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Whatever promise ground provides | [Poems]

Candace Black
The University of Montana

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WHATEVER PROMISE GROUND PROVIDES

by

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B.A., California State University Chico, 1977

Presented in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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WHATEVER PROMISE GROUND PROVIDES

Some of these poems have appeared, or are scheduled to appear, in the following periodicals:

Cafeteria: James Otis the Patriot; Mail Order Bride

Collage: Osprey; Save the Wishbone

CutBank: Textile Worker

Intro 10: Wind Damage

the Seattle Review: Giving Blood

Quarterly West: Homestead Family; On a Footbridge; Wedding
Portrait: The Mother of the Bride

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False Spring

Seen from a Distance

Before we moved in, you described
our rooms. Mine was egg blue, the trim
magenta. Even a black wall
near the heater. We thought the house exotic
as the desert name, Mojave.
Looking east, you pointed out vague signs
of life, too distant to be more
than violet-amber daystars.
We walked towards them
hoping for Bedouins camped near yuccas,
found instead empty bottles
perched on the bare limbs of trees.
I tried that alchemy at home, tried next
tracking satellites across distilled night air,
tried to learn Latin
before my chest grew, wanting to serve
someone.
We set out in dreams now, looking
for our dog, the one killed
by poison. Mother, we've gone farther
today than ever before. I think we'll find them.
These strangers will be friendly.

For Luck's Sake

a woman doesn't name her child.
For six years the air's too full
of spirits eager for mischief.
This-One-Always-Cries will grow up knowing
the value of the silent word.

In the same way, your life is bordered
by that you do not name. With the ill
it's tumor: the air's too full
of fear, eyes promise time and hands
coax away pain. With us, it's love.

A woman doesn't name the child
she may never have. That word rides quiet
between the ribs, on the tips
of our fingers, always asking for a tongue
we haven't strength to give.

for douglas

False Spring

In another home I'd be victim
to the season. Orchards of almond
blossoming white, pollen drifts
behind limited vision.
Here, occasional foolish trees
dare a late snow, set out
their own lace. The sun
invites belief. Like robins, I steal
mud for daubing a new life.

General John Bidwell knew
what he was doing: hardwoods
for shade, fruit trees for sustenance.
Named the largest after an English friend.
Twice the same week loves call
from years away. We talk
of marriage, I listen for the unspoken,
but they seem only envious
of such guarantee.

It is Friday and morning's winter
melts into new grass. Hooker Oak
is two years dead: laid down
with such a thud birds this far north
started into sky. One man left
to call, the one I wanted most.
He wades through rice, checking levees,
indifferent to the air
of the red-winged blackbird.

Osprey

Don't we always love
the wild? The snowy underbelly
the wingtips that flutter
with each change of current,
your fingers so light I haven't memory
of their touch.

That morning
socked in with fog, I wanted
to trap it or hover there with it
at least
before the last steep dive
but you said, let it go.
And don't we regret it in dreams
of two dead trees
the irrigation canal, the winter
cry of the hunt.

for mark

On the Coast

When we came to the end
of the river: confusion. Sky
had risen to meet us, or was it the arc

of water into low gray clouds?
We strolled all afternoon. The ring-bills
mocked our generous lunch

until we tossed it to them, the bread
assuming a brief, curious birdlife,
flying off in two directions.

Direction. We had not known the river's
name until you spoke it, wandered lost until
you pronounced the ocean Scottish,

the unseen sun north-west.
That was all there was time for.
We turned for home, walking

backward, waving long after the yellow
smudge of you waved back, the spray
misting our eyes, the gulls mewling lonely.

for dick hugo

While You Were Gone

the woman you think of
as yours slept. The man
hiding in the lilac
approached the window, open

during your absence. He released
her ankles from their dreamless chase
and now, returned home, you feel her leaving.
Beyond her still body, a Turk
has nearly made the gate. Guards become suspicious

within the turquoise city. You become
one guard, powerless to move
beyond your crimson jacket, the gold lance,
certain your wife lies asleep
in the rogue's bag.

How to account for this distance, the sudden
growth of hollyhocks in the garden,
the stranger holding your body, her mouth
stings like money. You'd kill

for the chance to talk with her
again. But you are frozen ten yards
from the gates, praying to Allah
the tower alarm does not sound, praying the woman
sleeping on your back won't stir.

Laundry

Think of the men you've left,
their assorted sizes
as you pile colors into mounds,
decide which can't be
stopped from bleeding. Check pockets
but men are careful
at this age. Hands feel for damp
in socks, smooth the baggy
pouch of briefs: stains
of younger brothers, Daddy's nylon
boxers, the ex-lover who went without.

