

A CONFLUENCE OF BONES

THE SPLIT ROCK EXPLOSION

OF 1917



Kathleen Bryce Niles-Overton

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IN MEMORIUM

The wonderful prose and poetry writer, Shari Carter, was reading this chapbook draft as I was working on it for two years. She was very supportive of the project and her approval was most encouraging. A few days before she passed, Shari suddenly remembered that her grandmother told of housing some of the people whose homes were destroyed in that catastrophic blast. Having lived in her grandmother's home in Marcellus for the last thirty plus years, she was grateful for this knowledge tucked away for nearly 80 years.

DEDICATION

To Jessica Lowell Mason

An outstanding writer, poet, mother, teacher, professor,
humanist, activist, leader and survivor
whose life has been periodically usurped by others.

Her spirit of honesty, caring, and concern for
all creates an environment of hope,
love, compassion and strength.



PREFACE

In 1918, the Split Rock Quarry in Syracuse, NY housed a munitions plant where a massive business of manufacturing explosives occupied numerous buildings. As I was beginning this series of poems, I was given a pamphlet that detailed each and every aspect of the work. the vast number of employees, the explosion itself, the responding local authorities— the firefighters, policemen, doctors, *ad infinitum*.

There were explicit descriptions of the blast, the bodies, the search for those lost, the attempts to piece the body parts with the correct body, the autopsies, and all manner of specifics of such a huge tragedy for the city as well as all near and far impacted by the tragedy.

I made the decision not to read the catalog of minute details in the pamphlet until I completed my chapbook. Throughout the several years that it took me to imagine and create my vision of that day, I questioned my decision. In the end, for me, it was the most comfortable. To speculate what happened to people long gone before my own birth in 1943 and my age of 80 would have been both disrespectful and presumptuous.

While the Syracuse media, in praising *Ashes From a Long Dead Fire* (Pulitzer nominee 1985) referred to me as the “Queen of Doom and Gloom,” I trust that these poems might elevate that status to one who has given insight into both the tragedy and the heros and heroines and those who were impacted by the Split Rock Explosion.

Kathleen Bryce Niles-Overton
Syracuse, NY 2025

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1. NO ACCOMPLICES NEEDED

In the midst of the years
just before the Charleston
the speakeasy and all the hellraising
after the Great War
we were weak from loss
fathers brothers uncles
buried in graves far from home

and our own city exploded

it was that time
when shadows climbed
across the overpass
 genuflected to the sun
and begged the moon to hide
the blinding light

for hours we could see
the smoke the flames
hear the fire trucks the ambulances
the police all who charged into
the fray like soldiers

for decades
they would blame the Germans
for sneaking in
hiding behind shadows
planting bombs like dandelions
watching the buildings collapse
seeing the bodies falling
like vaudevillians entertaining
the troops

guilty of much
they were innocent of this atrocity

we did it without them.

2. CONSTANT COMPANION

Captured at the lip of a path
that perfect surprise slid into his pocket
pressing his flesh very gently
crushing old fear and quiet rage
it would be his best friend
his constant companion

with that knife
simple and sleek
a boy of twelve often afraid and weak
grew a dozen inches that summer
no one ever knew no one ever cared

the secret in his pocket was his alone

decades later
when his tattered pants were emptied
a few coins
a lighter and his knife
were all that remained
of the boy who once believed
that he would live forever

3 FIREMAN

He loved fire

fire was his ballet
dancing pirouetting dipping
soaring shifting spinning
devouring a stage

fire was a beautiful woman
dressed in reds and yellows
luring him to dance
he knew that if he kissed her
he would simply ignite

each time he held the firehose
the music stopped

4. VIOLATED

In that crevice
between a clap of thunder
and the flash of lightning

the moon was jostled

her soft mouth curled inward
summer face transfixed in fear
her perfect arc blown off
by a blast that climbed upward

a rocket gone insane

5. WHAT IF

your breath could fell an oak
would the forest heave its mighty limbs
and stall your transgression

would you uproot a generation of trees
and leave fallow the ground on which
they once so grandly rose

or would you suck in pounds of air
your legs lifting off and above the ground
to fly beyond the forest

to breathe at last
across an unsuspecting sky

6. PREMONITION

He thought automobiles were boring
two heavy doors and seats like davenport
made for ladies in huge hats and
dresses long and abundant

