

# Poetry

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# POETRY NORTHWEST

VOLUME TWENTY-ONE

NUMBER TWO

SUMMER 1980

STEPHEN DUNN	
Three Poems . . . . .	3
THERESE A. CLEAR	
Three Poems . . . . .	6
MARY ANN WATERS	
Two Poems . . . . .	9
ALBERT GOLDBARTH	
The Story . . . . .	12
WILLIAM PITT ROOT	
Wrapping Up After a Writers Conference . . . . .	13
JOYCE QUICK	
Acceptance Address; a Dream . . . . .	15
ANTHONY SOBIN	
Driving Home To See the Folks . . . . .	16
SANDRA MANESS	
The Subjunctive Mood . . . . .	18
JOSEPH DUEMER	
Two Poems . . . . .	19
ANGELA HOLLIS	
Fishing at Port Townsend . . . . .	20
WILLIAM MEISSNER	
Climbing into My Father's Skin . . . . .	21
JACK DRISCOLL	
The Snare . . . . .	22
RICHARD BLESSING	
Two Poems . . . . .	24
CHARLES WRIGHT	
Gate City Breakdown . . . . .	26
MAREA GORDETT	
Seasickness Is My Name . . . . .	26
MARY OLIVER	
Fall Song . . . . .	27
ANE EDELMAN	
The Trees, Deciduous . . . . .	28

STAN SANVEL RUBIN	
Lullaby . . . . .	30
RON ELLIS	
Dead Air . . . . .	31
SANDRA STONE	
Game . . . . .	31
GARY MIRANDA	
The Gambler . . . . .	32
SHARON OLDS	
Bestiary . . . . .	33
JOHN UNTERECKER	
Not Swimming Below the Cliffs: Oahu . . . . .	34
URSULA HEGI	
She Tends the Fire . . . . .	35
RONALD WALLACE	
Two Poems . . . . .	36
MARCIA ALDRICH	
Two Poems . . . . .	37
MARLENE LEAMON	
Break a Leg . . . . .	40
MILDRED JESSE	
Tipping the Scale . . . . .	41
MALCOLM GLASS	
Clean and Press . . . . .	41
JEREDITH MERRIN	
Two Poems . . . . .	42
KATE McCUNE	
"Because we must finally love our parents we come to love our hometowns too." . . . . .	44
ROBIN SEYFRIED	
Two Poems . . . . .	45
JOHN TAYLOR	
Trying To Make a Joyful Noise . . . . .	47

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# POETRY NORTHWEST

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SUMMER 1980

*Stephen Dunn*

Three Poems

## THE BAD ANGELS

They are writing our names in the sky,  
the bad angels with their calamitous wings.  
They are spelling them wrong, exaggerating  
the loops so that we'll see each other  
askew, imperfect, like clouds broken off  
from other clouds, separated by blue.

Worst part of me, old underminer  
whom I've exiled unsuccessfully  
into the far away charged air,  
I know it's your black-winged gang.  
I wish I had some invisible means  
of support, some magic against you.  
I wish I could marshal all  
that's ever gotten away from me:  
Love and loss, what plutonium!  
What oblivion I could send you to.

They are changing our names in the sky,  
making their own insidious designs.  
I am one man with just the normal equipment,  
saying No, offering little essays to the wind.  
They are removing the vowels now.  
They are erasing the beginning and the end.

## AS IT MOVES

Last week I saw a child  
riding an escalator, terrified  
when the steps disappeared  
and I thought once again  
about primitives and the next moment,

the chasm that exists at the tip  
of our knowledge. I wanted  
to tell the child a story  
about the steps, how they  
sometimes crawl on their bellies

in order to survive,  
how at some safe perfect moment  
they rise and become what they are.  
But I moved on of course,  
went home thinking, oddly,

about a different kind of innocence;  
the friend I'd lost to a yoga ashram,  
my cousins at the brick plant  
and their wives with rosaries.  
It was Saturday,

I piled the garbage in the car  
and took off  
for the dump where seagulls perch  
amid orange rinds and broken chairs.  
The dump people were out

sifting among the shards.  
I can't quite explain it, but  
I felt tainted in some proper way  
with the world. The seagulls rose.  
I wished I could tell my friend,

Look, nothing's simple.  
It was almost dusk. I was thinking

the seagull is a comic, filthy bird  
magnificent as it moves  
upward in imperfect air.

## A LITTLE SQUALOR, PLEASE

The Cascades to the northeast, Rainier  
on a clear day  
as haunting as a dare—

I hate how after a while I learn  
to live with such things, beauty  
the stunning girl next door

with the dull inner life, her boyfriends  
with all those muscles  
in their legs.

Time to move on,  
or to look down the street  
at the street, candy wrappers

and stray pennies, a torn note perhaps,  
a piece of somebody's  
less than perfect life.

Where I come from all that's interesting  
has to be imagined, a mountain  
with a fire escape,

women coming out of trees.  
If Stevens is right, the imagination  
is just a lamp, changes nothing.

Still, I would change nothing  
if I could do it brilliantly,  
if the mountains here

were not so fixed in their grandeur.  
In Atlantic City where the dismal

avenues invite the reds and yellows,  
the splashes of my best self,  
I've found myself smiling, capable  
of some great transformational love  
as I've walked past the slums  
and slick hotels. I've forced myself  
to see a nude descending  
a staircase in the heart of the city,  
the passersby startled, coming together  
to form an audience  
that moments before  
were men and women with tired eyes  
looking for bargains.

*Therese A. Clear*

Three Poems

#### BEYOND THE YEARLINGS

"At last there came a time when there was  
no longer a point in being a horse."

*Theodore Roethke*

And it was always the colts who broke snorting  
from the edge of the field. You ran back  
of the fence and shivered a safe time. The road  
was always at your back—a controlled access, the straight path  
home. And you knew: tomorrow the same dash  
through the woods to these horses.

What was it you loved most? Their necks, the pure  
arcs gleaming in afternoon, or the charge  
of every forefoot pounding out dirt, a hardpack  
to the fence where you waited  
in the very breath of expectation?  
Days you insisted on their sorrel sleekness, the ears  
that flickered forward to your palm



of roadside grass. And the lips pulled back,  
the teeth lifting-in your gift. You believed  
your tongue to turn green.

