"Long distance for Aloysius Prairiebear" click

Paula Evans Petrik

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"LONG DISTANCE FOR ALOYSIUS PRAIRIEBEAR"

CLICK

By

Paula E. Petrik

A.B., CORNELL UNIVERSITY, 1969

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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1973

Approved by:

[Signatures and names]

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date

May 24, 1973
FOR MY MOTHER

Because I could never write a poem for you, I give you this book.
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CAVE PAINTINGS

I.
Toward the end the bears painted
their secrets on a cave wall.
Without sound, without prospect.

Who will prepare for this evidence,
this inheritance of our paws?
Into echoes, into memory.

Let one who knows how to wait come.
His hands will collect our silence.
As they are answers, as they are not.

II.
His tracks walk out, never come back,
a single line going east. I move inside.
His voice denies my name.
How will I sign this?
Somewhere a glacier picks up speed:
another ice age is just beginning.

III.
Months and things are unfolding.
Today I am counting red—
third primary color, least
used, most difficult:
One porcupine, the sun at noon,
iron coiling in rocks.
The count is never the same:
an ancient fire, cedar, and root
all change with the light.
Like weather, like a woman turns
in her morning mirror,
the fire falling off the wall:

Your visions are on time:
a widowed bear is waiting on the ridge.
She understands your loss. Her tongue
stitched down, her children, dead.
When your left arm is napping, she shows you
her sharp claws, how the paint is mixed.
Build a harp of fish bones
to catch the poems that arrive before dawn
when lips are cracked with nightmare.

IV.
And I have dreamed long ropes,
Another cut has opened
in my palm. A future scar
should rember the knife.

Fingers go mad and mute, curl
around something they do not hold.
The first wind for the first storm
rises, lean with wolves and teeth.
My arrows smile in their sleep
while I list the kinds of red berries,
four dropping at my feet:

Your arm wakes up screaming
promises thatare broken at the wrist
What returns is remembered.

Poems are best tied in knots
along a rough cord. The blind can read.
You will hear clapping in the dark.

The last bear walked into
the storm with his brush, the only thing he owned,
marking his trail with a line of yarn.

I have left the snow blank.
It is the third year. And I have made the yarn
red, the dye of thinning days.
Because I know traps,
I understand bridges and building.
I understand them best at night:
darkness of a yawning mouth,
the cave hands cupped for loon song,
space between bone and brain.
This is a dream of bridges.

A valley, a pair of rivers I've seen,
a place where you have never been.
Fingerprints construct steel girders.
Pylons shoulder across without thought
of weight. Concrete stirred with bone
and cables spun with hair and pillows.
The river is slow. Bridges exist at night
to maintain a simple balance.
Only crossing is important.

No avenues, no traffic. Except myself
thinking you are here, inside my sleep.
I have set traps in the tallest grass
like Frenchmen after scientific beaver.
The traps are empty, river banks the same.
I spend my time working traps and bridges
and nothing ever changes.

By an invisible sign on a body's shale
and stone, I know what beams, which plans,
the secret engineer. I choose a new site
when you leave. Bridges reach the other side.
They are connections and an idea of seeing
you: come now. Hear stories of my bridges.
Be inside me.
A PUNISHMENT OF LIZARDS

Nine days now and nine more
on this desert. We are sure
we killed them. Casual
murders occur. Their names
lie asleep in our hands.

Sand lamprey wait in ambush to suck us
dry and white. We are slender as lizards.
Eyes turn narrow. Here, wind numbs taste,
but we talk of cool ponds. Touch is weight,
a stone put in each mouth—stones carved
with dates: a rape, this maimed, that theft.
Lizards have no ears. Our tongues burn prayers.

A cancer on our backs sprouts
a heavy tail we will hide
in our pants, curling it
faithfully each morning
to fit its secret pouch.

This desert has no horizon, no edges except
the outline of the sun. This is the result:
lunatic they eat themselves, gnawing sorry,
sorry, on their stones. Nine days more
and bloating atoms is all they could expect.
The survivors cry for pardon, guarantees
and water. They bargain for dry bones.