buses were intrusive and rude
filled with accountants day labourers
and unsightly women who worked
in alley ways

so he sold saved scavenged
until that 1917 Harley-Davidson
motorbike was his

tension from the city hubbub
caught on tree branches sumac cattails
old fences and blew past his shoulders
in the relentless wind they created together
that bike and he

as he rode to work he never knew
how far this ride would take him

7. IN GOD WE TRUST

She had nothing more to say to him
that morning All the angry words had
come barreling out of her rabid mouth
the night before
she stood over his chair as all the
grievances tap danced from her lips
to his crimson ears
ears that blushed under a barrage
of venom she had spit in his
terrified face she had hit him
before with a broom handle
broken two teeth gashed his forehead
and he was scared the night passed
in silence she in the bed he on the
davenport the dog at his side
he left early in the morning no bath
no shave yesterday's filthy pants and
shirt he began the walk that would
take him to work afraid to start the old
Ford for fear of waking her
the walk was peaceful miles of trees
with each mile he tossed up a prayer
hoping that one of the oaks was God
in disguise he begged never to hear
her voice again pleaded that she would
leave as she had done before
and when he arrived at work he had no idea
that God had heard his mourning cries and
understood as his body was lifted above the
trees he heard the explosions and knew that
his prayers had been answered

8. AMBULANCE

It made all the noises
he heard as a boy

it whirred screamed clanged
whistled yelled swore
and was everything he loved

no one had ever been in it
no mess no blood no dust
no broken hips no bullets
no ashes

until the day
it was called into service
without warning
or training

for the unexpected
blast

9. STANDING ON THE RAFTERS

Stand under the doorway
they drilled

arches would sustain

thick stilts mired in concrete
would be a fortress to support fear

but there was no wild wind whipping
no rain in torrents to cleanse the terror
no impediment to halt the crash
when the rafters became the floor
and they in that second
became the storm

10. A WAR IN CAMBRIA

He knew that sound
the one he dreamed
the one that made him fold in half
when a car backfired
when thunder filled the sky
and sometimes when babies cried

they said he was shell-shocked
not quite himself since France
fit only for a monastery
or cabin in the woods
he knew that sound

he knew that sound
threw his shaking body
between two huge rocks
each boulder quivered recklessly
in sync to his raucous screams

he was as alive as he would ever be

11. FIRST RESPONDER

He put in his name to work
in the munitions factory
but his Irish mum would
have none of it

“your father and his before him
and me uncles Tim and Liam all
put on the blue and so you must too

“they walked the Dublin beat
with club in hand cleaned up those
drunken streets and so you must too”

as does often happen with sainted
mother’s vows irony danced in
all innocent and sweet set up
housekeeping and stayed forever

mum squeezed her beads bruised
her knees beseeched the Holy Mother
until She gave in if just to cease
the noise of it all

so when blue from top to toe he ran
into the smoke and rubble of the
smoldering munitions plant
his mum pointed to the clouds

his father and his father before him
knew they had to wait for him

he supposed he wasn’t through

12. THE FLIGHT HOME

There was no time for fear
his body was lifted fifty feet
and he was tossed back
into the war in Europe

the sky was a glistening onyx
birds frolicked overhead disappeared

and for just one second
he saw his late mother
kneel on an alabaster cloud
to catch him in her arms

13. FOR HIS SONS

He was getting long in the tooth
wanted a son maybe two
wouldn't settle for a wife
who looked like "who shot john"
his mind was set to take her on

he liked her pretty good
she didn't look too bad
strong back nice teeth
hard worker kept her place clean
and kept her place
better than most

he would a been a good catch
all his hair most all his teeth
steady job at the plant
and if she took sick
he could make a cup of soup

it was all settled

he caressed his mother's gold band
in his hand

imagining life ahead

and his hopes blew up
with the building
where he dreamed of his sons

14. A MOTHERLESS CHILD

He knew with all certainty that
Jesus held his hand when he wielded
the hammer and worked the day away

he knew that God had sent Him
to be his shadow
the pillar on which he rested when
night crept in and hid the sky

pastor had said so for hundreds of
Sundays he heard the word
lived the gospel hummed the spirituals
of ancestors on plantations

it is easy to imagine
that when that first explosion
blew the roof skyward
he knew that it was time

time to go home time to take
his place beside his mother
where she could teach him
how to speak with God

