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# The Zones of Paradise



Akron Series in Poetry

Also by Lynn Powell

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# The Zones of Paradise

Lynn Powell



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*For Jane Barnes—  
heart to heart*



## Contents

### I

Original Errata	3
<i>You Don't Know What Love Is</i>	4
Etudes, for Unaccompanied Voice	6
Dreading Spring	10
Homage	12
Here & Yonder	14
Late Snowstorm	16
Black Orchids	17
April & Ecclesiastes	19
And the First Shall Be Last	20

### II

A Theory of Geography	25
Leeward of Beyond	26
Larder with Christ at Emmaus	29
Swamp Genesis	31
Cold Valentine	32
In Praise of My Daughter's Insolence	33
The Gospel According to 3 A.M.	34
Rendezvous in Low Light	36
Gospel	38
Rescue	39
Habakkuk 2:19	42
Naked Ambition	43

### III

Lynn	47
At the <i>Bosque del Apache</i> Wildlife Refuge	48
Acceptance Speech	50
Aspiration	52
Varieties of Religious Experience	53
Outside the Garden	55
Garden Passages	56
Snail Mail to the Corinthians	59
Snowscape	61
Verses for <i>The Madonna of Humility with the Temptation of Eve</i>	62
Revival	66
Eve at the Louvre	67

# I



*For in the Zones of Paradise  
The Lord alone is burned—  
—Emily Dickinson*

## ORIGINAL ERRATA

He thought He had made himself perfectly clear:  
*Let there be lust.*

But where there's a will, there's a way  
to misunderstand, to make tragic  
puzzles of shame and fruit  
from lovely ambiguities He had always felt.  
No wonder He receded  
farther than the stars, farther  
than the white room of Emily Dickinson.

He'd had such hopes for the garden:  
a slow eureka of tongues in understated moonlight,  
rosy virtuositities at dawn, even the pink  
loneliness at noon the right hand heals.

Thus, He greeted the first tenants  
of the flesh, then paused beside the pear.

He wanted to confide a brazen sweetness—  
the short, slippery slope  
He had made for them  
into love.

## YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT LOVE IS

You can tell from across the intersection  
who's listening to a love song:  
windows rolled up, eyes shut to the red light,  
heart idling a little too high—like that woman  
in the soundproof studio of her Mazda,  
swaying, shaking a moan out of her hair, mouthing  
reckless stanzas she really needs  
for him to know.

Anyone else can see he isn't there, that he left  
early by another route and is skirting  
this crossroads of Main and Easy Broad—.  
A horn startles her, and she  
steadies her face, shifts, turns  
down the long, thin road toward *tonight*,  
that place she'll wear her ache like a small  
accessory, an edgy brooch  
or silk scarf the color of his eyes.

Well, go on, cast the first laugh, but,  
after the crushed orchid of the slow dance  
and the duet at the shaky ceremony,  
have you ever slipped into a love song  
anything but alone?

Haven't you had your own episodes  
of Ella, lapses into Janis, Top Hit  
spasms of honesty speeding away

from the one you loved?  
You've never been willing to say  
what you've been willing to sing.

Even last night, sunk  
in a soft, late chair, you chose a chanteuse,  
and, gazing in the mirror of her burgundy voice,  
you believed each *trompe le coeur* she made  
with a handful of rhymes and the frank  
companionship of a sax.

You wanted to let love have its way  
with your words. You wanted to  
drown out the bitter  
medicine of the moon and jilt  
the careful silence, embracing

the naked cry  
shameless in another throat.

## ETUDES, FOR UNACCOMPANIED VOICE

### 1

Is it better to be the crocus,  
speaking up too soon, putting  
a purple foot  
in the snow's white mouth,

or to be the mum, mulling  
over its maroon, holding out  
for the last dark word  
on the subject of summer?

### 2

April, and every apple tree's a diva,  
our little orchard smug with Dolly Partons  
and the chaste arias of *La Bohème*.  
The rest of the season they'll eke out  
only a few whole notes for the yellow jackets,

but nobody's a no-show for this brief, white run.  
Look at them: bending and bowing,  
each one sure the tumult rolling in  
from the back row of the horizon is  
meant for only her.

### 3

The frost-tired ground's in the mood for mud.

And maples in strips of curb lawn, redbuds  
poised in side yards, dogwoods stalled

between the porch and the open gate—  
they're all trying out  
their red and pink opinions  
after the large, gray, censorious season.

And before green clouds gather in the branches  
to drown them out.

4

At first you think a bird's gone  
berserk in the dark maple,  
that blotch of black against the sprinkled stars.

Nobody around here ever goes out on a limb like that,  
this late or this loud.

It's a robin on steroids, a starling  
sweet-talking its way into the dreams  
of finches and cardinals. . . .

When you find yourself mocking  
the mockingbird, stumped by its southern riff,  
you know you've lived too long  
at the wrong latitude.