Stranded teeth chatter things.
My fresh tail suns itself blood
rare, napping in the heat.
I plan the slaughter and sharp
knife. I want an expert scar.
DEER LAKE, WISCONSIN

Chased down by sharks, dragged by undertows and tides, we went swimming inland: we knew nothing about the sea.

This lake has circumference and waves we can imagine. No tides or stinging jellyfish. Where we wash the salt and kelp from ourselves, the water is cool and forgiving. There is little food here. We take small bites like making love.

Anxious city lovers with pale breasts arrive in June: halibut thighs and sunfish suck their toes.

We think we are safe while July burns the house. The boat rides uneasy. There are signs all around us: we find a starfish, and it dies slowly. We dream monsters under creaking ice. We wait. More halibut lovers arrive.

They don't see. We are like otters and fish. We know inland secrets of bays and turn birch keys in our hands.
DIRECT DISTANCE

I am calling home from the moon.
The house is empty. The telephone refuses to ring.

Mirrors turned to the wall leaving
the rooms blind. No one stopped them.
My ways crawled off with the oldest dog
to die in the corner. The man buried them
together with a tennis ball for luck.

For years the younger dogs waited
not knowing things had changed.
Childless, the furniture drank alone.
One spring the man falls from a silo:
he forgets everything. Another dog dies.

Craters are for dreaming better times.
Nothing comes true on the moon. Nothing.

My pain is simple:
A weave of scars called hands,
poems some plotted inside me.
One is the shape of a fish,
a wide scrape slashed
by dull teeth and water.
Look, snow burned these lines
long and white--like quills
and two scratches that dreamed
of being bridges, or the knife itself.

A ghost asks after a daughter.
Each minute calling is a closing door.

But I carry the legend of this house
tangled in my wrists and hear
faint noises across my lunar room:
my brother's shoes come upstairs,
badgers whisper an address,
my gloves pacing in the drawer.

I am calling home from the moon.
The house is empty. The telephone wants to ring.
I think I can move farther out
to get a better look.
Shadows fall from fences,
lie down on drifts.
A tree comes into the picture now.
Juxtapose several fat-bellied sparrows
not evenly spaced.
I think I can move farther back.
Wait. The arrangement is blurred.
Someone should tell the sparrows.
MISSING
for Robert

You came back brown, said it was the snow.
We thought you went farther north
under the great glaciers or just west.
"It's been a good winter." and didn't wait--
winter was a clock falling into our hands.
We thought all summer, the clues were there:
your pack missing, the foxtail off the door,
the kitchen swept, four cups in four places.
Where you went and never told were nothing.
You were color dancing on snow,
your feet never touched bottom.
But we understood about water
in your pocket, fish crumpled
in your billfold. Snow is really water.
You taught us: these are the stones
that speak, the moon rises on one
side of the sky, a feather cures
bitterness. This is a wing's truth.
Our ears are bent with listening
for snow. We cannot be sorry.
This way we are sure of you.
TERMINAL VELOCITY

I.
Before impact you are carrying a bag
of spices and a blue mixing bowl.
The bowl will be broken.
Two awful moons cross
the narrow horizon. Warnings freeze
and fall short. You have run out of room
at the curb. A scream leaps
over your teeth. Useless,
it dies on the asphalt, digging its claws
into the windshield. Your legs panic first.
They expect their nightmare:
the one where they're trapped
in plaster halls, where your ankle wakes up
to find it's real. For days the marrow howls
in its white room. Your knee
plans escapes with sharp saws
and drills. They all fail. Now, their fear climbs
your spine like a ladder and shivers in the brain.
Your last thoughts are these bones:
Lord, not my legs,
not this time.