15. ON THIN ICE

He always thought that
like his father
he would die on the toilet
reading local obituaries

he could see himself seated
trousers folded neatly
atop his polished work boots
his belt like a black mamba
slithering around his feet

in death he knew that he would
sit straight up as he did in life
eyes wide-open
smiling noting a job well-done
his father's son to the end

he had no idea he was
really the Iceman's baby
and suddenly fiery heat would melt
his history fifty years too soon

16. CORONERS

They are a strange lot
plugging away in rooms
built to house those gone
those without breath
those lost in tragedy

this time there was no illusion
of souls gone to a heaven
bodies youthful and free
running through elysian fields calling
mama poppa nannie spot

there was no thrill to seek answers
no whys no wherefores
no secrets to unravel
they were trash pickers
no longer the clever detectives
who wrote their own mysteries

pieces of those who once were
tossed carelessly into their pristine room
gave credence to why others
see them as carrion flying from trees
to pilfer the seine
on the stillest of waters

**17. THE UNFAIRNESS
OF HAPPENSTANCE**

He would never grow old
watch a thousand sunsets
wander aimlessly through a decade
gather his future like nickels at a shrine

he will not know the angst of loss
nor the thrill of creating miniatures
with a woman who views the moon as home
and walks with him at the edge of desire

he is barely past being a boy
not yet familiar with the wild highs
the wicked lows of a life that goes on
a life that lives and would live

until
he dies an old man
whose expiration date
had long since passed

18. ANONYMOUS

There had been fifteen of them
bodies adjacent to the blast

shoulders splayed ankles locked
legs and arms melded
useless remains entwined
in an insane dance to paradise
or hell

the grave was huge
the remnants of life stripped to shards
placed in rows

the strongest of bones
those that survived intact
were lined up
stoic archives aching to tell
one story after another

19. THE LOST EDGE OF MEMORY

For decades
he could not recall the day
he heard the explosion
he awoke in his bed as always
and the years had slid away

he never returned to the place
that made his workmates into dust
never spoke of the loss
had no memories of life
before that year

and many decades later when old age
strolled in and took all
his new memories from him
a huge strike of lightning lit
the sky above his room
at the Home

and it all came back
his childhood his youth his work
his mother and grandmother
he was nineteen once again

20. **JUST WILLIAM**

He survived the night “The Rock” blew up
banged and bruised he refused to die
the local paper gave his name
told all where he lived
and one more thing

“William is Colored”

ancestors who loved him
slaves more than thirty years ago
lived and died to be free

to walk on the same sidewalks
sit in the back of the same buses
no longer on foot

they did not name others “White”
it was assumed

he William
was not to be so presumed

21. AFTERMATH

Her life was laid out like a cloth upon a table
the plate piled with all the duties of a wife

at the head of the table was an imposing chair
cradling wash in need of folding an iron sat in wait
stains filled two every-day tea cups

while a broom leaned casually against
the china cabinet hinting that the good
plates would not come out
until the floor was whistle clean

in the kitchen the ice box abutted the stove
where twenty-one meals would be made
week after week the bedroom was primed
only as the playground of the exhausted

she was not yet twenty
but the next five decades loomed...

when the doorbell rang she was too tired to cry

22. INSANITY

He needed to ride

in the tightness of the reins
the horse would turn
garroted by his grip

there in the bed
her silence between them
his quiet spoke betrayal

though he would not speak of evil
he cast thoughts of treachery to the wind
like seed to starving birds

He needed to ride he told her

interior wars raged inside his
casual armor threatening
to explode to kill
both of them

in his mind when the enemies
left their secret places
his body would provide
her escape his war was over

hers
just begun

23. THE THERAPISTS

They were sent to her after the explosion
sometimes in small groups like jittery ants
on a slippery log

but more often alone

the directive was to fix them
make the horror
a ghost in the night
run away and make them whole
again

she tried and tried over and over
offering solace and fresh baked cookies
she hugged them when they cried
but no effort brought them home

Then they were sent to him
just home from the Great War
angry and edgy

he found no empathy for their fears
and stood over them
when they lay sobbing on the davenport