Why do this? Clothes
have no new secrets, no clues
to the man inside. Try them on.
Feel his thigh around yours
fold the sleeves to your breast,
say, his hands cover me. Celebrate
the bleach that kills his salt,
leave your own in the crotch and collar.
It will bring him back
like a ticket.

Letter from Another Life

Dear Carol: In the middle of a journey
south, I stopped in one of my hometowns.
Oak and walnut line the streets
like always and Sutter Buttes
guard the southern edge of the world
I once chose. I'm married
in that life, to the man I was mad for.
He's a farmer and at twilight, I know the two stars
winking are his, driving straight
county roads home to me. In that life
I've done things correctly. We have a son,
we hope for more. Our years run from
harvest to planting. Too much rain
at the wrong time sets us back.
I do what I can. Scotchbroom on the table,
our yellow hope filling the window.

I can write you, a stranger
these past years. I write you because
here, we live in a place where winter
doesn't forgive. Carol, you understand the letter
that never comes. In this life,
we love our husbands too much,
yet murder them in sleep.
We second-guess our bodies, telling
each other we have time, that frost
doesn't collect on windows.
It doesn't matter what happens
in that other life: another drought,
the market gone bad, the eldest boy drowned
his fifth spring. I've done the right thing
by going on, leaving when I had to.
That woman survives.
This letter comes from a life
hardly begun, a woman with dreams
fatal as ricewater.

Giving Blood

All those years I believed veins
blue rivers, only to find it true.
In lab, the cat's pumped
full of latex, it was easy to tell
them from nerves, tight ganglia.
Mine taught me the posture of death.
She clawed the gas, back arched.
Porcelain teeth we rang
with probes guarded the tongue, frozen
and pink like a Moslem tidbit.

My own veins grew skittish
jumped away from needles to expose
bone. Bruises were violent
then green. One morning we cut
away fat, found the twin horns
bulging with kittens.

Even now I can't trust
this tearose stain on white tissue.
Somewhere in my body
a cave must be blooming, a steady dance
to the season it knows
like my name, like my heartbeat.
Lulled by narcotic iris,
the hammering at the temple
is not our pulse, only the echo
of one we listened for in the dark.
Long ago, our ears small petals.

Litany

We were a family rough on dogs.
I don't remember Stanley,
only his dying, and being told he was buried
in the orange grove. Smedley
was poisoned in the desert and we cried,
remembering her devotion, the scar
below one eye from battle with Dog Baker.
A black and tan dachshund, Burgie,
totalled by a truck. We gave up then,
until my mother won Raffles as a door prize.
Born to the limelight, he made the society
column once a month, trolling
the Admiral's parties for snacks.
He finally ran away and joined the hippies,
changed his name to Sebastian.
Sandy, a second-hand dog, snuck naps
on the couch, died of cancer.

I won't go into the cats: Peanutbutter
eaten by a tom, Ringo the stray.
Or the parakeets that escaped
before getting in the cage. The turtle
carcass found beneath the bed.
The iguanas we gave my cousins,
still at large somewhere in their backyard.
I don't know. Kids are suckers
and parents even more so. Purina
was cheap back then. We ate it
out in the garage, picked a dog from the package
and said, That's me.

Save the Wishbone

So much to hope for.
You settle for things working out
they way they should, wind up
with one more brittle arm that,
with all the others, piles up
in the chest. The sharp edges poke
through sometimes, when you inhale to sigh.

I wish for the time between:
the empty arc of all wishbones,
light and darkness and when they change,
the times we know we still
have love. It is somewhere
behind our eyelids
with trust and the dark.

Safe Passage

The birds of last winter
have not returned. I want to blame
the mild weather.
Duped lilacs have begun
to play their hand, the lawn is spongy with wet
green. What need of us
have sparrows, when seed lies exposed
on bare ground? The sunflower head
is full, no flicker
lording it over the smaller birds.
I want to blame the tall pines
across the street, dense and safe.
My trees are always playgrounds,
never home. Nesting birds are visited
graces; I must want them too much,
a mark of favor from those I can't help
but love.

 Last winter I spent my lunches
watching for the white-crowned sparrow.
I was never sure: the glass
wavered just where he was, the juncos
bullied him away before I got a good look.
My one success the house finch
I'd call down from the neighbor's
tree, to the phone lines
to the fence, to the juniper,
the elm, and finally the feeder.
He'd eat, question, and I'd promise
Safe passage as long as I live,
winter flag, trusting heart.