II.
Human atoms have no defense against
two tons of accelerating steel:
a body's weight lets go.
Its flight is not perfect
like a ball or as far as a child can throw.
An old woman makes the same sound falling
down the basement steps.
Only a suicide
from the thirteenth floor plans an expert arc
and the final anesthetic sidewalk.
Even a dull knife wounds
more cleanly than chrome.
The seam that joins your arm and shoulder
tears. Tendons pull away and their muscles
follow them. One bone breaks
in half weeping. And another.
Somewhere near the wrist the blood comes untied.
They have driven on. Pieces of blue
crockery settle over
you like flax blossoms
in a morning field. Soft oregano, sage,
and curry blow like dust
in that same field
down the street.
III.
Before the ambulance and the crowd gathers, between injury and the time pain is unlocked in your sleeve, you have the world to yourself. No one visits the lumberyard at midnight. You watch the planets return to their orbits and hear a telephone ringing next door. As a test, you look into the hand lying at your side to find yourself. It is a red mirror, and you are pleased. You touch it with your tongue. Iodine and salt fill your mouth with welcome. Porchlights come on: there's been an accident. A victim loses his name. So, you take this story and crawl inside your body and pull it up over you and wait. Next month your arm will talk in its sleep, whispering, headlights, headlights in your ear.
This is a strange war. No one is killed
Bullets that lodge near the heart
are hardly ever lethal. The victims are repaired
so well they pass for anyone. What happens
is the course of their inner rivers changes.
The good beds run dry and bitter.
Roads go unimproved and the rich ore
that paid for everything is mined out
to the bone: barren tunnels filling
up with water. Casualties wear clothes:
inside out, they're stripped. Most of them die
in small hotels with a rear view
or raise large families and lawns.

In this war the enemy attacks from the front
across a blanket. Words turn into weapons.
Touch warps and becomes a nightly maneuver.
Learn to sleep with one eye open.
Eyes learn infra-red and the enemy loses
the element of surprise, the cover of a dark moon.
Stay alive like the breathing mice
in a dormant field, letting your fur turn
in time. Practice getting close
like a gopher. Possibly, as a last test, go
into the delta without a radio or medic.
Traveling alone and light,
your chances are better.

One day the enemy tries different tactics.
In an exposed field he lays down his rifle.
he hands over more than his name
with his maps and surrenders
the cross-hatched photos. No armies, no scouts,
no war he says. Living like this, it's hard. We need
each other's warmth and forgiveness.
We cannot be captured and almost takes you
prisoner. Years at point position
you have bivouaced in the open.
Houses are hostile and double beds, foreign.
Something with long legs and a smile
moves north in the dead grass.
And he will not catch it.
FOR RICH CAT

You sit down between two girls, touch their thighs. O, they are grateful and loll against your shoulder. You only sit in your silver Maserati to have them drift down to you navigating the stairs diagonally. Women are inverted V's, your name propped on a couch. They admire your grace on the thin air. You answer in words expensive as silk shirts and love falls footward like a dress
SNOW RANGER
for Ross and Henry

A mountain is woman who could never care.
You sail over her white skin. Your mouth drifts
down a lover's back. Your hand tracks the fields
of her thighs. The cold doesn't turn you
toward anyone. No woman can take
that wild look. You have fallen years
from the moon into your dark skin.
Will an avalanche be ready when you need to die?

Each winter you come back with wounds,
that never healed, some vague hope of finding
charms to cure the space you hold at night.
When you love, you break bones for minerals
and salt, enough to keep a wintering wolf alive.
Like a wolf, you steal and lick yourself dry.
A mountain only freezes tears like stars.
Frost goes farther in the blood. What will happen
when there's no one left to betray?

Raised in the hollow jaw of a cirque,
grown wary as a pine, I've learned the hungers.
I know a man begins to talk to himself, and why,
at last, he answers. I choose from what is here:
porcupines drown chasing otters, and otters die
in a porcupine's impossible embrace.
A girl falls in love with a ranger.
Each new storm reminds me of what I've buried here.
Too much of this is fatal.

At sea level the world rolls lovers
in its heat. Promises and plan thin out
with altitude. One winter here would change
a bighorn sheep. He'd wake up screaming
avalanche and lose his sadness
on a long traverse. A ranger's future is the same.
The final mercy lies beyond this ridge,
at some steep edge, somewhere deep in next winter.
THREE GO TO UTAH, NOVEMBER 18

Clouds heave themselves
on top each other.
News comes upstream:
a storm living in Utah.
We will meet it halfway.