Was there a name to the weed, to the fire  
of the wind as you broke like one more colt, hoof-free  
past the ring of friends gathered to pull  
the awful halter taut? The rope ended there  
at that jerk in the road. You coiled the last remnant,  
the fraying bit of cord that once unwound  
yards and yards of pasture. It was mean.  
Your hands wanted to pull out, to let the colts strike  
hoof and shoe across the wide distance  
once more. But no good. You knew  
the end of the field where the grass gave up  
its dogged seeds, where everything turned yellow.

In fright, you found the road  
itching at your back. Flies gathered on your neck  
in meticulous quiet. You found the world gone tame.

#### HIGH KITING AT ROAD'S END, OREGON

*for Patty Clear*

I let fly the roaring face, the dragon, the kite  
you check with string and reel, with constant  
arm and eye, your every sight.  
It pulls above, a strip of sheer color  
in the sun. It leaps  
and falls, settles for a glaring second  
then dives up and past the row of beach houses  
until nothing frames the curling  
and whipping blue but blue.

You live here, just a yard and picket fence  
from the beach. This bluff end of the road  
where headlands take over—where houses back up  
into the hill, their rear windows opening to vine  
and sticker and slipping rock. Storms crowd in  
sudden as a slap. Hail, like fists beating

on the roof, like someone forcing entry  
on all sides: weather comes in great leaps.  
Here the wind flares. You could fly,  
tie rag tails and go stringless  
over the cliffs, your face a wide-open gulf  
of stream and backwash, current, longshore.

A salty gust takes the beach in one sweep of air.  
And this dragon goes! Shoots headlong into the blue,  
wags with windy energy, climbs  
as the string unrolls to the last  
lock of spool and we hold, hold a taut grip and everything  
blows skyward: our hair, our hands, our flapping jackets—  
one kite away and two sisters beach-locked  
with the spool, the anchor, the touching  
point of earth.

#### THUNDER IN THE HOMESTRETCH

It halts you,  
a tree blown across the road.  
You've careened around corners  
like some lunatic  
believing at every crink  
someone like Mom or Cousin Joe  
waving a plate of cookies  
saying, "gosh, but have some milk."

And upfaced you stand,  
the blood quick-blown from your cheeks.  
It's shaky as hell on the driving cliffs  
and you're battered to the pulver.  
Institutions of old friends line up  
and number themselves down the path,  
are guttered away like sales slips,  
untotaled, never even torn clear.

You are abrupt—slap—shot in the road  
and at this moment it rings true,  
and truer. This is it baby,

no one is taking your hand.

There is the tree toppled  
by the wind and there you clamber  
and there whistens everything  
you ever dreamed. And there  
you see it, up and branching  
and you push past the halting,  
the jagged monoliths—

Now fire—bolts of surprise  
to those slow-lipped, the unconscious,  
all the inked-out souls  
forever raising one hand  
in a meek, undecided farewell.

*Mary Ann Waters*

Two Poems

## THE SHAPING

### I. *Loss*

Father, when I visited the cemetery the trees  
had grown so I couldn't find you.  
I thought dying in that small town ceased  
with your burial, the torn  
carpet of lawn, the precise machinery  
of the graveside, all of us gathering together.

Now the horizontal homes of the dead  
with each conservative address confuse  
me, and oh, the careful steady green saying grief  
is reasonable, grief is a system  
of lefts and rights, like diagrams, like towns,  
a map of stones with the years cut in.

And when I find you at last, no longer  
at the edge, the road paved now and named  
Blackthorn, just as relief consumes me

(you are after all still at home)  
the huge pulsating sprinklers click on  
and by some remote design lash me  
across the back and legs till I am wet  
and each way I turn wet again  
and where are you? You with your hands  
folded carefully beneath all that necessary green?

## II. *Woman*

First, the skeleton. A rude twist of wire, looped  
and dipped and dipped again  
and dipped so many times I lose count.  
It is 1945. You are making me  
a liquid rubber woman and I am watching  
your patient hands with their broad nails,  
the careful way you hold her form.  
I can't wait, but I do.

She will bend, will stand, wave, beckon.  
She can do splits. In her tiny chair  
she looks almost comfortable.  
No one has a woman like this.  
I might call her Mother, or give her a name  
like Alice, or Kathryn.  
Her breasts and hips are full.  
My thumbs press her flesh  
and it gives.  
The straight nose, the hints of eye sockets  
coax an expectant look  
from her flawless face.

## III. *Mirror*

I sat opposite you, the doctors would later explain,  
and imitated the movement of your hands  
so that my letters crossed the page  
from right to left and inside out.  
Mirror writing, a visual joke that disturbed  
everyone but me.

Again I'm moving back



to tell you my son and daughter,  
children at your funeral, are grown.  
The daughter is a woman now, filled  
with curiosity, and the son I could never be  
for you resembles you,  
a tall, blond, blue-eyed Dane again.

Father, show him the way you made the woman bend,  
the ease and strength of feminine.  
Father, show her the way to tie the leader to the line  
for that careful cast between the last rings  
of fish kissing the dark pool.

## LOVE SCENE

I first imagined each moment separate,  
inspired, consecutive. I could have cast  
the film—myself the female lead, you  
the star. I wore color—magenta, lavender,  
lime. You were in white, something textured  
that moved with your body. The music  
was sensuous, full orchestra scored for harp,  
piccolo, twelve double basses, a chime.  
The premiere, well-attended, prices high.  
Those who didn't like it find little  
to like in this world. The critics,  
through careful eyes, decided  
our performance was fresh, the location  
on the cliff above the ocean a splendid choice  
on someone's part, the humor warm.

But time extracts. After the blast, the slow  
boil, the few grains cupped in the palm.  
The orchestra was really scored for wind  
and pelican, the dry flick of lizard.  
The lily, with petals like white tongues,  
appeared from nowhere, and the gull remained  
stone-still, as gulls do not do.  
The costumes were too simple: sun and salt

on skin, and the actors kept changing roles,  
crawling into one another's lines, saying  
the wrong words when they spoke at all,  
finding it hard to think in vertigo,  
their love clouded with a retinue of men  
and women, former actors who wanted the parts.  
The critics made no sense of the film,  
double-exposed, sprocket holes on either side  
and a garbled sound track that wove 'always'  
and 'never' into one word. The beginning  
appeared in the last scene, and the climax  
was a whorl of color, like looking too long  
at the sun through closed eyelids.  
One thing someone found to praise:  
a clear shot of a shining feather  
lying on a stone in the path.