Photographs

James Otis the Patriot

says the family heirloom, The Otis Family in America,
struck by lightning. Time weekly: a cutlass
blow to the head. Whatever the cause, your prime
was spent searching for light, a warrant
of security for eight years service
in the legislature. Sam Adams,
that firebrand, took over and look
at my inheritance: a nose not quite bulbous,
headaches, a bent for oratory.

Our branch forked
west, missing out on elevator fame,
even the lone Archbishop. Shipped out
and stopped short at the sea. Great-grandfather
with a German bride had a rakish
moustache and a taste for rot-gut. Or port.
It didn't matter. He died young and Grammy Otis
carried on.

Two thousand pounds
in British sterling didn't restore your mind.
I couldn't convert it now; things have devalued
since then, except you. You appreciate
with age, our only claim to fame.
Our one link east.

Mail Order Bride

Why did I ever come here
to this Godforsaken
hole where wind blows hard
and the nearest woman miles away?
Okay, I was desperate
unmarried at twenty-four and the notice
said urgent, posted near the station like that.
But I was unprepared for this rock
who breaks horses
and hearts, drinks whiskey like water
and can just sign his name, just.
Three times this week he's come home drunk
to snore in front of the fire. It's not my fault
I'm with child. Wyoming winters are cruel
and two small crosses fill
the only window I have. Yet there are enough times
he asks to feel the child
or thinks to bring coffee from town
that I think I'll wait
for spring, what with everything paid up
and news of a wild herd
north of Etna and Freedom.

Homestead Family

The sod house in the background, square
and clean-lined. That narrow opening
the doorway grownups carried chairs from.
No one touches, except the mother,
holding the baby on her lap. A family
like others: three daughters followed
by two sons. I am third, standing barefoot
to the left, dark eyes solemn.
My brother James next to me,
his face blurred but one can tell
the freckles. An older sister moved too.
Perhaps her dress, a long-waisted gingham,
was tight: the hand-me-down
shoulders too small, her wrists bare
inches below the sleeve.
The rest are strangers. My face
really the baby's, mouth a half-circle
of surprise. Strangest of all
the mother, never mine.
She seems an older daughter of the gaunt man
in the center. Her left eye
is cast, filmed by years of lamp light
and children, one after the other.
All look ahead, fourteen ears
strain to hear the click that propels them
forward from Kansas.

Cañon de Chelly

At dawn, rain.
The dream begins
or ends, water always
half of the rock's prayer.
A good sign for the journey.

We ride past the standing
giants. They look
ahead into our distance
telling us nothing.
I sit behind my father
and am comforted
by the years of his blanket.
My dog walks beside the horses.

To the north the mountains are blue.

Lynching

That man with the tattoo
points up--is he your father?
Woody's behind you, holding
your thumb in his fist
smiling above your dark hair.
You try to be sexy, give
that look women give who sense
they're being watched. Your lips
part, eyes large and knowing.
At your breast you hold dollars of elm.
With men in shirtsleeves
we know it's summer. What keeps you
here fifty years is still
the glow of streetlamps
through leaves, this canopy of maples,
the enchanting angle
of the black man's neck.

Textile Worker

At first glance
it seems to be the moon wandering
late through the April
sky. But she looks
again, decides it's only a cloud,
then turns back
to the clattering bobbins.
Nine years old, she
knows enough to braid
her hair tight
and high, to roll her sleeves
beyond the elbow.
She will bring home
two dollars a week.

Six years into her future
she remembers
the sun filtered through
windows. Six years
forward she wanders
late through a moonless
night, her one arm
a beacon
and a loom.

Immigrants

From the railing they see the promised
country. Three weeks out of Salerno
they're luckier than some--his wife
and two children brought along
by a brother's factory pay. No city
suitcase, just the box on his shoulder
tied with string. The son already forgetting
his childhood:

Sopra la panca
la capra campa.
Sotto la panca
la capra crepa.

What can a man do
but follow the one ahead, sign
the contract at the end of the dock.
Little Teresa will go to school
be the ears and tongue of her mother
who thinks, in a language she'll never know,
Under the bench or over, the lamb
always dies.

Talisman

She walks with purpose,
home from the market. One stalk
of corn to shake at the road
ahead, another in her pack,
wedged between next year's seed
and her youngest son.
She wouldn't say
which means more: one grain
from the cob of her body
or a rocky patch of tilled chance.

This year's quipu will tell
the harvest. Knotted strings
keep history. Not this woman.

Wedding Portrait: The Mother of the Bride

I've taken care of everything.
Thanks to me, this daughter
wears white. The eye shines brightest
before the vows are spoken.
And tonight! Who but me
has thought to lay the corn husk
doll beneath the bed?

