



Past Perfect

A Novel by
Judith *P.* Stelbourn

PAST PERFECT

Judith P. Stelboum



Alice Street Editions

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This is a work of fiction. No reference to actual persons, places, or incidents is implied or should be inferred.

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*This book is dedicated to my much loved and loving partner
Martha Stephens, MD*

*And in memoriam for my mother
Jessie Lewis Stelboum
(1911-1998)*



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Introduction to Alice Street Editions

To write, for a lesbian, is to learn to take down the patriarchal posters in her room. It means learning to live with bare walls for a while. It means learning how not to be afraid of the ghosts which assume the color of the bare wall.

-Nicole Brossard¹

What are the implications, in the twenty-first century, of a new publishing imprint of fiction and non-fiction devoted solely to lesbian writing? What is the significance of isolating lesbian writing from heterosexual women's writing?

Alice Street Editions acclaims and affirms unique lesbian perspectives, offering in its pages the best cutting-edge fiction of the day. Defining "lesbian" may be ambiguous and sometimes contradictory, but lesbian writing is singular because it relates experiences and visions shared by a group of women who respond to the world in very different ways from women who are not lesbian.

At the start of the third millennium, we can respectably find ourselves in the Library of Congress catalog, and we can learn about ourselves in the newly formed academic field of Lesbian Studies, straddling the areas of Gay Studies and Women's Studies. We are, as Jill Johnston described us, the "lesbian nation," multiple, varied, composed of diverse entities, with particular customs and manners, but with our own distinct culture, history, and literature.

At the same time we are caught by those forces of our national culture that are ranged against us. Those who cannot accept our differences try to transform us into pop icons of lesbian chic, urge our assimilation, or call for our annihilation. We have been sexually neutered by queer theorists, and baby-boomed into a classification

of same-sex “couples” by sociologists. We emulate heterosexual marriages with commitment ceremonies, and we join the patriarchal army. Lesbians are in danger of vanishing by being subsumed into the larger heterosexual culture if we do not consciously create our own worlds.

Lesbian visibility is disproportionate compared with lesbian accomplishments, as we remain an under-represented minority. Consequently, the categorical motivation for Alice Street Editions is an attempt to answer the question posed by one of the most famous political activists, Susan B. Anthony, who asked how we should ever make the world intelligent on our movement. Although Anthony was referring to the Suffragists, we, too, have to learn to brave the dangers of visibility in order to affirm our existence. We must encourage and develop all of the arts, as well as lesbian writing and continue to build strong lesbian identities. Though some of us are still individually invisible, we must never be culturally invisible.

Monique Wittig in *Les Guérillères* urges us to remember our pre-patriarchal past. “Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.”² Inviting lesbians to re-member, or to invent our lives, beliefs, and desires, Alice Street Editions follows in the steps of those lesbian publishers who have courageously marked the path, allowing us the opportunity to hear a lesbian voice, or to be that lesbian voice. The joy and the thrill of recognizing our own desires and ideas in print is life sustaining, acknowledging the reality of who we are, our place in the world, individually and collectively.

To write about shared experiences transforms the love that has no name into the desire that demands to be realized, and articulates the ideas that can shape our lives into an exhilarating reality. Alice Street Editions will provide a voice for lesbian novels, memoirs, essays, and non-fiction writing, and will reflect the diversity of lesbian interests, ethnicities, ages and class. This imprint welcomes the opportunity to present controversial views, explore multicultural ideas, encourage debate, and inspire creativity within the lesbian sensibility. All genres of writing will be considered.

Lesbian fantasy, humor, and erotica will come to life in the pages of Alice Street Editions, in a publishing program that promises to be enlightening and entertaining. As Editor-in-Chief of Alice Street Editions, I'm looking forward to putting more lesbian writing into print and providing wider distribution for writers. The unique perspectives of the Alice Street Edition writers will become part of the articulated literature and lore of our lives at the start of the next one thousand years.