### *Albert Goldbarth*

#### THE STORY

And each of the train's hundred windows  
had a face. Passing quickly, it  
became a strip of film

so worked as film does: one  
continuous story formed, The Man  
of A Hundred Faces. I ran

alongside, so slow (that trick of perception)  
I ran backwards. Finally,  
I was a child. I looked up in the movie

theater I went to each Saturday afternoon,  
the screen like a window, and waved  
to the figure there, an old man

at the station just as we pulled away.

*William Pitt Root*

WRAPPING UP AFTER A WRITERS CONFERENCE

After the last reading  
I come back to my room whose window  
opens to the crescent moon  
and think

of your pumpkin cat,  
*how her eyes vivid as moons  
shine while she watches  
from her perch on your window*

*the puppetlike swallows  
swung as if on strings  
back and forth between  
their nest in your eaves and the world,*

*bearing the grubs and worms  
their brightbeaked young  
bury their heads in those mouths to devour,  
their bald heads like tiny buds*

*bulging over the thatched edge  
they'll probably fall into flight from  
before the next rent is due.  
With luck*

*and the right timing  
they'll make it and your Phoebe,  
grown wiser but no fatter,  
will crouch on the sill—trembling*

*tailtip twitching out of control,  
her birdcalling song blooming  
like a dry stalk from her throat  
as she strangles on her desire,*

*her choked voice transformed*

*by sheerest concentration into such  
a likeness of the swallow's chirp  
that I (though I know better)*

*stare in awe at her, half convinced  
that she has in her mouth, carefully cradled,  
one of their fallen bodies,  
that out of her jaws are peering*

*small eyes bright as driven nails  
and that any instant now  
one of those perfect chirps  
will pull out behind it*

*a halfgrown swallow suddenly graceful  
enough to fly free  
of that unlikely carnivorous nest  
which is Phoebe's mouth.*

*But no bird sings  
there in that dark.  
It is only hunger raised to such a pitch  
Phoebe's eyes shine*

*like false landing lights  
as her jaws drip and delicately foam.  
It is raw desire bright as a mirror  
in her heart*

*which has conferred upon her  
the power almost perfectly to mock  
the swallow's song,  
though any swallow knows*

*swallows only sing that song in flight.  
Across the empty fields  
lights in the students' rooms burn  
late into the night*

*where the poets, young and hungry  
for worlds of their own invention,*



devise their power songs  
and perch prepared to soar

over the nests of jaws  
waiting for them at home  
singing the songs of habit  
which may lure the weakest down

but will fail to tempt  
the ones who know  
only the song sung on the wing  
is the voice of an honest god.

### *Joyce Quick*

#### ACCEPTANCE ADDRESS; A DREAM

*Writing poetry is not like weightlifting.*

—Richard Blessing

Everyone here is a misunderstood poet, a heavy drinker  
of ancient music, a belcher of momentary song. Everyone here  
has a teacher. Mine gives me twenty-four bardic exercises.  
He says twenty-four was a mystic number to the Welsh and I believe  
him,

which is warming up. After all the intervening rhythms he remembers  
how the bear danced, hums the melody, demonstrates the steps:  
Record the code in code; falsify the records to create the truth;  
admit the lie beforehand; tune the inner ear; learn how to listen.

If we gain entrance by wit or well-timed blundering,  
we are shown a dream wherein every writer's life is beautiful,  
wherein what we leave out is most desirable—the strength we fight  
and conquer, the weakness met in wholehearted surrender, the times  
we realized we had nothing to say and said it anyway, with eloquence  
and great leaps of craft. We pass the time arranging more intricate  
transparencies, composing the guest list, believing that word  
will get around, saying it twenty-four times before sleep.

I lift the abstractions day by day, weighing them

against the afternoon I stop in stiffened thought, the throat  
closing, the mind closing, forgetting what comes after any given  
number  
and what gold I had seen just a moment ago in the past.  
Even hot whiskey and the sweetest of tongues will not be specific  
enough. The idea of finishing, the coming culmination of some work  
too long in progress are the last white things I remember,  
an empty room, the lack of audience, a linen table napkin  
folded like a bird, the giving up of gravity.

*Anthony Sobin*

DRIVING HOME TO SEE THE FOLKS

Asleep at the wheel nearly  
dead I think  
and feeling nothing on my skin  
but the dark eyes of the antelopes  
all around me in the Wyoming night  
watching me pass—a small animal  
growling down the highway  
with both eyes aglow.

To keep awake  
I force my head out the window  
as into a guillotine  
the black sleet-filled air  
slipping under each eyelid  
like a child's thin silver spoon.

Looking back into the car  
through the ice and tears  
I do not recognize that body sleeping there.  
I no longer know that leg pressed hard  
to the gas, the blue coat or scarf or  
the hand reaching out to the wheel.

Folks, you know I am doing my best—

pushing hard toward you  
through this winter sky  
but reduced to this—

just this head out a window  
streaming through space like a bearded rock,  
a hunk of pocked iron with melting eyes.

A trail of fiery mist  
is growing out of the back of my head  
and stretches now for miles across the night.

The odds, I know, are a thousand to one  
I'll burn up before touching earth

but if somehow I do make it home  
smashing across the farmyard  
and lighting up the sky

I will throw a red glow across the barn's silver roof  
and crash into the rough wood of your back door  
smaller than a grain of sand  
making its one childlike knock.

The porch light will hesitate  
then snap on, as it always does  
when a car comes up the lane  
late at night.

The two sleepy old faces  
will come to the door  
in their long soft robes—  
will stand there bewildered  
rubbing their eyes  
looking around and wondering  
who it was at their door

no sooner come than gone

a cinder in the eye.

THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD

For God's sake, whatever you do, don't  
hide in the closet—  
that's the first place he'll look!  
But then again . . .  
he knows I know  
exactly how his mind works.  
Were he to suspect, for one minute,  
that we might shy away from the closet,  
he'd never look there.  
So, go ahead. Hide in the closet.  
Unless you think  
he might think I think he thinks I know  
what he must be thinking.  
Be that the case—  
there's nothing to do  
but keep out of the closet.  
What we've got to remember is  
he's devious.  
The closet just might be  
the last place he'd ever look.  
But you know what really worries me  
is that once he gets started looking,  
he'll just keep looking  
till he finds us.  
We all know this.

