



# Poetry

NORTHWEST

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# POETRY NORTHWEST

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NUMBER TWO

SUMMER 1976

EDITOR  
David Wagoner

EDITORIAL CONSULTANTS  
Nelson Bentley, William H. Matchett

COVER DESIGN  
Allen Auvil

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*Daniel Mathews*

## HOW TO WALK

The earth pulls your feet, let feet pull your lank pelvis, scapulae  
will follow, let them fall, sky-hook to scalp whorl will hold you up,  
elastic tension through cervical spine.

Of your head, let only the eyes feel the pull, down, so low in fact  
you would appear as sleepwalking, if anyone were looking: your  
feet pull them down, to help feel out their way.

Don't think the huge white one across the valley is lost to them  
merely because it is out of focus.

Your steps are very small, and slow, leave them so, you'll get  
nowhere fast, but look behind you: how far you have come already.

On your feet you wear boulders, no, cobbles, lay them, lay them  
down, mason.

Often they must be rotated one way or the other to make the fit  
right. Hips will turn with them, only less, shoulders head each a  
little less still. At the top of the line, the sky appears hardly to  
twist at all.

Wasp, on your wrist, has *his* foot for a nose: you were never quite  
still enough to see this until now. Now, you can even *feel* it, ro-  
tating one way and the other, mapping contours of pores and  
creases between tall hairs.

Q Can you place *your* feet as wisely, as tenderly on the earth.

A You can: for the heather is brittle and your nakedness soft, so your  
feet have been allowing for this all along.





"I wake at night sometimes and pray for you."  
Dangerous words. They open up the sky and paint a yellow stripe  
across it,  
Fetch doubts that bury me in question, leave me  
Trying to be, not you, but something as implacable:  
You in your wrinkled skin; the light of nights washing youth across  
your face.  
What can I do to get back at you, how rob you  
Of your fierce heathen loving weapon?

#### SLEEPLESS NIGHT

A box with dry edges, there's no  
Collar or ridge, joinings  
Draw space into themselves, they  
Spit out objects like peach stones, they're  
Shiny as onyx, you can't see  
Your pale face in those walls, they swallow light.

If I could stand up and open out the evening  
Like a sharp can chiseled down the middle  
It would spill me out into a space

Open, deserted, where banks of moss are piled in terraces  
Against a milky sky.

Somewhere a line of marchers trudges over a shuttered bridge,  
Their boots graze near my ear, they make complaints  
Of creaking bridge ties,  
They pull a tired walker, his feet scraping behind him.  
I'll try to follow them down their slope of night,  
A steep roof  
With a slow slide to a shelf at the bottom

Where a woman is waiting, holding a cup of water.

*Douglas Crase*

Two Poems

#### IN MEMORY OF MY COUNTRY

As the land lifts  
The weather begins at once to wear it down:  
Its ridges lose their minerals in the rain,  
Its valleys open in wide parallels. The hills  
Sink of their own weight into plains, the plains  
Sag into rivers of their own debris, and features  
Hard as rocks will be transformed  
To clouds of dust that drip out of the sky.  
It is the land, as it appears,  
That tells the world of time: conglomerate,  
So fiercely made to pass through day and night,  
Heaped up and gullied and borne away.  
The falls cut upstream every year, the delta  
Spreads, the breakers sort the sands  
With no mistake. There is no place on earth  
Hidden from earth's patient spin: the stumps  
Of mountains turn in the same custody  
As the worn plateau over which they rise.  
Hard as granite, the weather levels the record  
Of the toughest past whose moments unfasten  
In confusion with the active land.

#### ON YOUR BIRTHDAY

We escaped together and nevertheless arrived  
At separate retreats, being guarded day and night.  
Messages smuggling out from either one of us  
Arc over spotted fields to die against  
The sides of intervening hills,  
Insufficiently propelled.  
See them, those melts appear thinly in the clouds?

That's where my words are falling through the sky,  
Far short of their destination,  
Far short of where you are.  
One after another in the cold  
They lie wounded and shrinking with no one near,  
Their shapes evaporate, their little hearts  
Subside into the snow.  
In myriad drops I sink away from you.  
Yet this much I guess we've made occur:  
Wherever you go will be no farther  
Than you are now, and this is why  
Though with you my intimate opposite was fear,  
Without you is going to be despair.

*Julie Mishkin*

#### THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

"This world understands nothing  
but words and you have come into it  
with almost none."

