

Barbara Brannon

PA W N T I T L E

K E E P C A R

and other poems

Barbara Brannon

PAWN TITLE
KEEP CAR

and other poems

MALDEN, MASSACHUSETTS



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BARBARA BRANNON



PAWN TITLE / KEEP CAR

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for Bill and Elsie

Se una notte d'inverno una viaggiatora . . .

Atlas

December, Dad, when I turned twelve years old,
You bought the first Britannica for us.
Remember — bound in leather, tooled in gold,
And more than a mechanic made a month?
It came with that amazing book of maps
That opened like a window in our laps.

To turn its pages was to take a trip
Into imagination, round the earth.
We traveled continents by fingertip,
Explored the Amazon by eye, looked up
Denali, found the Mariana Trench,
Scaled Everest, a hundred miles an inch.

Three decades since of birthdays, I unwrap
A present in an old familiar shape —
A new edition of the book. The map
Has changed, but not a father's love. One thing
I know for sure as long as I shall live:
The world's still not a little thing to give.

December 3, 1998

The Point of the Journey

There are some trips
and travelers
with different ends than ours.

Some people simply take a ride
from town out to the countryside
to gawk at what they think is quaint.
That, this ain't.

Sometimes the aim itself is time:
To have a good time. Leisure time.
To make the best time. Interstate,
to not be late.

Sometimes it's a familiar track
driven by instinct there and back,
rolling over well-known roads
with cargo loads.

Some have no certain destination.
Some meander on vacation.
Some have family plans
and minivans.

The map's unfolded. Keep it out.
This is no ordinary route.
We know there's more.

What exactly we are looking for
we do not always know
but this: We do not go this far
or stay this long

To come back who we are
unchanged from who we were
when we set out
so long ago.

Mascara Car

CARAMIA
in a red Miata
passed me in the fast lane
eyeing the mirror at eighty
lengthening her lashes
with her little black wand
making up
for lost time

PAWN TITLE KEEP CAR

—marquee of light
that beckons me
from sorry luck
to quickened hope:
The truck!
The deed is in the box
and all they need
is my John Hancock
on the back
to fix me up
with a few bucks,
a green wad of fast cash—
enough to pay the docs,
the light bill,
last month's rent,
and ten for a round at Mack's...
I cruise by slow
and stop to think
for just a bit
about the taste of money
in my pocket
And I about decide to hock it.
But then, I reckon,
a title's one hell of a joke
And I'll be damned
if I let
another thing
own me.

Crossing the T

“If you trust it will divert”

On this moonless night,
rise this once from the dark city.
Ride your soul so high
you can see the tracks of your years
laid out in a bright grille,
laced with stripes of
silver traced with a black pen.

The pure strokes shine
with accumulated force,
crossed and then recrossed
by engineers, conductors,
riders much like you
on the trails of ghosts.
All steel and electrons,
rays of particulate light,
rails white-hot from passing trains,
routes reticulate, well-worn.

Stare hard where the white lines meet.
It is there the light greys
and is most dangerous.
The universe is most potent
at its interstices.

Do not fear the cruces.
Stare hard where the lines meet.
Chance the grid again and again,
gather power, be transformed
where the white lines touch.

Our Garden

after Donald Hall

I helped our garden grow.
see it grow, see it grow
How could I watch the hard earth turn
Beneath her touch
So quick to such
A yielding soil, and not be glad to learn
To use a hoe?

We pulled the weeds by hand
see it grow, see it grow
And in their place sowed four-o’clocks
And feverfew;
Around the new
Spring beds we bordered tidy rounds of rocks
Set loose in sand.

Who in this plot could have foreseen
see it grow, see it grow
But her midsummer sage and thyme
Where thistles were,
And cockleburr?
We cultivate the ground together. I’m
Grown fond of green.

Midnight: Lake Lanier

This small craft docked on a landlocked basin
is our tall ship: *Paloma*, we named her,
dreaming of Columbus and voyages
of discovery. Tonight we sail alone
across black waves, beneath the moon's half-light.
Her mainsail swells out slowly, pulling in
the dark air as we ease away from shore.
We lean low under the boom, tighten line,
trim sheet, and come about to catch the breeze.
Before the wind we run, or is it fly?