I think.  
You think.  
He thinks.

---

Therefore we are

scared stiff.  
It all adds up:  
There's no hiding:  
We're good as done for.



RULES OF ORDER

for Don Devereux, 1957-1979

*Only consider one motion at a time.*

There is always tomorrow.

Even motions indefinitely postponed may be revived  
for further consideration.

*Privileged motions.*

Some motions, by their nature, are privileged.

The motion of a friend rising from a chair,  
the motion of a strong, young swimmer.

*Renewal of motions.*

Some motions may be renewed:

men in bright aluminum boats  
dragging the lake with hooked poles.

*A body is not considered present  
until called to order.*

All afternoon the body was not present.  
They called and called. Found, finally,  
it entered the minutes.

*Minutes.*

There are always minutes.

Minutes must be kept. This, however,  
is an amendment to the minutes.

*Decorum.*

The members of the body must at least  
appear to work together.

Personality has no place in discussion.

*Undebatable questions.*

Some things cannot be said.

Sometimes it is better to be quiet  
than to be inconsolable. (See *Decorum*;  
see *Privileged Motions*.)

## CURE FOR INSOMNIA

The cure for insomnia is imagination.  
Go to sleep like the man across town  
and wake in the morning like him . . .  
Touch the breasts of his sleeping  
wife to wake her. She will never suspect  
you are a new man and she will kiss you  
good-bye in the same old way as you leave  
for work dreaming for the first time in years  
of wild success on the job. That night  
old recipes produce new dishes  
and only the best shows are on television.  
All evening you hold hands like two kids  
and as you walk toward the bedroom  
she never suspects that someone is missing.  
But long after midnight you both hear  
scratching at the window. It's only a branch,  
you say, but it is a stranger you  
almost recognize, a man badly in need  
of sleep. The cure for insomnia is  
give and take.

*Angela Hollis*

## FISHING AT PORT TOWNSEND

I watch a man fish from the dock with his sons  
just as I fished with my father. How I loved  
to watch his arms cast out the line, the lure arc  
to the sleeping water, the trout tethered  
to a sapling like leaves, their deaths silent  
as their lives. He stood across the river,  
the sun reflecting pink as the bellies  
of the gutted fish. Shadows gliding dark,  
the cold at the river bottom seemed more real  
than the sun's warmth on my back.  
When the next rock turned, I slipped easily

into the coldness. My father called *go back*,  
but I kept walking toward him. Fishing pole dropped  
to the ground, he entered the river, his arms  
encircling me, sure as bark around a tree.

I still would slip from this dock like a seal,  
slide into the cold Sound where gulls ride the waves  
easy as foam and a small boat passes the buoy.  
A scoter dives toward the water with movements  
precise as the edge of white on its black wings.  
It is not the precision of its flight that surprises,  
but the scarlet legs trailing. How we do not die  
is startling. Even the seabird must turn to land,  
bear its weight on those blunt, scarlet legs.

*William Meissner*

#### CLIMBING INTO MY FATHER'S SKIN

It's like crawling into a cave  
I always knew was there  
but never explored.  
I remember putting my head  
into his salesman's briefcase  
when I was young.  
This time the bright eye  
I entered pulls  
away, a helium balloon.

The musty air wheezes, sighs  
trapped for years in old motel rooms.  
Further down the sound  
turns to grey drippings  
that fall on my cheeks.

Some boy has been here before.  
Burned matches in a corner,  
a tennis shoe, unreadable scratchings

on the walls. This is far

enough. Turning to find my way  
out, I tiptoe along a narrow black stream  
where white hands are rising,  
sinking.

I find myself stepping  
into the water: like slipping  
my small feet into large dark shoes, it is  
deeper than I expected. Up  
to my knees, my waist,  
I see the opening again—  
a circle of sky cut with a dull car key,  
a blue mouth singing a melody  
I know by heart  
but have never heard before.

As I go  
under, my arms,  
thick as my father's,  
reach above the surface  
then return  
to embrace me.

### *Jack Driscoll*

#### THE SNARE

I  
Tonight my father steps drunk into the snare,  
is lifted in his fur coat  
like a small bear  
                                who upside down  
feels only the weight of its tongue.

Alone in moonlight  
he circles for hours on the palms of his hands, finds  
by touch, the green bottle of wine upright

in snow. Already his eyes  
are small pockets of ice a paw has pushed through.  
And these are the tracks he follows  
into the first few moments of sleep,  
into a life now hanging by one heel  
among the birches. This is the world  
gone white at the edges of maps  
where even wolves disappear in silence,  
where my father's bewildered ear twists  
to its own deaf center, calling *home*.

## II

By morning  
he is still alive, this noose  
a last foothold turning his body  
slowly in a light snow. He wakes  
like a man whose skin has swallowed the cold, thin air  
wintering in the heart of a stone.

Here,

he dreams of dragging a sled of pelts across a field.  
But always his one caught leg  
keeps falling behind like an exhausted animal  
too heavy to move on the crust. There is sweat  
and a stiff wind carving a trail in his back, snow falling  
harder in every direction but time.

## III

At last he thinks of a woman  
undressing below him in the snow. Her skin  
is blue, her legs are crossed and long.  
When he reaches down  
darkness falls all the way from his chest.  
Inside one finger  
he has written his name in blood.

Now he must bed down for good  
in the thought of this one woman  
cold and naked  
who begins to stir openly in her perfect camouflage  
like absence  
entering the eye of this storm.



COUNTING BACKWARD

Each night my father counts backward from 100 like a shepherd  
climbing down meadow by meadow the Alps.

Since his stroke  
he does this, he says, so his mind holds still, so it freezes,  
a suspect, hands on the wallpaper. That way it is there  
with his cane the next morning.

When your mind runs away,  
well, it stashes parts of your real life forever, the names  
of lakes, the pretty faces of girls.

When that happens,  
you count on nothing, a patch of sun on a green carpet,  
new snow on a roof framed by curtains. You call the woman  
"Nurse" and wonder why she cries.

It is still a life,  
that chair between the cashews and windows.

Then one day  
Bang! Doesn't your mind come waltzing home, made up  
clown-style, sloshing memories like confetti in a pail?  
And don't you take your life in your hands, counting  
out good times, counting out bad, marking time  
backward so it's understood?

