

## More Praise for *The Branches, the Axe, the Missing*

I love Charlotte Pence's electric poems. There's nothing like emotions under pressure so great they enter the heart like bullets, like water that lies quietly in a pool but leaps from a hose with a force that knocks down doors. Macduff trying not to weep for his slaughtered family, a Bernini statue that seems to want to speak, Keats's odes: these flood me with joy. And Charlotte Pence's poems, too.

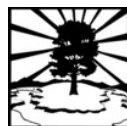
—David Kirby, author of *Talking About Movies with Jesus: Poems*

This poetry is dangerous in the way that we've always suspected poetry might be: poetry as truth-teller, poetry as seductress. There's enough narrative to keep anyone who loves stories hooked; experimental spaces for the innovative reader to co-create in; fierce honesty that does not give way to any trend; lyricism that can be set to music. Once you've entered the silken tent of Charlotte Pence's poetry, you will want to stay inside the intelligence and beauty for a long time, to resist the ordinary.

—Marilyn Kallet, author of *Packing Light: New and Selected Poems*

# The Branches, the Axe, the Missing

Charlotte Pence



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It is not a question of whether we as a whole will be saved or  
lost, but of how much of us.

—From *The Gospel According to Darwin* by  
Woods Hutchinson (1898)

□

What small mammals  
did we roast in the fire?

What first story did we  
tell? Something about  
longing. About loss:

The big one.

The got-away.



Turning into the driveway, her headlights reveal something dark.

She has light shining on darkness.

A limb has fallen, a good twenty-foot long and branded with many branches.

It is thirty-four degrees.

Drizzling.

She wants to be warm, eat that leftover lasagna, drink one glass of boxed red wine.

The engine idles.

She has just returned from her last act as a married woman: mailing the new-ex his car title. He wanted a copy faxed and the original over-nighted.

She can hear now the car part that scrapes under the hood.

She buttons her coat, lifts the collar, gets out.

Grabs the branch by the base.

Her hands slide down wet-slime of turkey-tail mushrooms in bloom.

She pauses. Decides not to wipe off her hands.

Begins again.

It takes five tugs, a deep drag. The moon seeps through to a shine.

How long has it been since she has done something as fundamental as this?

Cleared a path, been wet, been cold.

Scent of wet dog shit limps over from the neighbor's yard. Their windows are ice-black.

Something about this feeling is honest. Like nakedness.

Like this November moon, color of silk that is neither white nor silver.

Something she wants to conquer and can't.



We were born from wood and fire.  
Roasting small mammals as we sat  
in circles. The sizzle-spit of fat striking

flame. And outside the circle: darkness.  
Stalk of hyena. Crick-shift of his step.  
Then man lifting a torch—jab-jab-jabbing

that dark until the sounds flee back to the  
quiet: sizzle-spits. Shifts of logs carboned  
and bone-thin. Ashed by morning.



Biological anthropologists are discovering that  
“we were born from wood and fire” is not  
figurative.

Taming fire led to  
cooking which led to  
more calories which led to  
bigger brains to  
language speech communities  
w/ clusters of moms, dads, Bobbies & Sallies.

But w/ everything gained, there is loss. What  
is the equation for this?  
Simply:  $1+1$  is no longer one?  
With taming fire  
what was lost?





The wet, the cold,  
makes her think of Spike,  
her father. Or perhaps  
what makes her think  
of her father  
is the house itself,  
its heater clicking on  
as she opens the door,  
the stargazers' scent  
drifting from the hall,  
the red-packaged log  
on the hearth, and  
the dog by this log,  
whining because  
it has not seen her  
in five hours. She  
has not seen her  
father in fifteen years.  
He is homeless,  
a fact many friends  
don't even know. If  
she is asked why  
her father moved  
her family as often as  
every six months, she  
replies that he has  
a "mercurial disposition."  
Mercurial an SAT word.  
She does not know  
how to spell  
schizophrenic.  
Pedophilia she learned  
in the third grade.



Georgia July and the thought of ice storms occurred to her father.

Fifty-three loblolly pines surrounded their house back then. Fifty three pines that could ice-over, splinter, crash the roof.

They sat on their porch next to the strawberry patch that had given up only three berries all season.

She rarely weeded. She was ten.

Her dad liked quoting Frost and his proclamations of the world's end—*...in fire, some say ice.*

He kept ten full gallons of gasoline in the garage.

One chainsaw.

Cut to fall away from the house, those pines went down within seven hours.

A boy biked by with his sister on the handlebars. She wore a headband with bunny ears. Silver fabric where pink should have been.

The sound of falling pines was new to her, yet recognizable.

A sound slow to finish like stacked plates falling after an earthquake. Something impossible to stop, forcing one to stand by and watch.

Just before dark, the chainsaw quieted and the bike squeaked by. The boy wore the ears now. There was no sister.

She began her job of walking through each fallen tree top.

Such rooms within those limbs. Sometimes she did pull-ups to the next firred space. Other times, she ape-swung and jumped down.

In one nest's weave, she found foil from a chip bag and one wobbly line of red string. Two weeks ago, she had torn her red dress at the edge of these woods.

*Aren't you one lucky kid?* her father called from somewhere.

She stopped moving, let the tree hide her. And it did, towering even as it lay on its side.