Antonio Porchia

A countdown had begun.  
The air vibrated with the ticking of a huge clock.  
In the cities all the lights were extinguished.  
The dust circled like a mad dog.  
Children were sleepwalking through the streets,  
holding mirrors to their mouths for fear of losing their breath.

Language retreated into the past, a tunnel that gaped everywhere.  
Words cracked against each other as if hurled from great distances.  
The era of hands was ushered in:  
all the mouths flew off the face of the earth.

In the country the women lay down one after another to give birth.  
The rain stuttered and began to fall.

A trail of wet cradles led from one farm to the next.  
When the wind blew, the cradles rocked together.  
Inside they were thinking of the new life:  
the piano without hammers,  
the train without its doppler,  
the voice box without a voice.

The first man to waken deaf was declared President.

*Stephen Gardner*

Three Poems

#### AN OPEN POEM TO THE SON I DO NOT HAVE

I understand.  
And when you say  
You believe in the efficacy of war,  
Or do not believe in war,  
You will still be my flesh.  
I will not turn on you  
To rip you, smiling, into useless parts.  
And if one day you say to me  
You want to be a poet  
I will tell you  
That to write great poems  
You must embrace the dark  
And fear the dark;  
I will say you must know  
The terror of what you cannot see  
And love the unseen.

And hurt. I wish you

Not to feel the pain of things  
That hurt us all,  
And that you know  
All our agonies, aching until places  
Where your blood does not flow

Are bleeding,  
For if you live,  
If you must live and die  
To write, then you will  
Hurt, hurt deeply, and fail  
If you do not  
Feel the failure of us all.

#### ADAM'S DREAM

In the last male hour  
Warm with the change of his sleep  
She came from outside his mind

In a birth he could not have known.  
Around him were shapes he had named:  
Solid tree, quick deer, trusting sheep.

Yet this was something more,  
Sliding down the curve of his back,  
A hand that wasn't his on his side.

Before this soft light turned the earth  
He had lain in his dreams without fear.  
But the terror that rests in us now

Sprang then for the first time in him.  
The forest floor rolled with a heat  
He sensed, but without name or form,

And the sun framed the world new again.  
And the garden he lived in had died.

#### WALPURGIS

New York *Times*: "Pasadena, Tex., Nov. 5, 1974. The police filed murder charges today against the father of an 8-year-old boy who was poisoned on Halloween by a candy straw filled with cyanide."

Rain holds the goblins close to home.  
The town's afire with porchlights.  
Businessman militia watch the streets  
To keep the ghosts unharmed.

But CPA's and slow police alike  
Can't deny my mood. The taste  
Of candy's all I need. And now  
I'm older in the night. Clowns

And bedsheets scream; I hand out  
Tribute into orange bags; I close  
The door. The faintest smile I know  
Comes to my face. What witches

Coldly wait to fly you off tonight  
To darker candy moons, my son, my son.

*Jim Barnes*

#### SCOUTING TOM FRY HOLLOW

The trail in I blazed on pine is gone  
without a trace. The lay of the land and sky  
has run amuck. I check the ridge south,  
look for marks I know cannot be there now.

One thing remains unchanged. The hollow hard  
below: the brown, brown grass flowing around  
chimney rubble and collapsed corral, the sound  
of distant wolves keening in the stony hills.



I go down, as before, to look for the grave  
I will not find again. The wind always  
blows and sundown comes hours ahead of time.  
Little chance any artifact is left

to clear the name of bones the hollow bears.  
Grave unmarked, the hanged man still hangs under  
the ghost of every tree. I raise a stone,  
poor homage, for the next man to wonder on.

*Madeline DeFrees*

Two Poems

### COVER

I went along on the map to Virginia,  
said your name like the rape  
of women who should have run for cover  
to the Iowa River,  
those days of ease and clover  
never carried home.

Wet through I stand under the folding  
umbrella of your concern, the clouds  
uncertain as that first day  
you fell on me and I learned  
where our roots were tending. A knot of wind  
dissolves. You forget how I grow

away from you all these weeks,  
my one good eye turned honest for the asking.  
I bend over radical leeks to follow  
revelations of the sun  
when petals flare,  
their sudden stamina.

Whatever blade's on fire by the gate, going  
to seed, going wise to sleep, we fill

the exiled body, animal caves, feeling them  
open. The heavens  
fall on thin skin. Outside.  
This mortgaged apple  
paradise.