Whatever you're missing,  
he says, it's what you don't miss.

Listen, he says,  
that sound in the old high ceilings of the house,  
not ice in the eaves, no man's voice, no echo either . . .

Only the wind, counting toward zero.

## AFTER THE LAST POEM

They will not miss you, but for a while some men  
will notice silence.

Crossing a bridge in winter  
they will watch the black trees filling with snow  
and will wonder what it is they are hearing.

They may mistake your absence for the cries  
of mute, ghostly birds or for the sound of water  
going nowhere in ice.

For your part, you have reached  
nothing, a music lost and useless as the song  
the great whales sang in their distant season.

Whatever truth you told, it was a lie the day  
the last book closed.

Do not think they think of you,  
although between one weather and another, in common,  
daily speech, someone enters now and again a phrase  
like a familiar house in a foreign village.

What there was between them and death is still.

There was always one after the last poem,  
setting out time after time, tracking silence  
with a thin line.

Now there is no one.

Traveler, there should be a warrior's ceremony,  
drums, pillars of light, a great white stone  
with words, your words, if they could remember,  
a little.

They remember nothing. You are  
the shadow of yourself. Here is your last word:  
*Farewell.*

*Charles Wright*

GATE CITY BREAKDOWN

Like a vein of hard coal, it was the strike  
We fantasized, the pocket of sure reward we sidestepped the road-  
blocks for

In Southwest Virginia, seamed in its hillside  
Above the north fork of the Holston River.

One afternoon before Christmas  
In 1953, we crossed the bridge from Tennessee on a whiskey run,  
Churchill and Bevo Hammond and Philbeck and I,  
All home for the holidays.  
On the back road where they chased us, we left the Sheriff's Patrol in  
their own dust,  
And washed ours down with Schlitz on the way home.

Jesus, it's so ridiculous, and full of self-love,  
The way we remember ourselves,  
and the dust we leave . . .  
Remember me as you will, but remember me once  
Slide-wheeling around the curves,  
letting it out on the other side of the line.

*Marea Gordett*

SEASICKNESS IS MY NAME

And I am walking the smaller girl  
up to my bedroom, we must touch  
each arm of the bannister as we go.

Should we forget, someone dies  
in the family.  
It's happened before, it's not a game.

Then there's the room,

already ablaze  
with the afternoon's fever,

two stories down,  
armies of children play hide-and-seek  
in the golden furze.

Then all across the parquet floor  
we're running and pirouetting,  
the door is locked, two undershirts hang on the knob.

This is the time  
we cross our legs, arms extended,  
pushing into the wild

white spin,  
the room is gone,  
a shudder goes through me,

I can't stop to hear them  
downstairs, calling my name,  
three syllables circling,

Why can't they leave me alone?  
Why did they give me this name  
meaning waves of the ocean?

A dizziness  
obedient only to itself,  
the heart in the mouth, ready to jump.

*Mary Oliver*

#### FALL SONG

Another year gone, leaving everywhere  
its rich spiced residues: vines, leaves,

the uneaten fruits crumbling damply  
in the shadows, unmattering back

from the particular island  
of this summer, this *Now*, that now is nowhere

except underfoot, moldering  
in that black subterranean castle

of unobservable mysteries—roots and sealed seeds  
and the wanderings of water. This

I try to remember when time's measure  
painfully chafes, for instance when autumn

flares out at the last, boisterous and like us longing  
to stay—how everything lives, shifting

from one bright vision to another, forever  
in these momentary pastures.

*Ane Edelman*

THE TREES, DECIDUOUS  
*To my brother*

Peter, it's true.  
The trees are bleak  
and still as if  
paralysis set in  
instead of winter.  
Their shade is the sad  
absence of themselves.  
It's clear they lost  
all they held.  
Peter, the rings  
around your eyes  
don't teach you



anything, except  
a lack of sleep,  
of dreams. The trees,  
too, grow rings.  
It tells them  
to expect another  
spring. There  
are others; spruce,  
pine. I saw them.  
I thought all trees  
died with the oak  
felled last winter,  
the oak I planted.  
Trees are so simply  
cut down, but  
behind them, more trees.  
The blue spruce  
is as old as our parents'  
marriage. Think of it  
now, just discovering  
itself more silver  
than blue. Chance  
is in weather. Trees  
depend on rain  
and when rain doesn't come  
they depend on themselves  
to draw water up  
from the earth, out of ice.  
They survive, sometimes  
they die. Peter,  
the cones and pods  
wait under snow.  
Trees wait in seeds.  
In the future, we'll  
see trees grow.  
Now, we can remember  
how perfect they were,  
before winter;  
blue spruce,  
aspen and oak.  
We can remember

how, then,  
the leaves were like hands  
which, having just  
touched something  
beautiful, turned  
over and over  
in astonishment.

*Stan Sanvel Rubin*

LULLABY

All day, I go around  
twisted in lies  
The telephone lies  
with its buzz of attention  
The television lies  
with old dreams of friendship  
The clock lies  
in its own soft way

Why do I listen?  
I am sheathed in lies  
from morning to evening  
when the last lie,  
the sun, goes borrowing  
coins of darkness  
When the great lie, the moon,  
rises from nothing

When the lies we whisper  
in the ears of lovers  
come curdling sleep  
while the fat moon prances  
like a fox that has eaten  
little black stones  
and is dragging us quickly  
across half the sky

*Ron Ellis*

DEAD AIR

The assured voice on the state FM network  
pegs the good-natured simplicity  
of the Reverend Harvey who startles out of his  
reverie, hearing his request  
through the tatters of the best possible sermon.  
Our hosts winks. The technician smiles.  
"Well. Of course I'm happy to oblige.  
Going to force me out of the closet, eh?  
So here it is, sixty seconds of what *I* consider  
the most *beautiful* music in *all* the world."  
Harvey's eyebrows go up.  
Around the state we listen harder:  
appliances whirl and click, sinks drip,  
beer cans pop, ping-pong, silverware,  
a scraping chair, rhythms of carpets and walls.  
We can hear, with the classical buff in the body shop,  
the sudden, slanting, chanting of his file.  
The gift spills into yards, sprays  
out of cars, spreads into fields  
speckled with wild asters  
that we can hear, for just a few more seconds,  
rub against the drying grass.