This novel, *Past Perfect*, examines the ways we remember events and people. With the aid of illusion and delusion, the past can seem perfect, especially if we can re-member it. *Past Perfect* begins with an Italian proverb declaring that fear is a bad counselor. The book focuses on the intimate lives of four women, following them through a period of time and locales from the East Coast to the West, while they sort out their feelings and move ahead with their lives. The graphic sex scenes are an integral part of this novel because sexuality is basic to the characters, and sex highlights moments of physical and emotional vulnerability that seem to be very pure. The structure of the novel mirrors the way we come to understand reality, through scenes and vignettes that illuminate individual moments of our lives, whose significance can sometimes be understood only in retrospect. Each scene is titled to reveal the intent of that particular moment to the reader.

Judith P. Stelbourn
Editor-in-Chief
Alice Street Editions

NOTES

1. Nicole Brossard. *The Aerial Letter*, trans. Marlene Wildeman (Toronto: Woman's Press, 1988), p. 135.

2. Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. Peter Owen (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 89.

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PAST PERFECT

La paura e una cattiva consigliere.

Fear is a bad counselor.

–Italian proverb

Prologue

Carol walked slowly into the living room intent on rubbing the paint from her hands with an oil rag. She sighed and sank into a deep club chair in front of the portrait that hung over the fireplace. The painting covered the entire wall, affirming the passion that had been the painter's inspiration. The certitude of the artist astonished her. She studied it carefully, noting the details, the colors, the perspective, and the confident brush strokes. Carol had painted Elizabeth astride her horse in her favorite setting, a rolling meadow. Jewel, Elizabeth's German Shepherd, its mouth open, tongue hanging out, sat next to the horse. Elizabeth was wearing a brown and white herringbone riding jacket; tan jodhpurs that hugged her legs, and polished brown field boots. The braided reins attached to the shiny snaffle bit in the horse's mouth were held gently in her gloved hands, and the English saddle had a burnished gleam. Carol focused on Elizabeth, the sensuality in the thick, wavy brown hair falling to her shoulders, the warm hazel eyes that contradicted Elizabeth's expression of cold formality, bordering on arrogance. Looking straight out at the viewer, but through the viewer, the portrait revealed Elizabeth as enigmatic, contrary, and seductive. Carol turned away from Elizabeth's confronting stare, and walked to the French doors at the far end of the room. She focused on the elaborate perennial gardens they had designed and planted together.

In the beginning it was impossible to separate their love for this house from their love for each other. The house became the tangible evidence of their passion, an expression of mutual feelings of satisfaction, security, and comfort. Carol didn't want to admit that feelings of restlessness had been there almost since the beginning. She had long felt pinned down, tied to one place, one person. Growing dissatisfaction chafed her like physical bondage.

She had lost interest in the extensive gardens. She glanced around at the furnishings, stared down at the Persian rugs they had so carefully chosen, and she knew that they had become caretakers, tending all of the elements that were supposed to keep their private world healthy and alive.

She dropped her head and thought about the day she had shown Elizabeth the painting in progress, *"When I finish this, my darling, if I am able to do what I want, you will be quite naked to everyone who sees this."*

Elizabeth had held her from behind, admiring the painting. She breathed into her neck, "Yes, I will be naked for you, under that jacket, under those pants."

Now Carol knew she could no longer work here and was distraught thinking that she would never again paint anything as exciting as this portrait.

Elizabeth Sanderson

In spite of the warm spring sun flooding through the open French doors, Elizabeth shivered. Carol was gone and had taken everything with her. Sometimes she would find one of Carol's books, or an old shirt and these items became relics of a life she had lost. She was lonely. Every day, despite her depression, she went to her study, wrote, taught her classes at the university and sometimes went out for dinner with friends. She did what she was supposed to do. She wrote her class plans, delivered her lectures, but no matter how she occupied the waking hours of her day, at night in the cold bed and in the colder mornings she was alone.

Always so controlled, sure and confident, she now doubted almost everything she did and said. She considered and reconsidered uttering the blandest statement, afraid it would be misinterpreted. At department meetings and conferences, she spoke about her past projects, but when asked about her future plans, she was hesitant and vague. People thought she was reluctant to talk because of the project itself, but this was not the case. She couldn't understand why Carol had left, and although she didn't know what she had done, the fear of making more mistakes was paralyzing.

