

The background of the cover is a rich, deep red fabric with a subtle texture. A prominent diagonal crease or fold runs from the top right towards the bottom left, creating a sense of depth and movement. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the fabric.

Mercurial

Poems by Allison Joseph

Mercurial

Poems by Allison Joseph

Mayapple Press 2016

Copyright © 2016 by Allison Joseph

Published by Mayapple Press
362 Chestnut Hill Road
Woodstock, NY 12498
mayapplepress.com

ISBN 978-1-936419-64-7

Library of Congress Control Number 2015920172

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Poems from *Mercurial* previously appeared in the following journals:

Accident, *Pirene's Fountain*; Confederate Season, Sidewalks, Somewhere in the North Bronx, and Late Seventies, *Birmingham Poetry Review*; Her Chair, Pediophobia, Rondeau Redouble for the Women Left Behind, and Ode to Sandals, *ducts.org*; The Pervert's Shoe, *Terminus*; Self-Portrait as Small-Town Bus Depot, *Eccolinguistics*; Period, *Jet Fuel Review*; Ode to the Red Dress, *Dublin Poetry Review*; Skinny, *North Dakota Quarterly*; Different Dozens, *So to Speak*; To Wanderlust, *Cider Press Review*; When You Get Tired of Being Called Ugly, *Crow Hollow 19*.

Cover design by Judith Kerman; cover art used under Creative Commons license from www.torange.us. Photo of author by Rusty Bailey. Book designed and typeset by Ameer Schmidt with cover titles in Tangerine, subtitle in Hypatia Sans Pro, poem titles and text in Goudy Old Style.

Contents

Somewhere in the North Bronx, Late Seventies	3
Her Chair	4
Pediophobia	6
The Pervert's Shoe	8
Different Dozens	9
Accident	11
Confederate Season	12
Sidewalks	13
Pro-Ana	14
Rondeau Redouble for the Women Left Behind	15
Fault	16
To Wanderlust	17
Curse Poem to the Weather Channel	18
Metabolism	20
Self-Portrait as Small-Town Bus Depot	22
Columbia Record and Tape	24
Aubade in Which I Always Return	26
Ode to Sandals	28
Ode to the Red Dress	29
Period	31
Skinny	32
When You Get Tired of Being Called Ugly	33
Ballade for Motherless Daughters	34
Aubade with New Poem	35
About the Author	37

Somewhere in the North Bronx, Late Seventies

on the top floor of a sinking two-story,
a girl watches a game with her father,

her sad-eyed, foul-mouthed, quick-
to-anger father. The father loves

the quick bats and ugly spats
of these furious Yankees: hubris

of Jackson bristling with every
swing, every hustle. The girl wants

to go to that stadium, hear the solemn
public address man boom her name,

tell her story. The father eats handfuls
of peanuts, leaves a dirty shell-pile

at the girl's feet, commands her
to pick up his leavings, voice terse

as a strikeout. Her mother—his wife—
works another double shift at Bellevue,

money when money slides out of
the father's hands into one failed

mail-order business after another.
Balls and strikes, hits and losses,

the girl knows them all, sweeps
the pile of leavings into her hands,

father's eyes making sure she's
swept it all up before he rips

open another paunchy bag, crackle
of cellophane crunching between them.

Her Chair

My mother must have been tired
of being mother, wife, some patient's
nurse, tired of a house of dust

and abandoned appliances
drained of their usefulness,
of house keys, doormats,

throbbing of my father's TV
and ringing telephone, his primitive
remote slipping beneath easy

chair cushions. Home from work,
seeing spilled toys, clothes, books,
my dolls with their dead faces,

why was she never tempted
to leave, seek quiet somewhere
besides our crumbling house

with its falling kitchen tiles,
gift-paper skeletons of past
Christmases, fossils of my father's

home improvements, his threadbare
underwear, soiled dress shirts, jeans?
Home from the hospital wards,

long shifts of tending and mending
strangers, didn't she have a right
to refuse us dinner, refuse us

everything? But she came home,
full grocery bags intact despite
her walk from the bus stop,

despite our bathroom clutter
of toothbrushes, washcloths,
kitchen with the broken-clock

oven, living room
with no recliner for her,
no easy chair for her hard work.

Pediophobia

—fear of dolls

Their eyes never close,
these daughters without
mothers—toxic flesh,
curls made of anything

but hair, mouths shaped
into gaping holes
that cry with no voices.
I never wanted that doll

advertised on Saturday
morning TV—“Baby Alive”
whose creepy face
worked an imaginary

bottle, sucking and wetting.
Little bottle, little diaper,
all of it plastic, none
of it real. What was she

preparing us girls for—
with her pink spoon and
food you mixed with water,
only to have her eliminate

it moments later? My
childhood friends coveted
her, tried to shove her
into my arms, but I’d

push her back, not
wanting her ever, no
matter what color
her skin, texture her hair.

Who needs a baby,
I thought, *who will always*
be mute, mimic of life
never living, never breathing?

The Pervert's Shoe

is as glassy and shiny
as retail, crisp as money
new-minted by forgers

wise in the stink
of nightly ink. He has two,
you know, a special

pair silent over parquet
floors and parking lots,
able to burnish

the grime-streaked
corridors of hospitals.
He can find that trap

door you're sure your
landlord nailed shut,
surreptitiously unscrewing

your screens off
their hinges, whispering
his way through

your sleep-damp rooms,
until his palm hovers
over your lips, hand

falling ceaselessly
down the second
you awaken to scream.

Different Dozens

—the dozens: African-American comic insult game that begins with the phrase “your mama”

Your mama’s so mystical
she can sit by the right hand of God
and not get dizzy. Your mama’s

so spiritual Pope be calling her
for advice, queries left via
official papal voice mail.

Your mama’s so remarkable
her prophecies of the future
made Jeane Dixon jealous,

no astrological charts needed
to tell when babies would come,
men leave. Your mama’s

so extraordinary she can look
past skin to bone, blood, muscle—
diagnosing bodily ills by passing

her glance over you, seeing
scars on your lungs, toxins
in your cells. Your mama
can walk a tightrope barefoot,

summon new blues from Bessie Smith,
singing what Bessie would sing now,
were she alive. Your mama can
put out fires with a sneeze,

make kitchens clean—never touching
a mop—heal children with the stroke
of a pinky. Your mama smiles,

and my hands feel a swift urge
to shape real birds from clay,
sculpting them so fiercely their wings work.

Accident

Catastrophe looms just a blink away.
It only takes an inch to crash and burn.
Just when our luck runs out, it runs astray.

That bone you thought was strong? It cracked today—
and left you limping, unable now to turn.
Catastrophe blooms just a blink away.

The bullet that mowed down a child at play?
A six-year old confined inside an urn.
Just when our luck runs out, it runs astray.

The freighted train spilled into the bay
to make all drinking sick? We never learn.
Catastrophe balloons. We blink away

despite our rules, despite how loud we pray,
despite all debts, raw bruises that we earn.
Just when our luck runs out, it runs astray.

What can we do, in all our rich dismay?
Keep writing, though it makes us itch and churn.
Catastrophe consumes—one blink away.
And when my luck runs out, I run astray.