

“This is an arresting first book; it gives us a poetry deep in particular moments and eloquently alert to the world’s curious and agitated detail. Alan Michael Parker’s poems are full, as poems should be, of surprises which turn out to be simply true.”

—**Richard Wilbur**

“Notions of the casual, the consequent, the conditional—so many poems here start ‘If . . .,’ ‘How . . .,’ ‘Because . . .’—preoccupy this mindful poet, who may be otherwise characterized by invoking three nouns which as proper names become totems of our contemporary poetics: bishop, justice, strand. But mere identification of overtones, even of undertones, will not suffice: Parker’s autonomous qualities are: *clarify*, *fervor*, *glee*; these are the new notes sounded—no, rung!”

—**Richard Howard**

“With *Days Like Prose*, Parker has written a poetry of living music and sonic complexities, whose textures modulate from the circumspect to the resplendent. Whether meditating on the Sears catalogue or narrating a widow’s recent grief, these poems intimate rather than explicate; they bespeak the reticence in the folds of the world.”

—**Alice Fulton**

“In this marvelous debut collection we discover an eloquence so humble that at first we may not recognize its profound and sometimes dazzling elegance. These are poems in which the formal intelligence often touches true wisdom. *Days Like Prose* is a masterful accomplishment.

—**David St. John**

Days Like Prose

ALAN MICHAEL PARKER



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“Mud” appeared in *The Forgotten Language: Contemporary
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“Gents” was also included in *The XY Files: Poems on the Male Experience* (Sherman Asher Publishing, 1997).

In “7 Types of Congruity,” Section II contains a quotation from Fujiwara Teika, “*Hana mo momiji mo/Nakarikeri*,” as translated by Earl Miner (*An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry*, p. 13.)

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With thanks, this round, to Felicia van Bork, Eve Mitchell, and Davidson College.

PREFACE TO THE 2019 EDITION

HELLO, OLD FRIENDS. What a delight to reconnect, in some cases thirty years later, and to see what we've become.

In rereading these poems—some of which were written while I was a graduate student in the 1980s at Columbia, others over the decade that followed—I have felt a little dizzy, time itself the subtext. Here are ideas I have been writing and rewriting all of my career; here, too, lie promises I am keeping only today. The young poet's influences seem on the surface in this work, a first book necessarily indebted to the writer's betters. And so, yes, in my ear, I can hear Richard Howard's witty, pointed commentary on the ending of one poem, and the verb he so kindly proffered as a present for another. (Of course, *my dear*, one accepts.) Here, too, I remember with fond horror Joseph Brodsky's comment when he first read published work of mine—"Okay," he said, nodding at the page, from him a compliment, as I stood in the presence of that astonishing mind and tried not to cry. I was on my way.

Thankfully, however, the vertiginous work of rereading these poems resists the pangs of nostalgia. In rereading these poems, I have come to see nostalgia as the poet's bane, not only for the emotional harm inflicted by nostalgia upon seeing, but also for the debilitating sadness incurred by valorizing one's own past. Retrospection—I remember, I was there, this *was*—I can process, even when beset by memories. Nostalgia, no thanks. Nonetheless, precursors abound, the germinating of philosophical problems I continue to engage, not to mention the first appearance of my favorite family of imagined neighbors, the Saunders, who have appeared in almost every book I have written since, poetry or fiction.

I am struck by the ways poetry has changed. These poems

were written on papyrus—or so it feels, now—and xeroxed, handed out to friends, mailed with the hope that the return envelope would not be needed, that the Important Editor would want to keep a poem or two for publication in a journal with a circulation approaching 500. These poems might as well have been *samizdat*, for all of their reach. Before the onslaught of image-driven media, the Internet, the cell phone; before a couple of Bushes, an Obama, and a Trump, the poems here seem almost pre-Lapsarian in their innocence (although what the latest Fall would be, I could only opine). Suburban, urban, literary, personal, elegiac, formal, political, social . . . all of these terms would apply differently to poems written today. *Days Like Prose* reads from another century, because it is, even though I hope the poems are neither dated nor outdated (see how those words mean so similarly; how time makes of language an antagonist).