*Sandra Stone*

GAME

It is a night like February, withholding light,  
brittle with silences and snow, wind breaking  
against the baffles.  
Your head, my move.  
Our hands splay at Ouija over empty answers.  
Apple wine that checks our veins is dust  
in company of apples. Is this

harmless knowledge? Should I lie  
for less? Benignly we touch, raise dust  
of apples.  
My hand, your thrust.  
We pulsate backwards from Z through July, erasing  
lies and summer, equidistant from tonight,  
the sorceries of sun and simple sex. *The Man  
with the Flower in His Mouth* is smiling 'cheese,'  
is dancing on the lake, is shaking hands  
with daisies, is falling off the platforms  
of the waves, the tiny docks. We waft.  
Our fingers do. Wine flows like apples.  
Yellow grass dissolves in yellow sun  
beyond the bounty of February rifts. Now,  
bound for A, we rattle dust, swerve  
alphabets. Unintentionally  
we are kind. The snow starts  
to lengthen. A tacit agreement  
to begin bleak March is meanwhile  
being formed.  
Your word. My stand.

*Gary Miranda*

#### THE GAMBLER

*For Stephen Dunn*

Say there's a Muse of money.  
Or that plastic chips beat paper  
bills hands down as collateral  
for actual grace. There's a back  
room in the brain where lamp-  
shades dangle and the odds  
get better, the more you lose,  
that you'll leave a winner.  
Meanwhile, in the corner, a teletype  
keeps pumping news that somebody  
up there likes you.

You believe it.

In some cases, that place invades  
the body: going up for a jump-  
shot; the long moment before you  
come. Casinos are only metaphors  
for anatomy. However often  
you lose there's always an exit  
sign that reads: "Next day: to be  
continued." Money comes from  
somewhere, like the sun. Inside  
you're still your mother's son,  
a favorite.

You like long shots.

Not that any amount of luck  
will slake your thirst. Toward  
evening there's that restless hour  
you're sure the world is out there,  
winning without you. If you  
marry, women multiply—a parley  
you know you should have played.  
Everyone's laying odds you'll never  
have your cake and eat it. What  
do they mean, "have"? You see their  
bet, you raise the cake.

You eat it.

### *Sharon Olds*

#### BESTIARY

Nostrils flared, ears pricked,  
Gabriel asks me if people can mate with  
animals. I say it hardly  
ever happens. He frowns, fur and  
skin and hooves and slits and pricks and  
teeth and tails whirling in his brain.  
You *could* do it, he says, not wanting a  
single orifice of the universe to be



closed to him. We talk about elephants  
and parakeets, until we are rolling on the  
floor, laughing like hyenas. Too late,  
I remember love—I backtrack  
and try to slip it in, but that is  
not what he means. Seven years old,  
he is into hydraulics, pulleys, doors which  
fly open in the side of the body,  
entrances, exits. Flushed, panting,  
hot for physics, he thinks about lynxes,  
eagles, pythons, mosquitoes, girls,  
casting a glittering eye of use  
over creation, wanting to know  
exactly how the world was made to receive him.

*John Unterecker*

NOT SWIMMING BELOW THE CLIFFS: OAHU

1

The curl of brown river thins into blue.      Then sandbar.  
This is my second try.      I could wade the trickle of brown,  
walk out on the sandbar.      But I hover at medium-blue,  
wind pushing toward deeper.  
Swimmers power out      in      across.  
My toes grab sand, not-quite-balance (wind).  
"Everyone can float."      *Straight to Japan*, I think,  
toes dragging.      Three strokes, one kick: my day's triumph.

2

Once on a windless night I swam Lake Erie moonlight  
and still swim longitudes of dream ocean  
stroke-for-stroke where the bay curves.  
Far up on the cliff someone is shouting.  
I turn in the long trough between swells to call to the climber  
who holds in his left hand a disc of late sun.  
It echoes the wave top, blinds, releases,  
as under my arms, my thighs, sliding fish brush me forward.

## 3

Stroke for stroke. She says a word in the wind's singing,  
 and the wave slides over my shoulder  
 as if it were light in a mirror releasing, forgiving.  
 Now I remember moonlight calling me out of childhood that night  
 in lake water. Sun pulse on waves:  
 a woman's voice washing my shoulders, our shoulders  
 press arms into water, swimming across a truth of coral and seaweed.

## 4

Truth is what we tell strangers. Truth is the touch of things—  
 as mouths meeting, or a coral-brushed shoulder,  
 the raw scar white/red on tanned skin. Sun is under the water.  
 High on the cliff, sun dazzles a mirror's signaling light.

## 5

*Nothing*, I tell myself, running a finger across a scarred shoulder.  
 The sea stretches out, empty, flexing in half-light.  
 "Can you talk about it?" she asks. We are in a cafe,  
 perhaps in the south of France. "Yes," I answer.  
 I shift in my chair, turning my back to the water. The sunlight  
 masking her face is bright/dark, sand-brushed from horizon.  
 My face must also be masked by the sun, as if we were mirrors.

## *Ursula Hegi*

### *She tends the fire*

Burning his letters. They turn black  
 like thin mourning dresses.  
 Yellow flames, leaping; above them  
 a blonde woman's hair on her bare shoulders.  
 Red hollow glowing beneath. Illusion of passion.  
 Like fragile layers of widow weeds, matted bluish,  
 shiny, worn and buttons, yes, cheap buttons  
 and words. Her fingers touch the smooth skin  
 on her breasts. She tends the fire.

SEPTEMBER RAIN

Last color bleeds from the trees,  
the slow drip of rain, collapsing.  
The feverish maples decline.  
We pause to pick mushrooms,  
stick into our sacks these  
squat, warty, beige and tan hammers,  
these spongy plungers and rams,  
these alien, faceless denizens of damp.

They are not in our book.  
As we walk through this flaccid rain,  
this vague sense of loss and wrong,  
we don't talk. But we wonder  
about maples and mushrooms, about us:  
Anything you can't name is dangerous.