Out in the river channel, far from land,
the air is swiftest, where the lake is deep
above old shoals and gorges. Houses, roads,
and churches, farms and fields and burying grounds
lie covered over, and we think we see
the shadow of an ancient mountain range.
But here, the earth's a thing we cannot touch.
From shore to distant shore we float, up where
the clouds become the mist becomes the sea
between the mass of planet and the moon.

At Island's End

Provincetown

If you go out to the curl of the Cape,
To the tip of the curving slipper's toe,
The crook'd wave hooking the sailor home,
You could dip one foot in the Atlantic,
Then the other, your soles scrubbing pebbles
Once stones in the blue pocket of a dress,
Who knows? Or ballast in some monarch's hold,
Cornwall to the cold colony and back.

Key West

If you take U.S. One past Mile Zero,
Thread the treasure-strand hurricane spiral
That is the end of Florida, you might
Slip into the shallows on fine-pored sand,
Skeleton-white, and spy there underneath
Tiffany velvet surface the yardarm,
Reefed sail long shredded, of a merchantman
That plied the Martyrs centuries ago.

Edisto

If you walk up the slight headland, then down
The surf-ribbed beach as far as your bare feet
Can go on land before you reach the cut,
The capillary pulse of tide will show
The floating life of mussels, minnows, blue
Crabs mingling in the shoals of oyster-bone.

You might, as I once did, fish out a shard
Of porcelain, fine-veined and azure-glazed,
Its pattern worn by time, and wonder, too:
What vessel was it from, where are its mates?

Memorial Day

In this vast body all the bodies wait,
In end times to reassemble. Till then
The oceans do not part, but rather join us.
Spines of islands witness tissues

Warm beneath the waves:
The sea the skin that binds us,
The flesh that holds us in.

The road to the coast is paved with corpses:
Coons and cooters, bobcats, lizards, grackles.
Watchers who keep count of holiday scores
Foresee a certain toll of accidents.

Don't Become a Statistic.

Tortoises and whitetail deer meet their ends
By fenders, headlights, radiator grilles.
Wheeling buzzards scavenge their flesh by day,
Possums cruise for carrion by night.

Buckle Up. Don't Drink and Drive.

Down on deserted Cumberland, they say,
An old woman lived off roadkill alone.
On the mainland side she'd gather squirrels,
rabbits, muskrats, snakes, anything she spied.

Highways or Dieways: The Choice Is Yours.

She'd use whatever happened to turn up,
Bag it, ferry it over, and stew it.

It's true; the *Journal* once ran recipes.

This weekend her obituary read:

The last remaining dweller

On the Island now is dead.

Shed

Shed boy

He quit his job, sold his ninety-six Saab
gave his suits all to Goodwill
possessions are a crock of shit
he'd had about enough of it
moved into a cardboard carton on the side of a hill

Shed girl

She'd had her fondest wish, followed Phish
since Burlington, but then
it came high time to settle down
she wandered round from town to town
hitchhiked out west and finally took a shine to Port Townsend

Shed kids

The Coffee Bean was their favorite scene
they met there in early fall
her red hair and her nose ring pleased him
you got a latte nerve, she teased him
they both agreed how great it was to live so free and all

Shed couple

First winter storm he showed up seeking shelter
brought a Sheltie pup, and he'd picked her up
some Cheetos and a Coors from the Circle K

You sure know how to wine and dine a girl, she said
they shake off their clothes, next thing she knows
she's telling him she supposes he can stay

*In a lean-to shed where you live off the land
it's good to have someone good with his hands on hand
I had a dream, we had a shiny Airstream
we set out to see America, just us three*

Shed dog

They shacked up till he packed up
and slipped off on a morning in May
sure, they come and they go
but this life suits me, you know
we're better off without him

Shh, shhh, that's a good dog. Stay.

Marblehead

We will burn
whale oil in the lanterns
and conceive
new plans for spring
and husband
our crops and calves.

I will share in this harvest.
Wilt thou?

In this trim fishing village
things fit as close as kisses:
brick laid to tidy brick,
planks tongued-and-grooved and thick
white-painted clapboards lapped,
rock fences coping-capped
and each stone to its sister.

The narrowest of inlets
here serve as berth for sailboats;
meshed limbs of bridges, down,
link land to island town
where slender twigs of street
twine up the hill to meet
like fingers of a lover.

