

THE RED ELEMENT

Other works by Catherine Graham

The Watch (1998)

Pupa (2003)

THE RED ELEMENT



Catherine Graham

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For John Coates

One likes what one happens to like.

One likes the way red grows.

— WALLACE STEVENS

CONTENTS

Window Washer Sings at the Terminal	• 11
Drop and Catch	• 12
The Arms Fly Up	• 13
The Underwater Tea Party	• 14
The Rain Barrel	• 15
Pink	• 16
The Front Yard	• 17
My Suburban Forest	• 18
It's Only Her Piano Face	• 19
The Grimsby Angels	• 20
The Red Element	• 21
Vintage	• 22
Clay	• 23
Passenger Seat	• 24
For a Lost Stepdaughter	• 25
Doodle	• 26
Night Sounds	• 27
Puffer Fish	• 28
The Art of Wrapping Cow Tongue	• 29
Pliny the Elder	• 30
Pigeons	• 31
Arms Like Ladders	• 32
His Ashes Are in Lake Kashagawigamog	• 33

His Birthday Falls on Halloween	• 34
Like Snowdrops, Like Milk	• 35
On Leaving Burlington	• 36
If I Were a Ghost	• 37
You in Haliburton	• 38
The Ritual	• 39
The Farmhouse at Dundalk	• 40
Glass	• 41
The Destroying Angel	• 42
Doll's Eyes	• 43
Sighting	• 44
They See What They Want to See	• 45
Willow	• 46
Wings	• 47
To the Weatherman	• 48
Lakeview	• 49
Blooms at Boyd's Cove	• 50
Little Stars	• 51
Sky	• 52
Shoulder Season	• 53
The Power to Make Things Move	• 54
The Home Basin	• 55
Don	• 56
The Terrible Pond	• 57
Acknowledgements	• 59

WINDOW WASHER SINGS AT THE TERMINAL

His song makes me think
of green hills with little green stalks
upright, wind leaning. Look.
He is a sparrow in those fields,
trilling the echo of his lyrics,
flapping from blade to blade across
the panes of glass, the walls,
until he lands, easing. His song has edged us
to the clarity of sweet loss and the window
is ready now for wings to fly through it.

DROP AND CATCH

A pigtailed girl plays in the middle of her long front yard,
pale legs stilt under the cotton stickiness of her dress.
She turns from her asphalt shadow and pulls the red ball
from her pocket and peels the white price tag like a scab.

Drop and catch.

Drop and catch.

Suddenly the ball rabbits up the slope.
It rolls back like a trick to the edge of the crescent.
She runs to the edge of the neck-high hedge
that she's been told to never pass, and she stops.

I want to be good at this.

I want to be good.

THE ARMS FLY UP

Christine's finger is in the crack
of the garage door. She shrieks

when we raise the hinge. She shrieks
as her mother tears past us.

The red throbs as she's rushed
into the room with no pillows.

We know it's where the beatings take place.
Where the arms fly up and land wooden.

THE UNDERWATER TEA PARTY

We sip without cups, pretending to swallow.
White calves surround us like a grove of birch.

We mime the O of the other's moist mouth,
watch the air bubbles fly up to the air.

THE RAIN BARREL

for Bev Gillingham

Sunbeams scissor the wet black surface.
A girl's little eyes dazzle forward.
She leans like light into the light –
ribbons of her scribble on water.
Hypnotic. Her weight lifts her. She falls.

Surfacing like a fish, she mouths
the meaty water, hooks her webbed hands
on the edge, the edge where air begins.
Her gills fold back completely like wings,
and they seal in the moment when arms lift her.

PINK

Pink is my tutu. My burr
scratch. Pink tights.
The pink of mother's
neck as she needles and whirs.
Singer. Pedal faster. My tutu is flat and pink.
No perfect pirouette. *But I followed the instructions.*
Rip of stitches in her eyes as her pink
sandals pump the pedal. No, no, no,
that's her on the pink piano.
She is sewing my first pink tutu.
She is playing her scale of pink rain.
Allegro!

THE FRONT YARD

Pink was out there breathing.
Pink and the cut of the mower
caught me. I left my doll
lying on the steps and ran
into the silence. Dad was on his knees,
peering. I crouched there.
Don't touch it. But my finger
felt something. That night,
I dreamt my thumb purred with fur.
The next day, I'm told to stay inside.
The slam of the door
makes the face of a cat in my face,
parcels of pink on the red grass.

MY SUBURBAN FOREST

Before my long-fingered hands grew into long-fingered hands, those Spirograph tips of grown-up lives, I'd race home

smelling of sap and dusk, pincushioned with bits from the branches I'd climb up to and down from. After the front-to-back hand check,

mother would thread her needle with light, sever the ties to my suburban forest. The falling tree landing between us, she kindled the bark right out of me.

IT'S ONLY HER PIANO FACE

Sometimes I'd come home from school and find her playing.
Notes, little keys, covered my footsteps up the stairs.
I'd watch her long back swaying, until the long song ended.

