as memory, imperceptible
as the progress of a turtle on a stone walkway.

The Girl at the End of the Jetty

In morning's dark she rode a ten speed
three miles to the Longport Point.

A light on handle bars shone on a jetty
dividing the Atlantic from the Bay.

From where she parked the glow cast only
a few feet into the jagged runway of rocks,

boulders sleek as the flesh of an eel,
slippery from a constant thrust of waves.

Still she climbed to the almost end,
feeling under hand mollusk and brine,

the same scent that lingered in her hair,
detected by one who might kiss her.

She leaned bare legs against a rock,
letting sea spray caress her

the way a man might, unaware
of fear the ocean might take her.

Indeed, thinking it where she'd like to go,
that crevice where dawn starts beyond the horizon.

The Conservatory Student

She is young in a hallway, in a passage, as if there was no passage
and young means uncertain, as opposed to unknowing.

Prewar doors hold the weight of Bluebeard's Castle--

Did she choose the blue-green garden, or was she issued in to its florid walls,
not considering toil, maintenance?

Tomorrow she'll resume daily practice, ignoring pity she feels this moment
for a French Horn slipping through sound proofed walls, struggling with
the Finale of Firebird —

Sustained notes quiver like twilight dying in windows visible from a center
staircase.

Her shoes sound loud on marble as piano notes replay in her mind, let her
think her footsteps belong to another, leading or following to yet more
double doors, through a cacophony of sound, to an exit on Claremont
Avenue---

There trees bend in October wind, Vesper bells toll through Riverside Park.

Despite the now quiet of her step, a slope of uneven sidewalk, descending
like a sigh, reminds her who she is.

Words to Saint Francis

On the Roman road
it's summer:

Enter the walls of Assisi,
Climb the winding path
to a white cathedral.

Turn again to the poor,
They wait for your outstretched
fingers, pink streaks of Umbrian
dawn glimpsed from a field.

They lie in burnt meadows
of wheat and corn where
you kept a stone pillow.

Climb Francesco, now in first light.
Sparrows in the orange grove silence.

Blind, not deaf, you hear
the snicker of that newspaper boy
mocking your shabby robe.

Disregard his jeering.

Let the mountain air move
your limbs through alleys
cooling as you rise. Turn,

Wave again when you reach
Sancta Maria ad Praesepe.

No lepers board the bus on Strada Statale
75, but I spot plenty of American wolves
leaning on their luggage, waiting
for one motion of your hand.

Roaming Amalfi

To wisteria climbing a stone wall,
a scent of sea air steals through an alleyway.

Bluish flowers move so slightly
to remind me, I am living,
now as my thoughts light candles for those gone.

How is it they gather in greenery beside a villa?
Did one guess I'd be passing?

The small audience spies a woman
slip out of heels into comfortable sandals
to roam russet cobblestones.

Does a word wait or should she simply watch
until the shiver of leaves stops?

She's lost, you know, but no worry,
the scent of orange grove in Adriatic
air compels her to linger

near a dove perched listening
to the flutter of its breath.

The Wolf, the Coyote, the Woman

From acres of wooded land veined gray by streams
the wolf emerged onto a cleared lawn.

He stood for minutes staring at a farmhouse
with a wraparound porch and on a second storey,
a palladian window where he saw a woman, a she,
a kind of she he'd seen before, and without knowing,
knew it was a she, just as she suspected the wolf, a he —

Was it the way he surveyed the entirety
of the place, the open fields to the sides, a slope
to a running stream, a fence around a barn
or simply how he watched her with no fear,
thinking her a captive animal, a breed seen before
staring out of a window, standing in a doorway?

He took a mild interest before retracing his steps
to a cluster of elms and scarlet oaks. As for her,
she decided she'd be late giving a piano lesson
and stayed as long watching as the gray-brown
of the wolf's coat remained visible. In spaces
between twining branches he loped retracing steps

through an aisle of pines to appear in moments
again with a gray coyote trailing —

The coyote we will call a she because of its size
and delicate walk and the way it spent time
sniffing the ground for the scent of dogs
and other animals. And the way the two
rested on a hill blending their minds with decision
before moving on with the ease of pedestrians
across the fields and down the long drive. Though,
not before the wolf raised its head to acknowledge
the woman it beheld through panes of glass
as clearly as he looked into her soul.

Trees of Ivanovka

We hear music,
the minor keys of Rachmaninoff
on the piano

Through the window we watch the trees
of an ordinary yard.

Without wind there is still
life in the leaves,
a dew-drop greenness

That suggests they stood once
on a summer estate,
Ivanovka,
Listening to a trial of passages
for a piano etude's coda,

shading a Labrador dog
and a man's large sullen head
bent to manuscript

before hay making,
before the table was set with borscht,
he plucked from the air
arresting sounds
born in the languid evenings.

