

“... (A) delightful and disturbing read. A flurry of allusions, of histories, of personal disasters, all of it lightened with insight and a sly, sexy humor.”

—Arthur Smith, author of *The Fortunate Era*

In *The Branches, the Axe, the Missing*, Charlotte Pence goes beyond situating the personal within the contexts of science and history; she instead finely mortises the evolution of the human form with that of her own poetic form. This carefully shaped sequence reminds us that the “sizzle-spit of fat striking flame” remains part cause, part sustenance--and is indivisible, finally, from “that first word, that first word / that spiked a whole new species.”

—Claudia Emerson, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Late Wife* and *Figure Studies*



Many Small Fires

poems by Charlotte Pence



To Adam, my husband, my home, my fire,
who said: Write what you're interested in—
and what you fear.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I say that this book is ecological, I am not referring to the widely used secondary definition, which aligns social action with environmental protection. I mean the book is ecological in its primary sense: the branch of biology that considers the relationship of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings. In many ways, all good poetry does just that; it hones in on our physical and emotional connections and acknowledges nature's role in our lives—be it destructive, rejuvenative, or exculpatory. The poem is its own world in which each line break, each detail, each letter depends on what comes before and after, in the same way a bone needs another bone to become a body. The poem's only incompleteness is its need for a reader.

Many Small Fires attempts to make explicit several connections we, as a species, seem to intuit. The second section, previously published as a chapbook and written as one long poem in which facing pages reply to each other, brings in recent theories of evolutionary anthropology to shed light on the complex human invention that is community. Community is not only as necessary to the human race as fire, but also potentially as deadly. While we need one another, we don't always know how to support one another. Even when we try, we sometimes fail. No parent, I imagine, ever plans to disappoint. No child does either. Yet how often are those stories told? The book's second section brings in facts regarding our evolution from an upright but ape-like species to what we are now: fast-fingered lovers of light (fire, electricity, computer chips, cell phones), community (virtual, real, connected by memories, motives, and DNA) and motion (planes, cars, bikes, anything that allows us to leave and return).

This sense of interconnectivity permeates throughout the book. My husband and I were backpacking through Indonesia when I began writing about my father, who has been homeless since I was eighteen because of his paranoid schizophrenia. It was a three-month trip that we repeated the following summer. During these two years, I studied the intersections between the evolution of human physiology and human behavior such as pair-bonding and settlement creation. I wondered about whatever enabled our species to form a home in the first place. Luckily for me, much has been written on the subject, albeit outside the realm of the Humanities. Also luckily for me, I happened to be in a place where some of the most exciting discoveries were being made about our species. Indonesia, specifically the remote island of Flores where I visited, is home to the most recent, confirmed discovery of a distinct species named *Homo floresiensis*. More commonly known as the “hobbit people” because of their short stature, this species suggests many exciting things about evolutionary rates. What is indisputable, however, is that this species lived at the same time as modern man. We thought we were alone, but we were not. As I began to reflect on my childhood, I did so amidst the backdrop of Indonesia, finding not only a thematic resonance but also an emotional one. As all travelers know, never is a sense of home as clear as when we feel the lack of it.

Considering the amount of science in this book, the notes at the end might prove useful. Also, I would recommend reading the book in sequence rather than in sips.

Finally, if one feels so inclined to help the homeless after reading this book, I would suggest engagement with organizations that follow the Housing First approach. As opposed to the traditional housing readiness tactic that requires evidence of stability before a

home is provided, Housing First immediately provides permanent housing, along with supportive services. Not only has it proven effective, reducing homelessness in some cities by 50%, but it also has proven to save communities more money than the housing readiness approach because ERs, prisons, and detoxification centers are used less. Ultimately, the success of Housing First undercuts some firm-fisted American beliefs concerning self-sufficiency and autonomy. Housing First reminds us that we are still guided by fundamental needs such as shelter and that we are still one community, albeit fragmented. We are never able to free ourselves of each other, no matter how we might try. Let us celebrate our ancestral roots, and then turn toward the work of living together on this planet composed of many small fires.

... All must fall to the ground according to definite laws;
but how simple is this problem compared to ... action and
reaction ...

—From *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin

ARGUMENT (1)

Wind bending a grove
Of bamboo. Thin-trunked.
Sound of an opening door.
I think of my father.

How through him—
 His Oreo-fat,
 His hardening cock,
 His long, curled lashes

I stutter-stepped into myself.
A woman
 In wonder.