*suddenly he was a lieutenant on the battlefield
screaming into an imaginary megaphone
telling them they would never be
heroes never get a medal
or salute bludgeoning the last hope
into broken glass*

And then he went to her
realizing he was collateral damage
who also needed solace
and a way home

24. ONLY THE BIRDS

She sat a bird on a branch
her scarf silk wings
flapping in an errant breeze

her sun-starved hands resembled
two small hummingbirds
quivering in full flight
their only job to stay aloft

her eyes clutched a white cloud
that formed over and over in the
mercurial sky

she had stared at a thousand clouds
begging to see him watch over her
as once he did

but only the birds could see his eyes

25. HER SISTER'S NAME

Had he been the one...

who blew warm words through her hair
who lifted buildings and moved dirt roads
who hummed love songs between summer
sheets

and shared her dreams in technicolour

had he been the one...

she might have mourned

but he was the one...

who trimmed her hair with lawn shears
who built cages to halt flight
who moaned her sister's name in sleep
who mangled dreams and crushed spirit

She rejoiced

26. FRANTIC

in her pain she clutched old
clothes draping them on her new body
they hung on stooped shoulders
and fallen hopes

weeks dribbled by like pabulum from
her lips days collided with each
other and no memories slid out
one atop another as they once did

her wardrobe was full of clothes
that would never wear out
her flesh disappearing
to accommodate them nicely

27. CELLULOID

Deep in the recess of loneliness she wallowed
swimming in the mire of a youth gone awry
her glory days of laughter of love
playing out on a celluloid of imagination

when he left he was gone but not absent
she could feel him move against her sleeping body
touching nerves and pulling muscles
making promises and delivering wild red roses
and in the light of day he was gone again

in later years, she moved like a pachyderm
side to side lumbering through the decades
searching for a magic elixir
to erase memories and dispel fears of loss

in the dark days of the Depression she found it
in bottle after bottle of his favourite gin

28. PICTURES

The house
built a century past
had long narrow corridors
peeling grey galleries
where she had nailed
picture after picture
of him

pictures of her son
baby pictures
childhood pictures
pictures of the young man
and a single picture of a
grave

she walked this hallway
back and forth
back and forth
until she believed that
he still slept in the room
where the pictures stopped

29. MUSIC OF THE SOUL

While waiting for some man any man
to fill the void she hummed
she polished the kitchen floor
danced to the rhythms of the washing
machine pirouetted to the ice box
and began to sing

it was a melancholy song
filled with visions of butterflies and
lollipops that only a young girl
might remember
a song of love lost and abject
loneliness her voice careened off
the walls and bounced down the stairs
filling the house with longing

30. NINETEEN EIGHTEEN

She was a woman without a man
a horse with no rider
a book with no cover
a boat with no rudder
he was gone

she had no power no control
and needed to go hunting
without a gun

there was Big Fanny's bar
an Italian Club and
St. Anthony's Church

he was the Saint who found
her glasses her book old slippers
she didn't drink and was Irish
so she put on her best dress

and left for ten o'clock mass

31 BIG FANNY'S

They met on the North side
a joint called Big Fanny's
where a woman of enormous girth
poured nickel beers
and called all the men
Joe

light on her huge feet
she sashayed past whiskeys
and bourbons
waltzed by wines
purple and pink

“make mine neat”
he murmured

that was all she needed
to know that he was the one

and

thirty-one years later
alone
she tasted the first of many
“neat” ones to come

32. THE TRUTH OF TIME

Her life went on somehow

days crawled into weeks
and in time the memories
became few

do not be angry that she lived

she learned how to dance again
how to anticipate
to swivel in tune to the 1920s
where the Charleston whipped
the anguish into joy

she began to hum little tunes
that caught and hung on old lamps
and grew into songs that filled
her garden and made the lilacs bloom

33. THE ESSENCE OF BUD

She will hear him clearly in the cacophony
of a dozen careless whisperers
casually tossing platitudes
around their favorite restaurant

she will listen to him in the sharp wind
that snaps past ears, outrunning
that sound January makes
as it curls into her back,
nudging her toward sleep

she will feel him in that warm lake breeze
teasing her mid-August ,
and taste him in every bite she shares
along the shoreline with friends they loved

she will smell him in the collar of an old shirt,
a striped blue grey that clutched
his scent from a Sunday past,
that one matching the tie she loved best.