Some provenance: *Days Like Prose* is my first published collection, written and revised from the late 1980s until eventual publication in 1997. During those years the manuscript was submitted to various contests, as well as solicited by presses and editors, and named a finalist twenty-five times—including runner-up at Carnegie Mellon University Press, Northeastern University Press, and the Yale Series of Younger Poets (accompanied by a nice note from James Dickey)—until Andy McCord at Alef Books published the volume in his first-book, letterpress series. A book of poems! *Days Like Prose* validated externally my years of writing, rewriting, reading, and study; and rereading it still feels good.

I am fortunate to have the support of readers and editors, with this new home for old friends. With my gratitude to Andy McCord at Alef Books, for first welcoming my work into the world. I remain thankful, too, to Alice Fulton, Richard Howard, and David St. John for their wonderful blurbs; and to the late Richard Wilbur, to whom I sent the manuscript as a cold call, barely knowing the man but loving his poems, and who responded with an astonishing endorsement. Such

generosity of spirit remains my ideal—one met by the fabulous Crafts at WordFarm, for their interest in re-upping *Days Like Prose*.

Alan Michael Parker
January 1, 2019

A LITTLE SOMETHING

Because a doe broke through the Saunders' fence
to starve beside the heated pool, her thin
ribs cupped like fingers leaking light. Again,
the kettle whistles, dogs bark—and the sense
we make of being singularly *here*
evaporates. The kitchen window steams
as anywhere, from any steam; the same
fruit ripens on a sill: four brown Bosc pears.

Out of the whirlwind, orange pekoe tea.
Dull marigolds offend the telephone.
Against the din—a faucet drips, a grown
man shies from God—the day ends quietly.

Because the tea bag dangles in its noose:
a cul-de-sac, a house, a pet excuse.

DAYS LIKE PROSE

Epistemology, and all the afternoon
clouds perform their dying, tusks and trunks
dissolving in a rivulet of cold wind,

the sky a promise darkening.
Will it rain? The rain says it will
as thunder pools in every vowel,

beading in the wild raspberry patch.
Epistemology, and through the sliding
glass door of the moment,

here is what I think: a man loves
being loved, shirtless on the lawn,
singing the song of a fat life,

of giddy children trampling the lavender.
I close his eyes as the red darkness
blooms inside, the sky recurring

just so—and deeper in the night
when the planes come out to fly,
their windows clean with dreams,

and the dead heroes jostle
in too-brilliant tombs, I shall sleep
the cool sleep of the unexamined,

and I shall pray the dizzying wheel
might spin again. Epistemology,
the evening mist sprawls in the grass,

the happy, roaring dandelions
bow with dew. Here, I plan
to give up planning, watch the seagulls

dive for shiners in the foam—
where the neap tide unravels as
a warning buoy bobs beyond the known.

MUD

A blur of elements, a cataract
of sod—the canyon sloughs its juniper
and sagebrush with a shrug. High-tension wires
snap: blue sparks sizzle to the ridge and back.

Beyond the barn, the Dodge, the ambulance
and fire truck; past the flush of volunteers,
cheese sandwiches and coffee, sacraments
of natural disaster, slumps the owner.

He'll rise. He'll take his slicker from the fence
and join the wake, his house and pond and shed—
goddamnit his tomatoes—choked with mud.
And still he thinks: *There are no accidents.*

His property, his body. All that is
or will be mud, and loss, and artifice.

SONG

And the walls came tumbling down.
And the word for wall
came tumbling down.
And the dust came to mean
that which has tumbled.

She ran from the city, her
hands afire. And
where she touched
she burned. And the word
for fire came burning.