Why do you write that stuff? my father interrupts.

What do you mean? About your cock?

No. That right there, he says, lifting his arms, glass of O.J. in one hand, Little Debbie oatmeal cream pie in the other. He stands like a Lady of the Scales statue—chewing a wad of snack cake.

What are you talking about? What's in my poems? How I see the world?

All of this, he says and circles his drink in the air. This house. Our family. You and me. You think it's everything. He nods toward the window. But what's out there doesn't even begin it.

I answer: *Yesterday I saw something I've never seen before: A canary-yellow web that only one spider in the world can weave. What do you think about that?*

He shrugs. *Charlotte, that's yesterday.*

I.

But the struggle almost invariably will be most severe between the individuals of the same species, for they frequent the same districts, require the same food, and are exposed to the same dangers.

—From *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin

ARCHITECTURE OF THE VEIL

Islamic architecture often adorns the interior spaces as opposed to the exterior spaces. Commonly known as the architecture of the veil, this style alludes to the nature of the infinite.

Leaning over the low wall around our hotel roof, we are fooled into thinking Jakarta below might be understood by echo,

by prayer calls, car horns, hot spoons scraping woks of *nasi goreng*.
Or by gazing down on *pishtaqs*, minarets, cannons fashioned

into fountains. All afternoon, the faithful go on being faithful.
The faithless, faithless. Each chasing piety with sugar and sticks.

Green-flanked smog shifts directions, sweeps the clouds
into crumbs, into evening, into this thing called the infinite.

The architecture here secludes its beauty to inner spaces,
to what cannot be seen from the street where a costumed

macaque flees under a soup stall, his frustration blooming
into soapsuds rushing the gutter. A walker passes by adding

a spoonful of blood to her thickening placenta; a beggar
irritates his toothache into stone. And the mosaics repeat

and spin their cobalt patterns until the moon quivers one day
forward—and no one notices except that two mangoes rot

while green on the tree. All the while, the prophets' daughters
strut by in their highest heels, poking the sun back

into the pieces it really is. This brokenness, we suspect,
is true about our own selves, despite the fluid strides we make

from city block to city block. We walk among sweet sulfur,
wondering what we cannot see, wondering which feast or fast

is behind which house's wall. In each of us, a stray dog forgets
to ask for home; a pack of roving hounds guards the door.

PIG AND A BOTTLE

—*Funeral sacrifice in Sulawesi, Indonesia. June 2010.*

The blood, too fresh for flies, a newly skinned skull left to dry, but otherwise this dulled dirt-patch where animals are sacrificed is just another piece of empty ground.

I'm ten thousand miles from where I grew up by S.D. Johnson Elementary. At recess, we would search for a kidnapped girl, also named Charlotte. We each hoped to get

lucky and be the one to find her skull. See, Dad would say, *We're all the same. Don't act so goody-goody. Who doesn't wanna see the fat behind skin? Watch a person die?*

In front of me, the coffin shimmers under the spread of red silk hand-stitched with one-inch mirrors. If I approached, I'd see pieces of myself. So, I watch a boy and his wiggly

muscles struggling to lift a pig who's strapped to bamboo—its grill and grave. It thrashes out of its rope, which sends the men scrambling away. And right when I cheer this pig's escape, a warmth

wets my leg as a machete opens a buffalo's throat, its blood spraying like water from a sprinkler.

Dad loved to tell me what he could do with
a beer bottle's broken neck. Take the glassed

peaks to the throat:

It gives like a pillow.

I'm not a pillow, I'd say.

Not today.

Tell me whose neck you took the bottle to?

*Homeless guy. By the river after I bought him
the beer. And what you need to remember, Miss
Goody Goody: No one ever noticed.*

AGRESEARCH©

We didn't understand what we were holding,
but knew both penis and vagina on the piglet
meant something. We answered its squeals
with clucks and shush. Took note of its moonish,
hard belly. Sang "Twinkle, Twinkle" to distract
from the ear tag's needle and punch. My body
was not the body the piglet longed for:
no mother's teat, swollen and flabby, spritzing
milk; no fur slicked with manured hay to wallow
and warm. But song is song. Sailors, chain gangs,
boys with Corvettes and girls with Hondas—
we need song. I broke a flute once to get inside
the soft pads of each key. Found only metal and holes
and cold. That's the way with searching, isn't it?
We think we know before we know. In this world,
even babies hear their names before they're born.