South of Rexburg, south
of Pocatello, south of Logan,
South. Two hundred miles
and two a.m. we talk
about whiplash—jonahs in a
deep water fish going south.
We go back a week or years
following our bloody tracks
across old snow fields.
We know the sound
of splitting bones
their health spilling out.
Our shadows leave, cross
a hundred months of moons.
The earth knows, grows us tall
with wary eyes, smiling as pines.

The result of hobby love
is always the same:
we can't be civil with them.
Our light trails drift over,
so we keep traveling blind,
their names are monuments
we climb sometimes at night.
And the clouds turn tired
home to Venice.
Take a raft down the Madison for Jer
three days. It takes that long.
Go in the early spring when no one comes this way
under a sky gray as brain. Wait.
If it rains, the rainbows
end in snowfields out of reach as hawks.
Your tent is the only safety along a river rushing on
to meet the other two north of here.
If you must take a guide for the rapids,
find a blind man with strong arms. He sees the sounds you might miss
and draws the bears down.
No one hears you turn away. It is still too cold.
At night you think of new compromise, imagine love comes back upstream.
Anger shakes you with white water fever. But after, sleep comes so well
that you can't believe you've come this far.
Pay the blind man where the river ends.
In three days you are brown with forgetfulness.
You say: it is better to promise the mountains.
The way home from Wyoming is easy.
This place will call you back.
The photographer relaxed against the wall knows this place was once a whorehouse alive with loose kimonos, men at the border of hunger waltzed into a room. Loggers sere kept waiting out of spite. They bunched beside the piano, waiting with their money and dirty boots. The girls have gone, respectable tenants now. The same wet dog comes in, flops down to wait. You watch with folded arms buttons undone.

You are undressed: colossus by a trick of light, an island circled by a reef of clothes. He strides across corals, he makes you smaller with the shadow of his hands. He curls around your curves, he curls tighter yet: his kiss turns bite and stings. He says: I feel this and this for you. And the dog wags against the air.

The leaning figure wants to come off the wall, put his double image back in focus, no picture of a kiss and turn away from watching. The smile and laugh are keys dangled over a shoulder and sweetly ladies move silken down narrow halls. The photographer rolls over, quick gets the shot: say that last good kiss long ago.
We will start early in the pinto-hide spring
from foothills in the Bighorns
where Indians chased ghost ponies
down arroyos to Wyoming:
Practicing all summer until the dust
gets inside your ribs, we will get closer.
You will tire sooner, twenty-five years
heavier on that cheap horse from Billings.
We must work to hide telephone poles, fences,
the single farm, and the road from ourselves.
But be patient as an old snake
to finish these things.
They have no place here where the two
rivers roll together in grass.
No room left in the hill cemetery:
too many suicides, small pox, bad gin.
Once a month mail from Bismarck and gray dust.
Think highly of the southern companies.
They made it back to Charleston,
Nashville, and Atlanta, solid places on the map.
Even far from the railroad
this is not unfamiliar to you.
I know a place in Forsythe where we can talk
about similar outposts we have built.
We call them home.
LULU'S DREAM: LOVE POEM FOR ROBERT

The weather is better in March.
Foxes yawn, roll out of their tails.
Taken by my eye, the moon brought you here.

Never to anger, not cry
always a cougar
hungry in the wilderness

You take a body by surprise,
capture bitterness with bird catcher's
hands. My arm's shadow makes you a pinto.

Never to exaggerate, not feel
easily a bobcat
hunting all night.

They say we are lucky. We know.
We hear our names from the last hills
where the sun burns miracles on muscle.

Never to speak, not say
sometimes a coyote
nursing a broken leg.

We deserve each other at times.
With enough words we feed the blood
of this blessing. Lies have value here.

Never to touch, not wonder
perhaps a hawk
turning on wind.

Freedom stalks this kiss-quiet room,
licks sweetness and sweat from itself.
You are sucking poison from my snake bites.

Never to wait, not find
finally a woman
prepared for your memory.

The plains dance with northern rainbows
where sky falls, filling cups with stars.
This is what it is to love: bears sleep alone.
From the beach the lifeguard watches sailboats carefully all summer. They are distinct from waves, the sun, and unlike swimmers. Even when the sun is low, he is assured of white sails plainly against the shore—not drifting in the glare, face down.

