

Evolution of the Bridge

MAXINE CHERNOFF is the author of seven books of poetry and six books of fiction. Her most recent titles are *World: Poems 1991–2001* (Salt Modern Poets) and *Some of Her Friends that Year: New and Selected Stories* (Coffee House Press, 2002). Her collection of stories, *Signs of Devotion*, was a New York Times Notable Book of 1993. Twice a finalist in fiction for the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, she is chair of Creative Writing at San Francisco State University. Co-editor of *New American Writing*. She lives in Mill Valley, California, with Paul Hoover and their three children.

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SELECTED PROSE POEMS

MAXINE CHERNOFF



PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom
PO Box 202, Applecross, Western Australia 6153

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First published 2004

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9,5 / 13

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ISBN 1 84471 038 6 paperback

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for Julian, Philip, Koren, and Paul

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Acknowledgments

Poems have appeared in the following earlier collections:

The Last Aurochs (Iowa City, Iowa : Now Press, 1976, John Mort, editor).

A Vegetable Emergency (Venice, California : Beyond Baroque Foundation, 1976, James Krusoe, editor).

Utopia TV Store (Chicago : The Yellow Press, 1979 ; Richard Friedman, Darlene Pearlstein, and Peter Kostakis, editors).

New Faces of 1952 (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca House, 1985; John Latta, editor).

Leap Year Day (Chicago : ACP, 1991, Lee Webster, editor; distributed by Jensen-Daniels, 1999).

World: Poems 1991–2001 (Cambridge, England, and Applecross, Australia : Salt Publishing, 2001, John Kinsella and Chris Hamilton-Emery, editors).

Poems collected here have appeared in the following magazines : *Jacket* (Australia), *Center*, *The Milk Quarterly*, *OINK!*, *Out There*, *Unmuzzled Ox*, *The Paris Review*, *Poetry Now*, *The Wormwood Review*, *Madrona*, *Chicago Review*, *Pull the Orphan*, *Story Quarterly*, *Lowlands Review*, *Gravida*, *Skywriting*, *Brilliant Corners*, *Chelsea*, *Fiction*, *Strange Faeces*, *Sole Proprietor*, *Aspect*, *Syncline*, *Lucky Star*, *B-City*, *Chiaroscuro*, *Chouteau Review*, *Cowtown*, *Dental Floss*, *The Little Magazine*, *The Mississippi Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Sierra Madre Review*, *Sun*, *Caliban*, *Chicago Poetry Letter News*, *Keysatch(el)*, *Verse*, *The Prose Poem*, *Lesbok* (Iceland), *Santa Clara Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Washington Square*, *Denver Quarterly*, and *Sentence*.

Poems have also appeared in the following anthologies: *New Directions 49*; *Epiphanies: The Prose Poem Now*; *Up Late: American Poetry Since 1970*; *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*; *The Hat Issue*; *Fifteen Chicago Poets*; *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*; *Will Work for Peace*; *An Exaltation of Forms*; *American Diaspora: Poetry of Exile*; *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms*; *Stand-up Poetry*; *Anthology of 20th Century Illinois Poets*; *Cradle and All: Women Writers on Pregnancy and Birth*; *Smokestacks and Chimneys*; *The Party Train: The Prose Poem in North America*; *A Contemporary Reader for Creative Writing*; *The Anatomy of Water*; and *Great American Prose Poems*.

The author thanks the editors.

Evolution of the Bridge

from The Last Aurochs
and A Vegetable Emergency (1976)

The Moat

Two soldiers, masquerading as trees, pass me casually on the street. Aware of the possibility that they're armed, I avert my eyes, questioning their peculiar disguise only to myself. I walk on only to come upon two trees dressed as soldiers.

I assume that the soldiers and trees have made an even exchange, and aware of the possibility that the trees, as easily as the soldiers could be armed, walk directly toward my home.

Arriving there just after dark, I see that the draw-bridge has been raised. I compare my situation to that of a piece of luncheon meat destined for a sandwich, only to discover that the bread it was supposed to occupy is no longer available.

I question the possibility of swimming the narrow width of the channel. Stripping to the waist, I notice how my skin catches the eerie glow of the moon, making me look terribly anemic. This hypochondriacal observation adds to my reluctance about attempting the swim.

I empty my pockets to make the load lighter and leave their contents, some coins, a key, and a ticket stub, inside of my boot on the bank. As I submerge myself in the dark water, I find that all I can think about are blue, shiny plums. Despite my mind's obsession, I find my arms and legs moving rhythmically. If they were statesmen, they would be articulate speakers.

Shivering, I lift myself out of the water and knock vigorously on the door. James, the butler, opens the door. He is surprised to see me partially undressed. His reaction triggers in me, for the first time this evening, the realization that I am a woman and for the first time in his employment with me that he is a man. Bowing graciously, he hands me a dry, white towel.

I question the servants and find that not one of them knows why the bridge was raised before I returned home. Satisfied with this answer, I settle down for the evening. My tea, hot and fragrant as ever, is brought to me, and I retire to read a rather obscure book of aphorisms, comfortably wrapped in my white wool shawl, iridescent in the moonlight.

A Vegetable Emergency

There is something new among the vegetables in my garden this morning, a sinister weed with brown hair-like filaments. I start tugging but find it surprisingly resilient. Bracing myself like a sailor hoisting anchor in a gale, I nearly fall over backwards.

The ground gives way to the head of a man, attractive, about forty, with brown wavy hair. A small white butterfly, straying from the cabbage patch, has landed above his ear. I picture Gauguin arriving in Tahiti in much the same way, a startled islander pulling him from the rhubarb-colored sand. But a head seems to be all that exists of this man. I wonder what he's doing in my garden, a city plot smaller and less enticing than even the Paradise Lounge down the street. I ask him this, but he stares off at the white fence, stony and mute.

I wonder if the head, like a hangnail, is a little discussed but nevertheless common occurrence. I consult manuals, finding only parasites, fungi, and frost among the vegetable emergencies. No mention of a head, obtrusive as a fireplug in a desert. I call a few neighbors for advice. They are sympathetic but noncommittal.

That night I sit in bed, watching fireflies circling the jar-like head. I wonder what will happen when fall comes and I've eaten or canned all the crops. I imagine plowing up the garden, burying the head under a mound of earth and hoping for an early blizzard. But what if the head resurfaced each year, perhaps doubled in size, edging the other vegetables far from the sunlight? One blow from my spade might dispatch it abruptly as it arrived. But what if it screamed? A head so obstinately silent might be absolutely vociferous. Unable to sleep, I listen to the crickets as if to canned laughter.

Over my morning coffee, I distractedly read the newspaper. Outside my window, the head, like a silent Mafia don, dominates the garden. A sale at the greenhouse resolves the problem for me: by

10 A.M., I've purchased a dozen geranium plants. Like an expert milliner, I artfully cover the head with pink and orange flowers. Fuzzy begonia leaves patch closed the relentless eyes. I hang the *For Sale* sign in front of the house and wait for a prospective buyer. I hope, in its cloister of leaves, the head has vowed silence.