One day, I pushed into her peripheral vision.
I saw her face crinkle like tin. The taste of foil between
my teeth –
You're not my mother.

But I was a smart girl. I knew better.

THE GRIMSBY ANGELS

are lifting the streetlights up again, the way our blonde
angel at home
lifts the twinkling pine in our living room.

You, under ten, hold onto this thinking
before they take you down to the parade.

There's much to unravel as you wait for the red man.
What you want is the halo, above you, hovering.

THE RED ELEMENT

for Miranda Hill

In my aunt's high-rise kitchen,
a turkey cools under a dish towel,
and peas, having boiled over,
simmer on the red element.
I'm looking out at the red line, the fall.
"My God," she says. "You look like Rusty."
Hand on my hip, neck bent gently,
my dead mother, standing there, about to light up.

VINTAGE

for Jennifer McCullough

Spaghetti straps hook my bare white shoulders.
Crinoline lace scratches my naked thighs.
Spin counter-clockwise before the change room mirror.
Return to the decade when mothers were strung with pearls.

CLAY

Sculpting my mother's face in clay.

Rendering thunder.

One, two, three, four. The ozone is closer.

The final bolt cracks. The last crease. Cut.

When air is bone dry, you will see her.

PASSENGER SEAT

Even now when she skids,
she pumps the brakes,
she protects the invisible,
she with the mothering hand.

FOR A LOST STEPDAUGHTER

Somewhere on the bone ladder of your back
lies the tickle of my index.

Criss-cross applesauce.

The shiver remembers.

DOODLE

I see that elf. The doodle you were doing
the summer your dad and I split up.

The eyes, the red crosses. With eyes
like that, how could she see anything?

NIGHT SOUNDS

Behind my headboard,
a rodent.

The click and go
of the natural gas furnace.

Nocturnal
animal. Heat.

Sounds
we live with.

But sometimes
they turn on us –

Hands. Nails.
Walls with grinding teeth.

PUFFER FISH

All swagger and bloat like a bully's memory,
the blowfish, air-stuffed in a child's basement,
blows through me like the soft exhale of fuck.
Now I can forget all of our flotsam and jetsam, our spines
and pricks.

THE ART OF WRAPPING COW TONGUE

The pointillist pink slab
scrubbed with clover and cud
hangs in Bickel's freezer.

It receives my frame of Styrofoam
and Saran to become
a bustle island skirt on a Sunday afternoon.

PLINY THE ELDER

Drops of dew
stick to Mr. Coffee,

turn insect at midnight.
They carry the aroma.

Pliny the Elder knew
that caterpillars hatch from dew.

PIGEONS

They coo and waddle and peck at stale bread.
They enter the sky like you can't do.
They nest on ledges of the Candy Factory Lofts
and pretend they are cliffs by the sea.

ARMS LIKE LADDERS

in memory of Malca Litovitz

Your voice on a stage
of white daffodils.

You raise your arms, thin white ladders,
your fingers extend to still life.

Years later you appear,
here, in my dream.

You look well as we chat briefly,
until your arms line up.

HIS ASHES ARE IN LAKE KASHAGAWIGAMOG

in memory of Bob Coates

Look four your three tall ones.

Mother's postal code mnemonic.

Your ashes spelled galaxies,

clouds of bone

in a long, deep, narrow water.

The water moved.

We swam.

We moved.

Two tall ones now.

Two.

HIS BIRTHDAY FALLS ON HALLOWEEN

An airy hand carves a hollow
in your sleeping forehead and settles there.

When it lands on light's marrow, the lost bones of your brother,
all hell flickers through a crowd of orange mouths.

LIKE SNOWDROPS, LIKE MILK

If only he could.

After the ice-encased
coffined freeze,
if only he could unwind

to spring's slow release.
The cudding rain, the uddering sun –
milk through the giving dirt.

ON LEAVING BURLINGTON

Your stuff's all boxed and taped,
so you look out from the eighth.
Sun skids along the bay.
Smoke signals from Dofasco stacks.
Dragons.

Now you notice.

IF I WERE A GHOST

I'd float

to where we first made love,
first saw the sea's green spark,
the broken half of eggshell blue,

and like grass under rain, I'd begin.

YOU IN HALIBURTON

There is something that happens to you in Haliburton. Your business skin disintegrates and your gait mosses airily upwards. You look taller in sneakers, and your eyes sand-whiter along the edges, no more jigs of red. You sleep deeper in the hammock of silence, wind-lulled or rocked by quiet, the colder air a comfort to your white-collar lungs. You work your body felling trees: saw, gather, stack. The smell of wood a scarf round your neck. It ties you to this place.

THE RITUAL

Surrounded by green's dark, the day's wind
gathered in a knot, we walk the country road after dinner,
the flush of wine scoring our skin.

The tingle, after fireworks that we can't see,
hums through the palms of our hands.

We don't have to talk if you don't want to,
but we do in whispers when the woods blink back.

Brief, pale, yellow, we've arrived at the ritual. Come now.

Right here.