The houses stand together
against the threat of weather
and risk of seaman's life—
less space to slip a knife
than keeps back wall from wall.
How did they bear it all?
How ever get by, apart?

Slim steps lead to a summit,
the harbor distant from it.
High on this windy rise
a cemetery lies,
unbroken lines of old
markers where sea-wives hold
stone shoulder cold to shoulder.

The Rock-Knife

Upon the path on Holyoke
Where long ago the twin-rocks halved,
A sharpened scimitar of stone
Lay curiously from a boulder calved.
And on the boulder stood a cairn,
Built up, unlike the half-moon blade
That rested as if dropped, the hand
Of Abraham divinely stayed.
What meant these ancient riddled rocks,
The children-stones and brother knife,
Abandoned on the mountaintop?
The rite of sacrifice mid-stop,
The granite guarantee of life?
We do not know. None of them talks.

Near Miss on I-95

On the freeway south of DC,
Roads gone icy,
Night driving became dicey.
All day it had been so easy,

And with a hundred miles to go
Before the evening's bed,
I pushed stubbornly ahead
In the outside lane. Careful. Slow.

But I was not a fool alone
On the wide black sea of glass.
Amazed to see cars pass
At sixty, I hung back, crawled on.

When in the corner of my eye
There shone a wrong-angled light:
A white van, struggling to right
Itself, but sideways sailing by

As if upon a mad ocean
And bound to cross my bow.
I do not know how
I steered around its wild motion;

With a frightened, instinctive switch
I slipped from the giant's dance,
Drove on, glanced back at the van's
Nose pointing downward in the ditch.

I did not stop or turn back. I
Counted myself fortunate
Not to get too close to it.
I could not begin to say why.

Cold Comfort

Long, long at the lightening hour
the dark and the devil are howling about;
This side of the glass veil
a lonely lamp's vigil
burns long at the lightening hour.

High, high on the top of the hill
the rain barrels down on the tower of stone;
The old hall holds steady,
a narrow Andorra
so high on the top of the hill.

Deep, deep is the crest of the siege
and short are the stocks in the dwindling store;
How harsh blows the tempest,
how strong grows the winter,
for deep is the crest of the siege.

*Dawn spreads a mist on the river below;
The sun in the east yields a hesitant glow;
The sleet and the wind have ceased fire with the night
And retreated to caverns of snow.*

Still, still it is chilling without;
ice rimes the windowpanes, cold lies the hearth—
How frightening it is
to be safely within doors
and still to be wholly without.

Perihelion

To myself in the elementary hours
Of this cold empty place half past midnight
I pledged to stick it out alone atop
The hill with the clearest meteor view,
To ride the naked face of the planet
While a blazing veil of comet's dust brushed
Us all, to view every visible fire
Of stars falling earthward through the night sky,

But once I saw the first heavenstone plunge
Flaring like Icarus toward earth and home
I felt the chill of deep space in my bones,
Rose to my feet, gathered me about me,
Re-entered the door of our house, climbed back
Into our bed next to your warmth and light.

Sole to sole

is how we always sleep
when, after love and talk, we turn away
like bookends, facing outward on the bed.
The space between is where our stories meet,
the common paths of holy pilgrims' feet.
Lying back to back from toe to head,
we face both past and future so we may
our silent vigil for each other keep.

Taking Time: Late February

Let's head to someplace warm, you said.
The car is packed. It's not too far
to somewhere sunny. Will you come?
I've got to work, and I should not
allow myself the break right now,
was my recalcitrant reply.
The coast is half a day at most,
you countered. Come on, let's skip town.



I doubted we should leave without
a reservation. But in less
than four short hours here we are,
two tourists at the beach, unsure
we aren't both sleeping in the car
tonight. At last relief's in sight:
we tell the last-resort motel
we'll take their VACANCY. To wake
by sunrise is our plan, not one
brief moment of the day to go
to waste. We fall in bed in haste,
forgetting there's no clock to set.
No coffeepot, the TV off,
no miniature shampoos or in-
room bar or kitchenette—we are
alone, in dreams, and time moves on.



Too soon, we wake to find it's noon.
Too late. The water's high. We wait.