Let the poor girl
admire her gloved hands.
After tonight she'll never touch
satin again. Only goat dung,
only blood: a chicken's,
a child's, her own.

On a Footbridge

I step toward you, framed
by white handrails. The umbrella's
just for show, really. It's stopped
raining and a fortunate break
of clouds bathes me in light.
You look golden, you tell me
and I have to admit, I feel a girl
again. It must be the bare
limbs, the damp clumps of rotting leaves
taking me back ten years, to the fall
we were courting, the long
walks on Sundays after supper.

The ovenbird sang late
all that September. How were we to know
we'd leave Ohio, that we'd lose
Timmy to fever in Denver, Louise
to influenza? We should send this back,
let them know that even Wyoming
can be lovely. I'm not the girl
you married that clear December morning.
But today, on a bridge over stones
and low water, I step toward you again,
daring the winter ahead.

Harvest

Wind Damage

No sun. Weather spits
through on its way east,
forcing you indoors to the man
you'll winter with. Look him over
with an eye for time—it's come to that.
Tell him of men loved who died
early: Grandpa, a name with your mother's
face, Byron shot in Korea,
your only uncle dead at forty-six.

Point out the exceptions. Your dad
approaching fifty, begins to breathe
easy. Be sure to mention Paul,
the great-uncle who hung on. His wife,
Mildred, swallowed salvation and later--
the priest gone--tried to kiss grace
past his startled lips. Her jealousy
of something vague as cancer, the secret
pride of keeping her vow longest
in a family of widows.

Tell him the blue spruce this morning
was only the start: eventually
barer, hungry trees will crack
through his dream, embrace him
in a way you never can. There are women
in trees who, rather than lose
one branch to a stranger wind,
let go and fall
toward whatever promise ground provides.

Clearing

A man and a woman work
together, clearing

the garden after the first hard frost.
Corn whispers

sharp intrigue, but they do not
hear. They survey a ruined

kingdom: twisted crookneck,
tomatoes caged grotesque.

Berries need a blanket
of straw, canes need to be cut back.

The last bees dust
the sunflower. Hail the brassica

finally thriving! Welcome the humble
finch. Soon it will be

the garden's only color.
Head's blood against snow.

In the coming months, the woman
may grow dark with winter.

Her belly swells
like the melon. At night,

the man rests his hands
upon her skin. He feels the change

inside her, the ground
being turned.

Crossing the Borders

Remember the first one? The watery
green, deer gliding through rushes.
We were young as that valley
and now, miles later, I can tell
you these things aren't common--
I am being whittled here
by something more than mountains.

I think lines on maps have nothing
to do with this. The boundaries
we crossed have no names, although
some try Oregon, Idaho.
Where we've been is a tattoo
we can never find; the places
we go to, the pulse
beating closest to the ear.

for mary-ellen

The Doctor Loses Three Patients in as Many Days

Small matter they were old,
their hearts too weak
for another season of breath.
The doctor sleeps
when he can, despite the hoarse
rattle and straight line
weaving his dreams together.

His garden is sown in even
rows. He loses himself
among the tendrils and runners
pulsing green. Squash swell
like fingers, the snowpeas
in their pale curves, embryonic.

And we are all growing
toward decay—the garden,
the small yellow bird
darting in the tree, the many
hearts the doctor will not save.
Small wonder we praise
the child, who knows the words

for ball, butterfly.
Who sees his father in all
bearded men and sleeps
through the night, trusting
two faces. The doctor
learns to trust each symptom,

none, to usher the dying.
He sleeps when he can.

for tom

A Gift

I remember visiting Kitty
in the drugstore. My sisters
and I ignored the grownups'
talk, we wanted gum
then stood dreaming by the perfume
display. The drugstore was old
and dim, and though she didn't
work there long, it's the one I remember
best. I remember the windows.

Kitty died yesterday, the youngest of three
daughters. She was the old woman
I'd grow into, according to the family.
Carol would be Aunt Alice, Marilyn our grandma.
I will be no one now, a woman I'm reminded of
by windows. On the sill above my desk,
a small lilac branch grows in a clear jar.
Windblown, it forgives
by leafing out anyway, forks jagged
against an empty backdrop of sky.

Everything seems to forgive our impatience
for the season's change. The pussywillow's
fur dotted with pollen. The geranium
in bloom. Even the crow coughs a blessing
on us as we work out back,
spreading compost or raking leaves.
Last week my husband gave me
three carnations. The shredded edges open
and we taste clove in our dreams.