The smoke rose.
And the word for sky
became the word for smoke.
She plunged her hands
into the river. And she

burned the water. And
the water burned the banks
on either side. And
the word for burning
spread to the fields.

In the fields the wheat
burned, and came tumbling
down, and rising up
went the smell of bread.
And the word for bread

became the word for clouds.
And the word for tumbling

down became Jericho,
Jericho. Jericho
came tumbling down.

GENTS'

In the Gents' room between acts
at the Regional Theatre, talk is corn and beans,
the drought not a lack but a thing out there.
We're all in line to go: one guy asks
after his neighbor's chickens, prices at the yard,
but clips conversation to fix
his stare to the wall. It's something
not to see, his body posted and tightened
into privacy, gone invisible. Like how
the houses here grow their windbreaks:
a quiet thicket of blue spruce in the middle
of a field, and no one will ever
notice us, hiding in the open.

An usher goes by, ringing in Act Two.
Sooey, says a voice in a stall, and all
the gents laugh. It's a revival,
the seats harder than remembered,
cushions for rent for 50¢ and everybody pays,
joking about the tax man. And the lights
go down, the other play resumes:
the gents sit up in their bodies,
scattered about the house, waiting for rain.

LANDSCAPE WITH COWS

Time is but a gate between the fields
of *non* and *sense*, a self-
made fence to keep us
in our lives, which I would leap
to know your mind—
as summer tolls *I told you so*.

Mountains score the sky.
They might as well be ideas
in the distance, monuments to time
which thin the air to nonsense.
(I would climb.)

Near the stream, cows ruminate.
They are cows. Moved
by happenstance, they sit, they eat.

Patience is a dragonfly, purple
and impossible as
reason. (Here's a reason:
I pretend to be
a man acting like a boy.)

I would know your mind,
alight between the fields,
balance like a dragonfly.

I would dip my wings
in what is yours and what is mine.

TWO SUNS

Like a slap
 the second sun
arrives, arranged
 as though all errant
images were imprisoned
 in its image.
Pane by pane
 the Pan Am building
fills with flame,
 south from 50th.
Why not!
 The world is wholly
all its worlds,
 alibi and alias,
and *black* contains,
 bemusedly, its *blueberry*;
why can't a cantilevered
 thought include
the fact of a mirage,
 a mirrored moment
in the sun's
 second sun?
It can. It does.
 It fills two
buckets full, brimming
 with each breath—
and winter, and *will*,
 and a long walk
down Park, downtown,
 doubled with light.

THE WIDOW

I

She remembers how the pain
took the form of an afternoon walk:
past the mill wheezing with sawdust,
through the pulpy tang of scrub oak

and wild lilies by the water,
where all she knew seemed as slick
as the creek's four stepping stones.
There was the willow: there she sat

on the burl'd roots, almost
somewhere, in between.
This made her late, so she hurried
back to the house, her hands

knotted into fists, gripping her skirt
as she ran, the memory of a fist
gathered on each thigh. Did she think,
then, as she swung wide the screen door,

that any day might be different?
She cannot remember when this thought
became hers, all those times together
smooth as custard. Or like milk

in tea—yes, she remembers thinking
the day seemed like milk in tea.
Her living room was dark. No one
looked up from the curve

of the sofa, sleepily, unseeing.
She expected no one, imagined
no one, but thought all the same
her words might meet with more

than their own emptiness, or the afternoon,
corporeal with dust. There she hesitated,
neither from loneliness nor want
but to sip a long sip of the possible;

there she saddened until she became
her own ruin in the evening,
flickering about the kitchen
and in the glimmer of the bedside lamp,

falling softly across the pillow
as she eased into a comfortable
early bed, falling on the letter
she had intended to write.