We're quite a couple: you're uptight,
and I'm a bitch about "spare time."
Until the beach is clear, we fill
the cold gray Sunday with a stroll
along the garden path. What's wrong
with us, we wonder, can't we just
ignore the schedule, ad lib more?



Should we turn back? you ask. Maybe
the tide's gone out by now. Besides,
the sun's come out, and it's past one.
Here, I'll check the sundial. We smile
despite ourselves to see the light
fall on the blank disk, its gnomon
gone. Look, *someone* took time, you joke.



And after that,
we loved, we laughed.
The unexpected joy of winter sun
on shaded faces: light played
on stolen moments. We'd come
to kill an idle hour—
but time, the fugitive,
would not stand still.

The Pencil-Post Bed

We lie, gray shadow-lined, upon the sheets
in chiaroscuro from the shutter-slats.
The netting on the tester's chain-link cage
casts webbed illusions on the plastered blue.

The four posts are our king-sized compass rose.
We range like islands: Cuba, you, crosswise
to me, the Keys, hooked out into the Gulf.
We were tempestuous last night. Ill dreams
let neither sleep nor drown. We lashed about
from point to point in quarrel, till, past mid-
night, there was nothing for it but to raft
the nearest pillow, sink to straits of tears.

But morning, ah, the morning mists at last
are lifting. Soon continents are drifting.
They meet on the eraser-tips of feet.
The world laid right, its grid pulls parallel,
its oceans rest, its storms retreat, its flags
and enemies go slack. And in their lull
we tie our moorings fast, redraw the map.

Asheville: Fire in the Wolfe House

July 24, 1998

Heart-pine boards go up like lighter'd,
Tongues of flame consume familiar trappings.
Lacquer on Julia's old bedstead blisters.
Silver melts into a shield, too late.

What's left: dripping into black gutters,
Water in sad rivers. In the smoky
Mountain air, gray ashes, prayers of ghosts.
Relics yard-spread like bones from a dig.

O lost, splinters and shingles never stood
A chance. This house both fuel and mother-muse,
Its stories sear our souls. The books brand us.
Fire drives a thorn of memory in the heart.

Come, construct, remake what you must.
What it touched can never burn again:
More tangible than wood are words, the stones
that char each time but will not burn away.

Blind Gator

for Rachel and John Jakes

THE WARM DAYS are coming round again
to the island, to the sound—
I feel it under my smooth albino belly
as I doze half-in, half-out of the marsh ooze.

It is my favorite springtime game,
lying loglike in the soft shadows
Between the knees of the cypresses
I drift with the breath of the tidewater.

The sun blows breezes over my back
warm across my armor plate
As I carry the weight of shadows
from the low oak-hanging moss.

I coast slow, float, never but a toe's bend
above the silky silt and bottom-mud
and when a wave pulls itself from under me
I settle, gentle, into the salt mire,
become part of it for an hour, a year.

When water runs faster
I loosen, move
meander like a swamp stream
among the trunks
Nose through old canal-roads
slip silent, swim, sniff shore
Remembering the water-track
from sighted times.

Smell and sound close, swell around me.
I know scents of oleander and of sand,

Sense scuttle of little fiddler crabs
 splash of sunfish, dive of dolphin
 whisper of sawgrass, sea oats, sailboats
 nesting terns, gulls, pipers
I feel lulls in seasons, when they turn chill a while
 then hot again when new-hatched mayflies,
 tadpoles, caterpillars, minnows grow
Snakes awake in logs, lay eggs
 bogs sprout fresh flowers
 ditches blossom out with pitcher plants
 and sticky flytraps swallow ants.



THIS SUDDEN SCENT is of sweet water—
Sun and wind wave it to the marsh-margin
 where I lie lazy, then raise my snout to graze it.
From my back an egret starts, departs
I turn my whole head toward the water-fragrance
 that sounds, sprinkling, tinkling as a buoy bell
 and smells like the promise of rain
I hunger first then thirst
 and, tired of brine, climb
 up to the dry world.

I cross dunes, drag on legs gone heavy
 the hike not much to my liking
 old and slow as I know myself to be.

But I find my winding way in time
 through sand-spurs, thorns, burrs
 horned-toads' holes, shell scraps, driftwood
 turtles' tracks, deadfall, scrub pine
 to the oasis.