1001 NIGHTS

Each night I read you stories—  
Sinbad, Aladdin, Periebanou, Periezade—  
in that strange exotic language  
you cannot possibly understand:  
*countenance, repast, bequeathed, nuptial,*  
what can these words be telling you?  
What can they signify?  
That I love you? It's time to sleep?  
Keep safe throughout this night?  
And yet you will not let me simplify,  
get angry if I explain,  
and hang on every word as if  
our lives depended on it.  
Perhaps they do.  
One day the stories will fail us,  
there will be nothing left to tell,  
another hand will rub your back,

another genie will rise.  
But for now, sleep tight, sleep tight,  
and dream of the singing tree,  
the speaking bird, the golden water,  
the stone that was your father  
restored by morning light.

*Marcia Aldrich*

Two Poems

#### APOLOGY TO THE THIN MAN

So I loved you because I thought you would be fat.  
I thought you would increase,  
multiply, develop a big belly, double cheeks,  
triple chins, dimpled knees.  
I thought there would be more of you.

You'd stand out in a crowd, flaunt fashion.  
We'd have to buy clothes  
in stores catering to the big fellow.  
In your hands birds would nest.  
On your knees children would perch.

You would rock marvelously—  
better than any rocking chair, better than a row boat.  
You would conjure up the sound and feel of water,  
the expanse of sea—its waves and calms,  
its storms under control.  
In your arms I would be sailing  
without the bother of shipwreck.

All our gardens would grow  
if you dropped the seeds.  
Pumpkins would explode for fullness.  
Tomatoes so heavy would collapse their vines.  
Cauliflowers sprouting the size of streetlights.

Your voice would fill the house—



raise the ceilings, flood the windows.  
I'd hear you in every room.  
Over storms your voice would carry,  
lightning would not diminish you.

What happened?  
You are no larger than me.  
Our voices fill the same small space.  
No soft flesh to press my fingers  
into deeply before I hit the road of your body.  
Your bones are as clear to find as mine,  
neither distinct nor hidden.  
They are simply the usual set—  
they suffice. They hold us together  
with no genius.

The self you offer me  
is not unlike my self—  
no great dimensions,  
no extraordinary appetite.  
I don't live in the tower of your sound.  
Trees are outside our human scale  
and birds belong more properly in them.  
The only nest we can build  
is a nest for ourselves.  
In short, my dear  
you are my equal.  
We can only grow  
what every other can grow—  
the seeds we have been given.

## SUSPENSE

He said he was sincere,  
but now you wonder.  
His honesty comes too easily—  
the way he pulls confessions from rags.  
The unlikely coincidence of meeting  
him wherever you go—  
madly taking fences, you see



his hat in the woods,  
or on a train reading, his shoes  
appear below the page (those odd socks  
you'd recognize anywhere).  
The train goes faster and faster  
until you reach your stop.

Dizzy with questions,  
you consult friends about him  
and hear a bad report.  
You've been seeing him  
behind your father's back.  
Believing you incapable of folly  
or passion, he'll be more than dismayed  
to discover your affair.  
But you rush out to meet him anyway  
leaving caution in the closet.

Behind each portrait  
lies a man.  
You're ready to move  
through walls.  
Still when he appears  
with roses  
and an even smile  
your mind starts racing  
for a reason for such kindness.  
You begin edging into corners,  
fingering separate petals—  
stalling for time  
to recover  
your easy manner  
before it's too late.

He begins to feel suspicious.  
All he's given you is  
love.

But there's a stiffness  
in your hand,  
a certain chill on the sheets.  
You take a trip

to lift the spell  
but he doesn't know  
the roads. They curve frighteningly near  
the cliffs.

His hands grip the wheel,  
the maps on your lap fall  
to the floor  
and the car, the car  
goes faster and faster

*Marlene Leamon*

BREAK A LEG

Then try standing on the edge of the stage, footlights  
crawling to your waist, and you taking in faces too  
original to bear.

The front row throws you, filling  
your mind with arrogant straw brims and the sound  
of one man who chokes occasionally on air.

You try  
to go back to the time when all the lines were  
yours. The boy next door was throwing you  
the ball and you were hitting it far outside the field.

No actress then, you bragged about success and the way  
even a girl could pop a fly. Tonight  
your throat goes dry. You play the strange love  
scene in which X will cross the stage, planting  
his feet in front of yours.

This is your cue,  
the moment when directions are most clear.  
A spotlight finds your face. You remember,  
someone is taking your place.

## *Mildred Jesse*

### TIPPING THE SCALE

Because he was such a large man no one noticed him gazing in front of the glass case arrayed with pastries. Other men's haunches could fit the saddle, but his walk hung heavy before he moved. In his boyhood he might have stood by the displays, savoring the sticky liquid in the fat wax jugs, he had only to bite the top off, it would run over his mouth. Was there ever a woman who refused to fix his dinner, who even if she could, denied the pork frying; mashed down full plates of white potatoes.

Was it the chocolate forest cake he would carry always to his mother? He, standing feet planted, thumbs stuck before his mother, the glass case reflecting her eye, tarts in rows, she never whipped him. He stood and stood as if forgiveness was waiting with his change.

## *Malcolm Glass*

### CLEAN AND PRESS

My feet hold the floor  
down. I stretch over  
and grip the cool bar,  
a still music in my  
palms. Testing, I find  
it bolted fast. Blood  
stops, ready to fire.  
Stop. Think: Don't  
think when to pull.

Legs braced, I breathe  
deeply, filling the discs,  
and then the pull, sooner

than I thought:

My breath rises.  
The bar floats up. My wrists flip  
it over and drop it knocking  
on my collarbones,  
clean.

My toes learn  
the floor again, tighten-  
ing back into grain. Lock  
knees; tighten thighs, buttocks  
biting; arch into balance. Shove.

The lift cannons. Skin clamps down.  
Straight up, driving through the sticking  
point, joints cracking, to arms locked overhead,  
breath broken. And the chasm between earth and sky spread,  
held.

*Jeredith Merrin*

Two Poems

#### THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ANIMAL

"The most beautiful animal  
of the Middle Ages never existed."  
—Kenneth Clark

And this may be said  
of any great beauty—Dante's Lady,  
for example, or the order the music of Mozart  
suggests. We know it, having carefully  
emptied ourselves of illusions  
in deliberate stages, as the Egyptians  
emptied their dead. Here we are,  
imperishable, and undeceived  
of all fictions but this:  
that we can persist without  
organs, or blood. Consider  
those Greek shades who clamored  
at the entrance of Hades for the gory bowl,  
the "black-clouded blood"; the gods



who were drawn with such need  
to the laps of young girls.  
Think how, with sunset, our senses  
dart from us—aren't we thirsty  
for colors now that the huge, compound eyes  
of a dragonfly husk are our own?  
Such knowledge breeds only more irony,  
that good pet, our mummified cat.  
How shall we keep from panic  
but do as Mozart did, intent on new  
musical phrases, folding and refolding  
his napkin, plying,  
always for more intricate patterns,  
the yielding white cloth.