In between meticulously sewn threads
holding his oldest sweater
together, she will find him
and never launder that garment again.

She will see him in the stained glass
at every Mass as the morning sun spills
across an altar set and waiting...

in the rail he opened and closed
a thousand times and up and down
every aisle he walked, basket in hand

and, she will taste him
in each glass of wine she'll toast
to his having been and always will be

He is around every corner.
he was too much of her to be gone.
she will never be alone.

34. AN UNFINISHED GARDEN

He visited these graves
always alone always lonely
not knowing which one holds a fragment of his father
nor the parts and pieces of other fathers
lost in the blast
unrecognizable undetectable

these bones (because the entire city was watching)
are buried alone unknown

at fifteen anonymous plots

he stopped he knelt he prayed to God
to let him see that man

to make his father whole
when the time came
to plant the all of his own body
to rejoice once again

35. REPETITION

The depressions are vast they stroll
into our lives in casual ways
not unlike a sudden summer storm
that lasts for days flooding dreams
and drowning hope

there is a meanness that undermines
all hard work that erodes emotion and
torments the spirit a rage envelops us
fixations and miscommunications abound
dreams become nightmares imagination
is reality

the darkness lifts as swiftly as it enters
there are no answers and the questions
never make sense we are learning
to accommodate it to welcome it in on
February nights to let it wallow to believe
it must be family

they are unwanted children returning home
to disrupt the peace only taking time to rip up
pieces of ourselves launder
their dirty belongings and hit
the road again

we are relieved when they are gone
we want to lock our doors and put boards
on the windows but they know

how to get in through the floor boards and
we don't want them to rattle
the foundation of the house

so we say good riddance knowing
they will come back over and over again
we hope they grow up someday that they stop
making the same mistakes and that one day
they will find homes of their own
so we can grow old in peace

no matter what they belong to us and
until we confront them
until we really send them away and mean
for them to go

until we no longer need to rely on their return
to know we are alive they will take all
their vacations at our house.

Filled with regret we can embrace them
as our children or we can batten down
our lives and pretend we did not birth them

whatever we do we must learn to do it
together or they will surely
drive us apart

36. AND THEY WAIT

Trace the roots
pull stretch and entwine
nerves and veins
gather bones
stand each on end
stagger them in rows
in architectural profile

an old city
balanced on dirt and stone
ancestors beneath
(once wrapped in gauze)
have waited waited waited

they know those bones
belong
to them

37. PICTURE THIS

Just last week
in a cluttered garage
filled with an old woman's detritus
I saw his portrait
in a gilded frame
trapped between a movie star poster
and a battered wooden cutting board
twelve dollars negotiable

he was handsome in the manner
of a Victorian litigator
or stiff-collared cleric
he sported a tight tweed suit and vest
slightly pompous perhaps
a discerning face interesting
but someone else's great-grandfather

while elegant and whispering to me
I did not need even one more picture frame
so I bought two books a spatula
and a fetching scarf
a dozen more garages nagged before home

there on my stoop lay
the Syracuse Herald newspaper
its front page emblazoned
with that portrait
that twelve dollar picture
signaling the one hundredth anniversary
of his great fire

AUTHOR'S NOTE

KATHLEEN BRYCE NILES



Kathleen Bryce Niles is Editor Emerita of the *Comstock Review*. A teacher and administrator, she retired as principal of an Alternative to Expulsion for Weapons Possession School in Syracuse, New York. She was the CEO of the Bryce Focus Group in Western New York that specialized in non-profit arts organizations. Additionally, she was a therapist in private

practice. Currently, in her 80s, Kath has enjoyed 25 years in retirement. The author of several chapbooks including *Ashes from a Long Dead Fire* (nominated for a Pulitzer Prize), *Catechism of Regret*, *Parochial Habits*, *The MacBeth Papers*, and *A Deed to Precious Property*, she holds a BA and MA from the University of Albany, Ed.M. in Psychology from the University of Buffalo and a CAS in Educational Administration from SUNY Oswego.

She is proud to have judged the national Jessie Bryce Niles Chapbook Competition, and the work done in conjunction with Mr. V. Newton Chance of the Trinidad Poetry Workshop to mentor aspiring and very strong poets in their ancestral homeland.