What cynic misnamed that bird, anyway—  
that earnest DJ of spring?

5

Everything has its say.

Small gray birds chip  
at the silence.

Forsythia belts out bright arpeggios.

Even the magnolia, alone  
in the dark, corroborates  
the moon's white lie.

To all of which the frost  
takes cold exception,  
in a gloss of asterisks.

6

The body throws itself at the mind's problem,  
shrugging out of desire  
or despair  
with a squall of tears.  
And so, for a while, each thought  
is solved, relieved of what it knows.

All afternoon, a storm shook  
the pear tree at the edge of the orchard.  
Now it lingers in the mist,  
the way a woman lingers  
in the soft  
euphoria of the well-wept.

7

Bring in the loudmouth tulip,  
the white vow of the lilac,  
the iris in its velvet pleasures.  
What can fit in a vase, can fit in a voice.

The wind hurries by  
in its scarf of birds

and spent petals, undoing both  
the naked magnolia and the bold  
proposals on top of skinny stems.

Even out of the wind, nothing scarlet stays.  
But what would we be without  
bright slips of our tongue-tied hearts?  
Granite, with a grudge against the weather.

## DREADING SPRING

It's easier in winter: the trees  
just standing there, skinny  
and self-conscious,  
like double-entendres divorced  
from their better half of meaning.  
And the snow falling lightly, finessing  
its indifference—till the slow,  
mammalian heart shrugs  
and curls up in its den.

But what will happen when even the radio  
conspires with the weather?  
Violins and lilacs reprising their magenta  
in every unrequited key?

The Sadhu and the Trappist plan ahead.  
They hurl an insult at the possible:  
a ring of heavy brass to weigh down want;  
some burr or burlap lodged against what's tender.

Should I take their private hint and hide  
trinkets of ice to ward off warmth?  
Cold words to answer fragrance?

For when the double pane's undone, and between  
midnight and me there's  
nothing left but lace,

God knows I'll feel again my low  
threshold for moonlight,  
for the wide, blank sheets of the bed—

where lovers, like poems, are meant to lie,  
tongue to tongue.

## HOMAGE

Breasts love winter—  
they joyride in jalopy bras,  
forget themselves in sweatshirts,  
mumble their long or short vowels  
into layers of wool and fleece.

But just as damned and elect  
differently await the reckoning,  
some dread, some long for summer—  
for summer judges *bosoms*,  
*boobs, jugs, knockers, tits*,

and makes revelation commonplace.  
At the marina swimming pool,  
a teenager glides past with her new  
apparatus, two great spinnakers leading  
the languid yacht of her body,

skinny girls wait at the diving board with  
their first inklings nudging the spandex,  
a prim wife backstrokes in rigid pastel,  
divorcées, lax in skimpy black, share  
their cigarette-rough laughs,

and a large woman lumbers to the pool's edge  
and lowers her flowered suit strategically  
into the turquoise, up to a smother  
of breasts bobbing like lifeboats  
before the *Mayday, Mayday* of her body.

Every tiny assertion, each stiff  
insistence, every overzealous nod  
is aware of the eyes of men:  
powerboaters lounging with  
their Budweisers in a cold sweat,

graying skippers glancing up from  
Patrick O'Brian over half-moon spectacles,  
and twelve-year-old-boys with snorkels and masks  
going down for reconnaissance  
into the chlorinated underworld.

*I bet there's not a cup of milk  
together in those two breasts,*  
sneered my own sixth grade nemesis—  
an assessment that defied the basics  
of biology but nonetheless

unnerved my adolescence, till I finally  
unbuttoned and my first lover murmured  
*More than a mouthful is wasted*  
as he sweetly illustrated his  
point of view.

Twenty years later in this poolside shade,  
my baby agrees: his pink cry  
the shape of my stretched nipple,  
his eyes and fist and tongue  
ravenous and grappling

with what has made him live.

## HERE & YONDER

*On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,  
And cast a wishful eye—*

My son's hoping for a swank heaven  
engineered on clouds—a Comfort & Joy Inn  
where all the good go ever-aftering.  
We'll each get our own turquoise room with a view  
(assigned on a first-dead, first-served basis),  
but we'll gather for banquets of milkshakes and fries,  
by fountains filled with root beer, rejoicing  
in the holy ban on broccoli,  
the everlasting paucity of prunes.

My daughter is pragmatic and fourteen.  
Her paradise? I can well imagine what she imagines;  
that's why I try to keep her stalled outside the pearly gates.  
I know that brand of milk and honey.  
I know what waits beyond the first threshold of touch.

An angel's plastered on her shut-tight door:  
Johnny Depp, twice her age and naked from the waist up.  
Beneath his steady eyes that lock with mine,  
I leave my offerings,  
Jane Austens and massive Tolstoys,  
speed bumps made out of hot-blooded moralists—  
though I'll admit that in my time I skimmed  
those plots, dog-eared the passions, took  
the ardent shortcut.

