

# Written by Himself

**By Gregory Pardlo**

I was born in minutes in a roadside kitchen a skillet  
whispering my name. I was born to rainwater and lye;

I was born across the river where I  
was borrowed with clothespins, a harrow tooth,  
broadsides sewn in my shoes. I returned, though  
it please you, through no fault of my own,  
pockets filled with coffee grounds and eggshells.

I was born still and superstitious; I bore an unexpected burden.

I gave birth, I gave blessing, I gave rise to suspicion.

I was born abandoned outdoors in the heat-shaped air,  
air drifting like spirits and old windows.

I was born a fraction and a cipher and a ledger entry;

I was an index of first lines when I was born.

I was born waist-deep stubborn in the water crying

ain't I a woman and a brother I was born

to this hall of mirrors, this horror story I was

born with a prologue of references, pursued

by mosquitoes and thieves, I was born passing

off the problem of the twentieth century: I was born.

I read minds before I could read fishes and loaves;

I walked a piece of the way alone before I was born.

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Gregory Pardlo was born in Philadelphia and grew up in Willingboro, New Jersey. He is the author of *Digest* (2014), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. The Pulitzer judges cited Pardlo's "clear-voiced poems that bring readers the news from 21st Century America, rich with thought, ideas and histories public and private." Pardlo's poems, reviews, and translations have been widely published and are noted for "language simultaneously urban and highbrow ... snapshots of a life that is so specific it becomes universal." He is an associate editor for the literary journal *Callaloo* and teaches creative writing at Columbia University. He lives in Brooklyn.

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