LISA, READING

—for Randall Jarrell

There are other worlds and I have, because that is how I survive,  
taught my daughter this. She is reading *Little Women* on the couch  
and I am reading the poems of a compassionate, sad man.  
In her book, four girls are waiting to become  
women, as she herself is waiting, reading about them.  
Some, like Jo, will go to market: they will buy  
what they will buy, as I have bought this shelf of books,  
as that man bought compassion with his own pain.  
Some, like Beth, will stay at home, which is another name  
for the place we come from and are afraid of and long for.  
She is thinking she will be like Jo. She says, "Jo wants to *do*  
things, like me." I am thinking I am like the woman at the zoo  
in the poem I am reading who says, "Change me, change me!" And  
now  
I am thinking how reading is like college that becomes for some an  
endless  
preparation for the lives they will not live.

... Look how my daughter looks  
intently at the page. I am amazed  
at all this act contains: how we clamor to become



while we drown in someone else's sea.  
Not really drown. Staring at the page  
all readers know, "Not me, not yet," and yet,  
called to dinner or the telephone, "This, too, is not myself,  
not quite." So we might, startled, say at any time:  
"I am not here. This is not my life."

In this, our life, my daughter and I hover  
where all longing lies. I watch her reach  
one volume, then another, from the shelf  
and lose and find, and find and lose herself—  
her lips half-forming words while she sits here.

*Kate McCune*

"BECAUSE WE MUST FINALLY LOVE OUR PARENTS  
WE COME TO LOVE OUR HOMETOWNS TOO."

*—lines spoken by my sister, in a dream*

Like the tender fingers of vines pulling through  
your bedroom window, you're pulled in too:  
one morning you wake up and it's not *Fredonia, New York*  
outside and hasn't been for eight years. You turn around  
and it's not your sister beside you in the room. And in the mirror  
you're not twelve, or even twenty. Gradually it has grown  
inside you and taken hold. You close your eyes and behind  
each lid is the park fountain and Woolworth's and Barker Commons  
and every tire-licked road leading down a hill to your front yard.  
Father is there inspecting things. Mother is there too  
inside with your brothers and sisters  
who have come home like you—  
small and wild and ready  
for some familiar dinner smelled over and over from inside the edge  
of a dream more insistent than nightmare—the one that stays with you  
and speaks only as the itch of your heels remembering  
slate sidewalks smooth as underwater, forever indiscernibly worn.  
Even this late it happens: after moving  
through the several cities and the several lovers

calculated to offend your mother—  
after all that distance comes a chart, a sufficient map  
made of streetlights and the late hour  
and a breeze too gentle to carry their voices away.

*Robin Seyfried*

Two Poems

SAME DREAM, THREE ENDINGS

The first time I descend  
the staircase with the music I say  
to the camera or to anyone who'll listen I'll  
get him back I'll think about it later  
at Tara. The lighting is all  
from my eyes the eyes have it  
Later in the dressing room  
I chant my mantra to the mirror  
I must get him back I will get  
him back get him back I will  
I will I will

The second time the music goes down  
without me I know it will be  
you at the door appearing in black  
& white and I say (lighting  
a long cigarette) what makes you think  
I'd take you back  
the words white  
and dry as smoke I'm sorry  
you say and I begin  
to soften the smoke goes out  
of my voice I say no  
it wasn't you it was  
the time our eyes are full  
as you turn fade I begin to see  
through you or rather I am seen  
through you the music starts slowly  
up the stairs

The third time's the charm there is no  
music no staircase only this shallow stretch of night  
we've been over it before the light  
yellow as an old bruise and you  
are saying I love you I'll always  
love you saying goodbye I'll always love you  
and you die you  
die in my arms but  
you die.

#### DANCING ATTENDANCE

Let's see you  
dance, she says.  
You're not dancing  
she says as I try  
to shuffle off. She's calling  
the shots.

I begin to toe  
the line, slowly heel  
over. I put my right  
foot in, my best foot  
forward and all at once my feet  
don't matter I am dancing on  
air, all night, in the dark, cheek  
to cheek hoofing it for all  
I'm worth Pavlova  
through Isadora having a highland  
fling no accompaniment but  
the limbs, in time:  
*glissade, jeté*, and bump,  
grind,  
and one  
for Giselle and two  
for the swan—  
I'm dying again  
to please the audience.

But just

when I think I've given  
my all, I'm ready to take it  
home, to go for the roses, the big  
finish, she says:

Now sing. She says,  
let's hear you  
*sing.*

### *John Taylor*

#### TRYING TO MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE

Trying to make a joyful noise  
I bark, croak, hoot, whimper. I keep trying  
For God is a child

Who laughs, God is a mother who smiles  
Even at an idiot child like me  
If I make enough

Of a joyful noise, so I leap  
About howling, stand on my hind legs and wave  
My paws, bright-eyed

And bushy-tailed as I can be  
Under the circumstances of being more or less  
Human (All too

As fierce old Fred with the mustache  
Said before the spirochete or the Paraclete  
Got him for good)

Which reminds me to coo and cry  
Like the fiery-feathered phoenix, like the rainbow-  
Feathered dove,

Make a joyful noise for love.



## About Our Contributors

STEPHEN DUNN's *Full of Lust and Good Usage* was published by Carnegie-Mellon University Press. He teaches at Stockton State College in New Jersey.

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## A PLEA FOR HELP

Due to recent general budget reductions mandated by the Washington State Legislature, *Poetry Northwest* must raise \$3300 by June, 1981. Our alternative to donations is to raise subscription prices from \$5 yearly to \$6. This has happened in spite of our having received \$2000 in a grant from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines in the spring of 1980. We will apply for another grant but can't count on being so fortunate twice in a row.

*Poetry Northwest* has survived for 21 years relatively unchanged in format. We are refusing to raise our subscription price or to reduce our size and are undertaking to find the money instead. Will you help us in any amount? All contributions are tax deductible.

David Wagoner  
*Editor*