An arrogant diver is secret in the waves. His cries sink like things too light, and he begins to drown. His lungs betray him sadly. Breath takes days and longer. He loses the light from his eyes, his skin. He loses his last thought just as the rain loses to the lake, as mountains lose, as the trees. No one sees his slow defeat in the blind spot of the day.

Young girls with weak breasts crave sensation these afternoons: the lifeguard's exact performance. They imagine even his bones might amaze bent hard against the air like that. But to dive with blind fingers again and again for a body lingering in the weeds is all he can offer, and they turn away. The one he did not remember snores in mud, staying for the dredging hooks.

Now he stands bleached by the sun losing drops from his fingertips, the stare and bronze of a hero. He loses just as the days will lose the fatality curling in his hands. In this way they wait separately but prepared. Losing things along the way, they found replacements and other guides. They knew damage, how thorough it was. But always they expected something more, more than vacant hands, better than sharp hooks.
THE BIRTHDAY POEM

We shed our skins today,
you for the twenty-fourth time.
Our old hides were dry,
let the wind peel them away.
We are refreshed lying on ferns.
The sun comes up so hot we fall
back surprised with pride.
You say: "Your breast will melt
in my hand like a snowball.
I will make love to you until
you burn away this winter."
We travel with the years now,
they settle on our shoulders.
I think: "No. Winter is mine.
Above the timberline I will
write my name in snow
tall as two story houses,
and I will leave you breathless."
We are nothing to each other,
but muscle on muscle
bone on bone shiny
with the sweat of kisses.
Today we shed our skins
and lie telling our lives
on the wreckage of dry scales.
THE DAY THE TEETH WERE PULLED

For twenty years the knowledge
grew fat and sharp behind my other teeth.
Something happened waiting:
they turned lazy, fell on their sides.
One stood on its head to pass the time.
Blood sprouted in my gums,
ran down my throat to plant itself.
I am a cannibal
living off myself.
My liver is wiser,
mathematically, creating juices
just as ribs divide skin and lungs.
My marrow eating the scraps of these
last wisoms, ponders in its house of bone
that my tears are so professional.
And I grow pale each lunch
reminded drop by drop
that I am getting to like the taste.
A NIGHT AND ITS DREAM

I.
The mountains are blue-naked:
two days of patient snow.
It is the color of a body,
curves white from stars, gray
wilderness of arms and legs.
Lips give up freezing kisses.
There must be reasons for staying.
We meet with no words
on my old quilt,
sink down in its drifts.
Sheets will cover us
like so much snow.
We will sleep through moons.
Owls will take care of the night.
You are brave and solid,
a barn stored against winter:
tendons as square bales,
rafters as bones. They do not break.
I steal calm from your sleep.
Stay with me now.
The storm is moving east
and so am I.

II.
Name your dragon after the king.
Repeat it constantly all night
until he grows gold with knowing.
(This is an anagram.
Take all the t's
or spell tennis court.
Find the secret message.
The dragon's name is the password,
and I never told you.)
The wizard's head is screwed on backwards.
His shoes point out opposite directions.
In the magic circle surrounded
by ten clocks, all set at different hours,
the hour of your death, you feel safe.
The dragon, he will die with you.
GRANDMOTHER'S SAMPLER
for my grandmother

Grandmother, you must have been pretty once.
Now wrinkles knead your face, bones stiffen,
faded hair done up in ivory
combs. House dowager, old queen,
fat and floured in an apron.

In the morning, after baking heavy bread
you raised four children and my mother.
Never much passion for him,
that railroader, his watch ticking.
Every day you packed his lunch.

Strength came from York, and Pricilla dying young.
You sewed overalls with patches
for three granddaughters and one grandson,
embroidering a sampler
for seventy years with simple knots.

The bread of your kindness always had a sharp crust.
From a long line of Mary's you asked
obedience out of our fingers,
gratefulness bending us like silver
spoons. They grew moral—all but me,
finding no faith in penny thrift.

Your laughter clattered in tea cups and sugar,
smiled until your father died a drunk.
Eighty. You are a kitchen sybil
muttering prophecies for us
among tripods for eggs and loaves.