II

Stunned by too much television—
sprawled in the attic, in the dry rain
of fiberglass insulation; raw as memory,
which may be a kind of loss

when one will not forget—
she topples the piles of magazines,
flattens the city of magazines,
the years of *National Geographic*

reduced to a simpler time. Someday
she would have to do something

with all this stuff, all these pages
of maps that refuse to be tamed;

the Sea of Tranquility, the nerves of the eye.
Some other day. For now
what she wanted were the photos,
boxed and beribboned, captioned

in ash-gray, her Instamatic shots
of a puppy skittering on linoleum,
goofy for a knotted sock. *What was
that awful dog's name?*

she asks the ceiling fan, the air
tightening. *Am I dead?*
Someone's white dress rustles.
Her hand throbs as from a deep cut.

III

*Name a ten-letter word for
"covered with small scales,"*
he had commanded her, oh,
she can't remember when.

There were his blue eyes swimming
one to a lens, and the newspaper
dipped in blueberry jam. There were
the slippers she had tried

to throw out. *Sorrow
is the loss of sound*, she thinks,
thinking of his coffee mug—and then
of her father visiting her sickroom,

the drawn blinds pulsing like a vein;
the carpet mined with lemon drops,
used Kleenex, and the overturned
gray flowers of a jigsaw puzzle.

There he had sat at the edge of
her fever, reading aloud
the market news. “Squamulose,”
she tells the butter dish

this morning, having looked up
the word and found other words:
spurtle, *sprit*, and *sprink*, more
meaning than she knows

how to make. It feels like living
inside a doll, moving a doll’s hands.
It feels like the summer she was
condemned to summer camp,

writing home to tell her parents
that she had died. And, oh, what a look
her father had given her, on Visiting Day—
the look she learned to want

from a man, as though through water,
the look he gives
when making love, the look
that quickens as it dies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALAN MICHAEL PARKER is a novelist, poet, essayist, and cultural critic. He has written and lectured widely—including at the Sorbonne and on the Menominee reservation in Wisconsin—on subjects ranging from the history of beach house art to casinos that sell Matisse paintings. The author or editor of seventeen books, including *Whale Man*, *The Ladder*, and *Christmas in July*, he has received numerous awards, including three Pushcart Prizes, two inclusions in *Best American Poetry*, the North Carolina Book Award, two Randall Jarrell Poetry prizes, the Fineline Award, the Brockman-Campbell Award, and the Lucille Medwick Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America. His poems have appeared in *Antaeus*, *Boulevard*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and many other journals. He is Douglas C. Houchens Professor of English at Davidson College, and he also teaches in the low-residency M.F.A. program at the University of Tampa.

OTHER BOOKS BY ALAN MICHAEL PARKER

POETRY:

- The Age of Discovery* (Tupelo Press, forthcoming, 2020)
The Ladder (Tupelo Press, 2016)
Long Division (Tupelo Press, 2012)
Ten Days, ten poems, with ten drawings by Herb Jackson
(Origami Lake Press, 2011)
Elephants & Butterflies (BOA Editions, 2008)
A Peal of Sonnets, seven poems, with book artist Zachary
Carlsen (Gendun Editions, 2006)
Love Song with Motor Vehicles (BOA Editions, 2003)
The Vandals (BOA Editions, 1999)
Days Like Prose (Alef Books, 1997)

NOVELS:

- Christmas in July* (Dzanc Books, 2018)
The Committee on Town Happiness (Dzanc Books, 2014)
Whale Man (WordFarm, 2011)
Cry Uncle (University Press of Mississippi, 2005)

EDITED AND COEDITED VOLUMES:

- The Manifesto Project*, with Rebecca Hazelton (The University
of Akron Press, 2017)
Intimacy, with Debra Kaufman, Richard Krawiec, and
Stephanie Levin (Jacar Press, 2015)
The Imaginary Poets (Tupelo Press, 2005)
Who's Who in 20th-Century World Poetry, Editor for North
America, with Mark Willhardt (Routledge Books, 2001)
The Routledge Anthology of Cross-Gendered Verse, with Mark
Willhardt (Routledge Books, 1996)