The lilac above me lives.
Is it too much to hope
pale green fleurs-de-lis will flower, white,
heavy with scent? Kitty's heart
just gave out. A year ago she announced
she was dying, but no one
believed her. I believe the light that fills
my window later and later each day,
the slow shift of earth. I cup
my hands in the garden and inhale
the peppered smell of dirt.

for my great-aunt

Leaving It Behind

America was always north to him.
---Wallace Stevens

At low tide two women edge the bay.
A cormorant surfaces in the corner
of your eye, having swum even further
than you expected. Summer
becomes a three-lettered season,
French, for the daily crossword.
Uncharacteristically south, your skin
burns, tells you this is wrong:
we used to dive here, at night, our bodies
gleaming arcs off the bow
of that sloop.

Every calendar reports
October, but here the trees do not turn,
they merely die. At last you can say so long,
you can let go of whatever held you under
dank sky. The sea means nothing
to you now, a flat green, white rollers from
a plane window. This autumn, you and I will return
to the lake we call ours.
We won't need shells to interpret
the wind that blows down the Swan; we know
it says home. In all seasons and years
to come, it says home.

Below the High-Water Mark,
with Gannon and Kyran

Early spring, after dinner,
we all walk to the far dock.
I've never known the lake
this low. Not like summer,
when water covers
our steps. You show me
where to look for shells
under driftwood. I never find
one on my own, but you both know the tide
and its secret places. My pockets
bulge. Above us, Red explores
the cliff. He's a good dog. Swallows
bank against glare and dip
out of range before we can say for sure,
Rough-Winged. On the dock,
you teach me to spot fish: don't
look for the dimple, look out
to Goose Island, or beyond, to Angel Point
and there, on your left, the splash,
the growing circle. Before sunset
you head home to bed. I'll follow
later, reading the maps
ice left on rocks. I'll stop at
the gift of your days, the cache
of shell and flat skipper.

Fishing Ninepipe

That old man lands bass
with a rubber worm. He leans
against the floodgate, slow
to offer advice. When you turn I find,
in your smile, open sky.
I want to dive in. It is summer.
We are only starting to love. I don't
mention the line of blue,
sure it's just another symptom. At the bridge
nothing bites. But we stay
past sundown, with the hoarse bark of geese.

In September, hard frost
has driven sunfish too deep.
We take pictures instead, listen to the deaf
man shout for last year. The mudhens
clap, taking off for calmer water.
If I could, I'd give you ten summers
under these Missions, each one big
with bass, for the sky of your mouth again.
Today, my words tumble into leaves
we kick on the way home.

Listening to My Uncle

It's the third day wind screams
through the Hellgate and then, amazed
by the sudden expanse of valley,
dances crazy on our lives.
This wind isn't yours, Jack. You waited
for the perfect breeze, watched the windssock
and nosed out thermals. In the end
wind failed you, brought the brown hill
rushing up too fast.

I only know you
left too soon. All those years my dad
fought the unpopular war
you held us together, you who knew so much
breath in the garden, the love of soil.
Always quiet, out-talked by the family's
women--but those days on the beach,
we felt your eyes on us, trusted you
to know the currents.

I finally understand your children's
rage. They'll never leave home, afraid
you won't follow them over mountains,
beyond the water's edge. But I can tell them
what you've taught me: love is often clumsy,
it hasn't the sympathetic music
we've been led to expect. I know a man's arms
extended with offering, branch
into light. Sometimes, a hummingbird
will visit our eyes with the life
of his breast, will feed
in our presence, if we're quiet.

Harvest

On a dark road leaves race toward
headlights like children
running home. We've made it
this far. To the dying
of the year, still whole.
Now is when trees give up, silver
maple turns in to itself. Only juncos
dare wind at the feeder. We turn in
to ourselves and dare what private
demons we carry. Mine is harvest.
Contrary to weather, I must fight
the fullness of autumn, struggle with my own wish
for a seed to carry through winter.
This bearing down of seasons makes me strong.

It's a hard time, when air
becomes something to be wrestled.
Let me take that for you, let me breathe
when you can't, calm as the resting branch.
My hand in yours means time, years
stretch out like a river
heading west, alive with moon from a night's
promise of frost.

I've hung corn and wheat
on the door. They mean hospitality:
the home we're building
will be Pocatello or Blackfoot, Archer
and Johnson, all the towns
we're part of. We'll become the lives we touch,
the ones we start by loving each other.
In the end, I'll close your eyes
if I have to. Let me kiss back all the life
you've given, hold you
beyond the point where touch is what matters,
my voice leading you home. And gone.