II. Etudes Tableaux

He called them picture studies
but never wanted to reveal
the image that inspired

the writing. "Let them paint
for themselves what it most suggests"

So whether dusk falls
on the turrets of a city
or on the stone walls of a Moscow courtyard

whether mist rises on the Volga,
the crowd on the bridge not noticing,
or from a simple lake warmed by mid- morning

pairs of ducks crossing
to a hill of illegible tombstones
bowed in prayer to the high grass
there is little difference.

Reading the time on a 15th century clock
you are as different as the hour in far off cities,
yet, something inside says--*This is me,*
finding her way through labyrinthine streets,
thinking strange buildings familiar.

Her eyes focus on rooks and swallows perched
above the Old Town Square, and in that moment,
the strike of an hour when figures of Apostles
on the Orloj move, she is who she was,
a woman just being.

Scenes from Prague

Often a stern door,
slabs of wood
open from the center
quickly, then close

Imagine
a timid knock---
state business,
man with gray complexion
bustled in

Façade baroque, ornate
windows flanked with cherubs

fleeing from the fluorescent light.

II

Winding in darkness to the Town Square
streets resound with shouting

rhythmic as the jangling of keys,
accented with sudden screams.

Figures in darkness hover
near the Salvador Dali Museum
watching on a massive screen

Germany play Spain for the Euro Cup.

III

In the darkness the Vltava
makes no noise against Kampa,

where dogs play at night in the park
near the bridge to Nove Mesto —

Nine Muses stand on the National Theatre
above a woman walking in lamplight alone.

IV

Josefov –

A boat at sea
painted by a ten-year-old,
a voyage dreamt
inside ghetto walls,
a green half-moon, green stars, green flame
burning from a random purple candle,
large as the sea yet alone
on the far right side of the page,
Sophie Bobaskoba's notebook
Terezin 1938.

The House Wren's Nest

How long the house wren worked you can almost calculate,
having watched it this hour carrying grass, mud, pine
needles, twigs into openings on top of a propane tank.

As I lift the lid, material stored reflects four days,
perhaps, of rigorous flying, carting and between trips
calling from a roofline's highest peak to a mate
who burrows now in a hollow of briar
sampling the space before labor's done.

I see a beak and stone black eyes, a head still
while feathers quiver like those minutes when sun
descends to night. It knows I watch it,

and the other wren perched on a dogwood branch,
whose twitch of a tail rises with the start of a question,
whose screeched call reaches the climax of song,
that high note when a heart perceives, thinking there
any purpose to our efforts largely is in vain.

The Messengers

Knowing is different than feeling.
Still, knowing isn't easy. It's Loss
I hear, we hear, five of us
and to a place on Shelley Hill
we're set flying, dotting a near
circle on a lawn aside a farmhouse.

Did I say we meant to go elsewhere?

To a row of pines by a ravine,
not far from here, patches of ice
nearly melted, waterfall
no longer frozen. We meant to go,

before the message came
first to my ears or was it
to my eyes, that rapid twitch,
or, perhaps to that even
space of feathers above
they call my mind?

And who was it who sent it,
moreover interrupting,
an otherwise perfect plan?

Though, once understood,
again knowing isn't easy,
what is there except flight
and the murder of us cawing,
cawing, cawing so similar
to your own *calling*, until
from a second storey window
she listens?

Pianist Walking

Long hours of afternoon, window gray
with early snow one lamp
on an upper floor of a west side
brownstone, piano etudes of Chopin
Rachmaninoff, Debussy droning in a distant
other time, other life in an industry
of hands visceral, unstoppable as winter storm.

How strange the practice of those passages
sound now ringing in their repetition
heard from quiet pavement of a lamplit
street, light snow freshening a face, grazing
lashes with merely the semblance of tears.

To Hart Crane's Seagull

Why did you hover over that bridge,
especially when July beat a Caribbean
sun onto the roadways?

In Brooklyn heat, suspended cables
rarely cool despite the evening.

Why not be content in a rooftop garden
mingling with peculiar sounds of words?

A constant need to fly injured your wings.
Another gull, less hungry,

might have chosen a placid lake
instead of the East River

where cigarette smoke from walkways
wafts as high as Roebling's arches,

where the wake of one ferry has no time
to die before another passes.

Place is a difficult choice, especially
when it could be another.

Not Cleveland, per say. Perhaps
a Canadian refuge where wild geese

overshadow other happenings, still,
you found a spot to stamp your feet

on the banks below the Promenade
where hidden worms emerged
mistaking it for the sound of rain.