Clean laundry, a fair way of speaking,
this for the grandchildren: Victoria,
hard Sarah, Philip who is twenty.
For me with my father's name, a ring
bruised by weddings of Mary's,
gold to slip on sad hands of ink.
THE BOAT BUILDER AND HIS DOG

for Bruce Young

You say you are landlocked here.
At night you dream a lake
and in the morning find one.
You were right all along.
I know you want to build
the frames of fine, sleek boats,
live enclosed on a circle coast.
But eyes tell a different story:
they see five hundred miles
inland, back to the Missions
and the long Bitterroot Valley.
I hear the story of a bird's
beak gone dead and dry.
Whistle down the hard season
for your dog, He comes running
and you love him for it.
The miracle will be kept in his bark
as you spend his life together.
Still you can deny, say no twice.
In the dream the northern shore
of the lake is a green glacier.
It will cool you, wash the salt.
Hot deer’s blood spills down legs
fills up your goliath boots
with old life. Who knows
what menaces sharp mountains
under a clear sky. The badger screams
at night, whales sound deeper than the harpoon.
FOR MY FATHER

I can remember him as a tree
whose arms my brother and
I went swinging on for years.
His hair has gone the color
of cottonwood, and his joints
just as stiff as its wood.
When the crops died too soon,
he cried at the kitchen table.
Peaceably, the badger and
coyote gave up the land.
He spent two days walking
out its borders for us.
Five a.m. hands play
around his coffee cup
like blind puppies.
He watches his animals:
the pheasant and weasel.
Father, let me be tall as you,
fill the horizon with my work.
He nods, points out the does
stepping down on sharp feet.
I am twenty years taller now,
but as he rides the south end
the sun shines off him
like a rifle barrel
and his is high as the big dipper
in August.
FLYING FROM BISMARCK WITH PHILIP
for my brother

Tracking out of Bismarck
at seven thousand feet,
the north star is on the right.
Our course is always due west.
The horizon calls: home is here
on the edge of my circle.
You can go no farther.
Maps and charts roll down
behind our eyes. Philip,
I feel myself coming back to you.
This is the last place for our traveling.
We are the flying squirrels,
cousins to the Dakota thunderheads.
Brother, build a house for me
in the hills of our growing.
I am gone so long.
Winter wheat whispers so high:
fathers, mothers, my children.
We have nothing more to say at sundown:
a silence where it is all
right not to speak. No need.
Losing altitude at a hundred feet
a minute, we glide toward home.
The Bighorns let you down
and take you up again.
The valley pulls at you to stay,
turns your hair black with envy.
There is no counting Crow Agency,
or Busby as towns, The hides of houses
go into the hills with the antelope.
Wind. Even you've stayed so long
you can't remember a place
without this sound.
No telephone lines to send out
the thin cry for help. No one hears,
not even the blonde at the Four Aces.
She's paid for knowing you you're white.
(Each day for ten years Aloysius asked
for his mail at the post office
the postmistress said, "Nothing."
and Aloysius walked home again.)
Doing seventy back to Hardin
is safer than thinking.
Two miles farther is his house,
the roof sags without him.
(Aloysius Prairiebear has my letter
much creased. He shows it to his
drunk friends at Jimtown.
He is drunk, too, three days now.)
So, you must send out letters to let them
know you're here counting off
the first five days of your next ten years.
There is town near with a post office,
but you can't be sure.
NEWS FROM THE EAST

All up and down this ocean
there is no beach: a cliff
except for the small margin
of sand you are on.
He can be seen far above with the gulls
a long way off
running along the rim,
his arm shines outstretched
wings fluttering at his heels.
Maybe he'll tell you of love or war
or loyalty to fathers and mothers
you've forgotten.
He passes in front of the sun and chars.
Probably it will be news of Caesar's legions.
Your slaves look up and your youngest children
pause. To them it is clear: a strange bird.
But you are old, blind from standing
at the Empire's northern wall.
No word from the capital and the couriers died.
The wind will rip his words away,
take them out to sea
with the tide. You are sure
his mouth will open and close
like the fish you've watched these months.
Pantomime and lip-reading are difficult.
The messenger comes down
comes down
to tell you more.