Pausing before the painting on her way out to the patio, Elizabeth thought of her horse, Red Cloud. He was buried on the property, and she liked to imagine his spirit still running through the fields and moving noisily through the woods. Sometimes when she walked in the woods abutting her house, she heard a loud rustling sound, and she would turn quickly, expecting to see her dog, Jewel, come running out of the brush. Then the memories of riding Red Cloud with Jewel running along beside them would be almost unbearable. Jewel was gone, too, buried two years ago in the "elephant graveyard," as they had called it, with all the assorted cats, and chickens. It was very quiet here, now. She

looked at the painting she loved, and it tortured her with memories. They had shared a life together for more than twelve years.

She thought it might help if she took the painting down; instead she passively waited for some change. She acknowledged her pain, waiting for it to ebb, as if she were practicing some Zen exercise. But even after two years, it still felt like an exercise. It was not coming easily, not at all.

At first she had avoided her friends. What to say? How to explain? When she did see them again, she assumed a pleasant persona. Someone who was entertaining, could talk about ideas, about books. But her heart wasn't in it. Her heart had been dead for a long time, and maybe should be buried in the "elephant graveyard" with all the creatures she had loved.

Her friends tried to introduce her to new women. She could barely muster the most superficial questions asking what they did, where they lived, but beyond that, no one and nothing held any real interest for her. Some friends had even taken her to a women's bar one night. She had looked at the young women dancing, kissing, filled with the excitement of a life ahead of them, and felt even more alienated.

The final scene kept playing in her head. She was standing in the bedroom. The light wood floor and the beige rugs reflected the late afternoon sun. She smelled the roses through the open French doors and gazed across the lawn down to the river.

She was listening to herself pleading, crying, and screaming. Could she be angry with Carol—that beautiful open face, the fine blonde hair she had clutched in ecstatic moments? She heard her own voice. "How could you do this? Why do you want to do this? When did you decide this?"

"Don't yell at me," Carol shouted back. "I'm sorry. Things happen. People change."

"And me . . . us? We don't change? We can't change?" Elizabeth asked. "What are you talking about, Carol? Tell me what you want." Elizabeth tried to calm herself, but her heart was

pounding, her head was buzzing, and her hands were shaking. She felt nauseated and dizzy, sure she was going to faint.

"I want to tell you, to try to make you understand about us," Carol said.

Carol was trying to speak to her reasonably, but Elizabeth heard each word as an assault. ". . . us . . . never to be again. Talk . . . this will never happen again."

Elizabeth sat down on the bed, and said, "Okay. What is it you want to explain?" She leaned back against the pine headboard for support. Outside the window she could see the strong flow of the river. Swallows were skimming the water, catching insects, and she heard the warblers and in the background distinguished the unique cry of a mockingbird. How beautiful, she thought, how peaceful, the real world. She tried to forget what was going on in her private world.

Carol paced back and forth in front of the bed and spoke with great agitation. The words came spurting out. "I can't explain why. I don't know. I want to leave. I'm not happy . . . I *have* to leave . . . I have to go someplace else . . . I'm dying here. I can't work anymore . . ." She paused. "I could drown in that river out there, just walk into it and drown myself. I will. I swear . . . I will if I stay here."

Elizabeth covered her face with her hands. "No, no." She could not stop shaking. Gasping once or twice, she gained enough control. "I don't understand."

Carol started pacing again. "Of course you don't understand. How could you? You never would. I've got to get out of here. It took me a long time, Elizabeth, to know what it was and it's this world we've created . . . so neat, so explainable, so safe. I don't want that. I want out. I want out of this house, this life, our life. It's killing me. I can't work here. I need chaos, disorder, more wildness. I can't explain it any more than that." She threw up her hands.

Elizabeth was angry. "What do you think I should say? Should I say you don't make sense? But now you don't want anything