I'd still know that old heart anywhere—hesitant,  
hurried, half Zeno, half Zorro, and bound  
for every storm this side of Jordan.

Look: outside my window,  
an unpredicted bliss of blue soars  
above the autumn baritones.  
Yet here I am, stuck inside  
one-woman's-worth-of-weather,  
making meanings out of molehills, coaxing  
tight-lipped verses to eke out what they cannot know—

how far to trust the cobalt happiness  
that waits beyond these panicked clouds.

## LATE SNOWSTORM

March is a moralist with a highhorse heart,  
a spinster with an eager past,  
a clairvoyant who reads the orange thought  
in each purple mind unhinged by the sun  
and blanches.

She despises her own small lapse, and now  
all these sudden keepsakes . . .

so she's smashing  
her crystal into ten thousand shards  
and scorning the crocus with heaps of them—

oh, whatever it takes  
to seize up and wreck  
the delicate machinery of desire.

## BLACK ORCHIDS

Aunt Roxy walked the same sidewalk every day of the Depression and the hard divorce: leafy hobnobs of houses, one steeple needling God, the creek's small talk in culverts big enough to take the mountain's tirade, and an avenue of bleeding hearts, forget-me-nots, mums. She stopped at the iron gate that opened inward.

At that intersection of the quick and the dead, the bus stopped every half hour, and once, as she waited with her niece beneath the line of maples (on strike again and handing out a fiery point of view), she saw through the wrought bars a new grave smothered in orchids—the sod lavished, in that metallic and ochre time, with a surfeit of purple.  
*Let's get ourselves a corsage*, Roxy said.  
*That poor woman's finished with flowers.*

So they each plucked an orchid from the blanket: huge, candid, cultivated blooms to wear all day pinned above their hearts like outrageous brooches. But as they stepped on the bus and winked at the driver, the orchids shriveled in the heat, turned mythic and dark, charred by the touch of the living.  
*If that doesn't serve us right, stealing from the dead,*

Aunt Roxy laughed, the tender soot falling  
down into her lap . . .

black petals  
now pressed between these pages.

## APRIL & ECCLESIASTES

*Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, . . . all is vanity.*

—*Ecclesiastes 1:2*

Windflowers edging their way out of the garden,  
violets hinting to the plush grass, bluets  
lazing in cloud nines—wherever  
you are, you can sink  
to your knees in lapis and lavender.

Even the scraggle of woods, rank  
with snowmelt and leaf rot,  
wades into drifts of sorrel, pools of trout lilies,  
while peepers make a ruckus  
and, one by one, the iridescents hatch.

It's a swig of Eden, a rendezvous  
of promises, the luxuries of lust  
before anybody gets hurt—

and only a spoilsport who's been  
around too few or too many times would  
want to point out the waste it all is coming to:

just beyond hyperboles  
of sweet pea, the brassy  
glamour of goldenrod,  
the cattails' last delirium of seed.

## AND THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST

Avon Ladies, gaze on this and weep:  
a handsome zealot's on my doorstep, tempting me  
with the make-over to die for.  
No lush scourge of loofah and mint mud,  
no lily-of-the-valley bath salts or baubles  
of scented oil can cleanse and heal  
like the ointment of belief.

That dirty, little business of the grave is bygone  
in the pastel paradise he riffles through,  
and everybody's twenty-something, trim, and smiling.  
And then my buff believer lifts those dark brown eyes  
and judges me. Yes, I have a few faux pas of gray,  
and a recent, forty-something aptitude for chins, but still  
I'm startled when he condescends, *Ma'am,*  
*take heart, our Lord makes all things new.*  
I want to reassure him I look different in another light—  
but maybe even that's no longer true.  
I tell my heart to harden, before I  
backslide through the closing door.

*Not a hair of your head shall perish,* promised Luke.  
And in Torcello, at the gold flash of Gabriel's horn, I saw  
lions retort with torsos they once relished,  
hands and feet blurt from mouths of wolves,  
heads peer from the maws of blissed-out jackals—  
the soul salvaging the body from every  
junkyard grave and gut.

But I've misplaced my little lot of beauty, not my body.  
And so I'd need to lighten as I rise, casting off  
the weight of birthday cakes and barbeque, of chevre and champagne,  
my face recanting years of smiles that softened it,  
my breasts forgetting heavy miracles of milk until  
each nipple lifts, pert and pagan.

But could my belly have my babies and deny them, too?  
And who would recognize me sleek and sweet and feral,  
everything I've learned of love, downsized  
to fit on the head of a pin?

Only you, long-lost Adam—  
I can almost see the rendezvous:  
in a throng of holy shoo-ins, the two of us just  
barely saved, in our smell of clove and sweat,  
our tender, savage appetite.  
Let God think twice before He gives us back those bodies!

Unless there is a private moon for us in heaven,  
a little lake, the bed of a beach, and the endless ransom  
of each flawless night—

nights when I was naked, and unashamed,  
and I visited you.