The wind had not been wrong:
Its silent song had sent me message
 of this inland sea so unlike lakes I know
For here flow cool springs into a pool
 smooth free from current, hurry
No rushes crowd its clean rim
 ringed by rock and flat pebble path
 surrounded by flowers, bushes
 towering trees, honeybees combing
 the twining sweet wisteria vines.

I slide into water clear as water cannot be
So light I trace no friction of silt on skin
So thin I strike echo from bottom
And it is deep, fit for floating sleep
I immerse myself in it, absorb it, become it
 drift again,
 glide,
 fly.



DREAM-TERROR: I wake to tangled purple vines
 grown up strangling around my neck.
I am drug down, pulled out, bound, muzzled
Shorn of my strength I struggle,
 puzzled, mute-jawed, fear-clawed.

Hauled like a beached keel from the pool
Lashed limb and tail, at last made motionless
 I am hefted hard and fast into a webbed cell.

Where they take me is no swamp I have been in
 because even after so long I remember.

Easter Comes to Tom Green County

I recall all scents, sounds, movements—
hum of wind, snapped twig, drum of rain
habits, instincts, ways of raccoons, rabbits
stinks of skunks, fungus, fern, fire, and lightning
strike of copperhead, stripe of coral
feral boar, fleet deer, hare, heron
quicksand, trap, and snare.

What they are saying is not *Let him go*.
No, what they find is *blind, too old*
can't fend for himself in the wild.
Child, I know old;
your grandfather's father told tales of me
years before you, young one, ever grew
tall enough to lift the gun I hear cock.

When they take the shot they are quick
Mark dead aim, humane, release
the trigger swiftly,
hit.
They are right:
I had forgotten how sight impairs.
I stare, see light as darkness pales
and scales fall like stars
from my eyes.

for Kay

The road's a flat-felled seam of dust stretched taut
Beneath a stone-washed Texas sky. I don't
Get out here much these days. *You must*
Stay pretty busy with that job back east,

Says B.C., riding shotgun, as the miles
Roll by. From Abilene to Robert Lee
The scene's the same old same old, harrowed fields,
Rusted pumpjacks, barbed wire, purple sage.

We pass the cattle auction and the lake.
It rained this March, he says after a spell.
Come a norther, more'n we seen in years.
The green of the mesquite trees bears him out.

Around the bend the pickup switches gears;
We're well into hill country, heading south
Across the county line. Not long to go
Before the gathering in San Angelo. And then

The landscape changes like a trumpet blast:

Bluebonnets blanket every rocky slope.
Man, Dad, you ever see a sight like that?
He thinks about the question. *Nope*. I see
The tear well up. He brims his Stetson

Lower, looks away across the blue
Profusion, daisies sprinkled in like gold.
Dry majesty, thorn-circled, flower-crowned,
A carpet for a king, these desert hills.

*Nobody plants 'em there, you know. The seed's
Just lying in the ground. In times of drought
It waits, he tells me. It can keep until
The rains come. And when they do, at last . . .*

He looks away across the blue.

Four Lullabies

Twilight in Grandma's yard

i

At dusk we play inside the gate
Swallows from the chimneys rise
Grandma lets us stay up late
We hide, and we grow wise.

ii

Darkness shuts its door around us
Evening breezes hush the sun
Shadows rise up from the earth
And we and the night are one.

iii

To tapestries the gingham fade
To velvet weaves the sky
To diamonds melts a ring of gold,
To dreams the open eye.

iv

Cradle rock and ocean roll
Candlelight and sea-bell toll
On the waves we sail and sleep,
Mermaids watch us from the deep.

Moving Out

For Eric and for my mother

It's hard to leave the digs
in order
after all these years.

It's hard to make sure things
get packed up
and sent on ahead.

And it's hard to clean house
well enough
to please the landlord.

You fasten down the lid
of each box,
securing the contents.

Reluctantly pass on
possessions
to those who stay behind.

Find forgotten treasures
underneath
the sofa cushions.

Dust, in the final days,
the baseboards
that have stood concealed.

You finish one last meal
from what's left
in the old icebox.

Then on the goodbye day
look around:
the end you've come to

was never meant to be
a stopping
but a moving on.

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