### HOW THE AMISH WOMEN WENT DOWN IN THE IOWA RIVER

Went down under quilted leaves,  
the beards of their men  
rough against homespun cloth.  
Went down on the green verge without a sigh  
under broad-brimmed hats,  
the log jammed stream of their coming  
overriding the shore. The hostler unhitched  
and watered the horses.  
Girls in their Sunday dark, white caps and aprons,  
sheered the fragrant night.

Down like a jet from Moline at 30,000 feet  
with the throttle open  
in the shade of horse-drawn carts,  
sad boots on cobbled streets of a country town.  
Went down in the heat  
of iron kettles filled  
with boiling lard. Elders in black felt hats  
shook their heads and warned.  
The tactful fathers, spared, let down  
their guard and turned away.

Now it is noon when the women rise.  
Their cottonwood stand of simmering trees lapped  
in light. Bonnets down to the groin,  
they are caught in the April freeze  
of the floodplain. The river grips them hard,  
full loins skewed  
to the mouth of summer.



*Joseph Garrison*

TALENTS

I can start  
almost any plant  
from a cutting,  
grow my lawn  
into a green,  
keep the mower  
from stopping.  
Every appliance  
in the house—  
even the vacuum—  
thinks before  
it calls me in.  
If floors tilt,  
I know where  
to use pressure  
and how much.  
My guitar sings  
like a glass  
at my touch.  
Pieces of wood  
in my hands  
come out birds.  
With some luck,  
I could change  
Robinson Crusoe  
into a Franklin.  
My talents keep  
my world awake,  
even in sleep,  
where I dream  
of sending them  
away, in return  
for the talent  
I do not have—

finding familiar  
names for things  
that no one else  
could have said.

*Conrad Hilberry*

SONG

When the body rocks  
in its own arms  
like a swimmer held  
in a net of water  
at night, the senses  
fall asleep.  
Taste and smell  
keep their own counsel.  
No telegrams  
come rattling in  
from someplace else,  
no pictures  
perch in our eyes.  
The only news  
is cool air  
caught in our lungs  
where it melts  
into the blood.  
With no eyes  
to define us,  
our edges waver  
and dissolve,  
our colors bleed.  
But we are not lonely.  
When we rock  
to the black water,  
we are plankton  
where the quick fish  
come to feed.

*Robert Gillespie*

THE TROUBLE

It will not go away anywhere even for a visit.  
I offer it money, a vacation in Florida.  
It settles in like an old clunker in drifts by the barn,  
gearshift frozen up stiff as a birch stick.  
"I can not possibly get away," it tells me.

Stuck with it, I invent  
a tramp out in the far field  
as if to an assignation:  
It has stopped snowing after days  
Cheerfully I bow to it  
I savour it deliciously by the handful

and for the first time  
in ages brilliant  
as filament I'm full  
as the sky  
of white light Love  
is our revenge on reality.  
At last,  
crystallized, utterly happy completely  
alone, I am exalted as new snow.

In a flurry  
I rush out to meet this person. Together at last!  
Things are joyously out of hand in my head!  
As I bolt all fired up around my domain  
a woman bumps into me that on the spot  
I marry I am so happy,  
we have seven lovely children, each summer  
tomatoes and lettuce and pearl onions, chickens,  
and I a friendly lazy old brown hound in the sun.

Oh my god! What have I done?

They will not go away anywhere even for a visit.

*Frank Cady*

WALKING

The field slowly escapes the sounds  
of a careless city, as car horns  
give way to the improvisations  
of yellow-breasted meadowlarks  
who play their arpeggios down  
the wind. Yellowbells begin  
at 3600 feet, and my feet slowly  
take hold and find their way  
through air that is its own master  
and pours down from a sky piled high  
over the northern range, brilliant  
in sun and silence that's breaking up.

For days, it doesn't speak, just broods,  
waiting until the fragile plants  
are strong enough and I can walk  
to the place my field opens, bathed  
in the orange chalk of evening light,  
the patches of purple pasqueflowers,  
the delicately veined waxed petals,  
yellow clumped on high stamen centers  
that survive snow and wind and rain,

and climb to timber line  
from its underside, greet windsong  
in silver firs and calm surprised birds:  
the isolations of air are safe, I come  
in peace to walk a windy light,  
and turn with lichened rocks into  
a setting sun, follow it over  
the spine of a ridge to a valley  
I didn't know was there, the distance  
caressed by its watershed, and stop  
at a shootingstar, wavering between  
sun and a full moon that stretch the sky  
as wide and taut as it can be.

*Ray A. Young Bear*

you know we'd like to be there  
standing beside our grandfathers  
being ourselves  
without the frailty  
and insignificance of the worlds  
we suffer and balance  
on top of now  
unable to detect which to learn  
or which to keep from  
wearing the faces  
of our seasonal excuses  
constantly lying to each other  
and ourselves about just how much  
of the daylight  
we understand  
we would be there:  
with the position of our minds  
bent towards the autumn fox  
feasts  
feeling the strength and prayer  
of the endured sacred human tests  
we would set aside the year's  
smallpox dead  
whole and complete  
with resignation  
like the signs from the four legs  
of our direction  
standing still  
sixty years back in time  
breathing into the frosted lungs  
of our horses the winter blessings  
of our clan gods  
through dependence  
they would carry our belongings  
and families to the woodlands  
of eastern iowa to hunt our food  
separate and apart

from the tribe  
following and sometimes using  
the river to cleanse the blood  
from our daughters and wives  
not knowing that far into  
our lives we'd be the skulls  
of their miscarriages  
as a result:  
the salamander would paralyze  
our voice and hearing  
under instruction  
our sons the mutes would darken  
their bodies with ash and we'd assist  
them erect sweatlodges with canvas  
water plants fire and poles  
from the river  
the scent of deer and geese  
the hiss of medicine  
against the heated rocks  
belief would breathe into their bodies  
camouflage and invisibility  
somewhere an image of a woman's hand  
would lunge out from the window  
of a longhouse  
and it would grab from our fingers  
the secret writings of a book  
describing to the appointee  
the method of entering  
the spirit and body  
of a turkey  
to walk at night in suspension  
above the boundaries of cedar incense  
to begin this line of witchcraft  
travelling in various  
animal forms  
unaware of the discrepancy  
that this too is an act of balance  
a recurring dream of you  
being whole and complete  
sending the glint of your horns

into the great distances  
of the gods  
acquainting yourself with ritual  
and abandonment of self-justification  
to realize there is a point  
when you stop being a people  
sitting somewhere and reading  
the poetry of others come out easily  
at random  
unlike yours which is hard to write  
to feel yourself stretch  
beyond limitation  
to come here and write this poem  
about something no one  
knows about  
no authority to anything

in disgust and in response  
to indian-type poetry  
written by whites  
published in a mag  
which has rejected me  
too many times

*James Anderson*

#### RUNNING IT DOWN

Running it down. The serpentine once-over then  
Sighting the damn thing in. All so extremely  
easy you wonder why you have waited so long.  
There. Just a little to the left  
near the crease that marks the center  
of the hood.  
The look of recognition will last only a moment.  
The glance up as you stare down  
And then:  
You run the damn thing down.

Down as you have done a hundred times in dreams  
later waking fit for the day  
turning sour before the first break, and  
down as you have done countless times as  
conversations drifted  
And you imagined just the slightest thump.  
Now you will do it. Then drive on  
as if nothing happened and no one saw.  
Running it down. The easiest thing in the world.  
The look of recognition will only last a moment.  
The rest of your life will be lived content.  
The days you have will spend like stolen money.  
The men and women you know will sense something great.  
The cry in the dream will come from the next apartment.  
Others will be the ones who bend beneath themselves.

*Rory Holscher*

#### ELEGY FROM PINE CANYON, UTAH

For Abie Clemens

A gray wind floods the sky at dawn. Snow clouds  
are weighing the hilltops down.

By noon tumbleweeds are loose on the plain.  
Wild as lightning balls, they're headed for Wyoming.

Late afternoon, pickups go rattling home.  
Country music says love is in shambles.

At sundown the snow begins to fall  
in a quiet weave with the coming darkness.

Lonely ranchers far out on the desert  
have waited all day for the storm to arrive.

My friend, your death is part of the silence  
where I am learning to sing.



PANTOUM

As beech trees bend in a violent wind  
The night before the funeral,  
All the small deaths knock against my heart.  
I remember my mother saying,

"The night before the funeral  
Anger washes the swirls of memory from my brain."  
I remember my mother saying  
"My brain is soft and gray, an oyster."

Anger washes the swirls of memory from my brain.  
I begin to take the risks I never took as a child.  
My brain is soft and gray, an oyster.  
I want to take my hands off the handlebars.

I begin to take the risks I never took as a child.  
The dark grass shivers at moonrise.  
I want to take my hands off the handlebars,  
I put my hands down slowly on the bodies of two lovers.

The dark grass shivers at moonrise.  
I put my two hands down slowly  
I put my two hands down slowly on the bodies of two lovers;  
An image scars the inner eye.

I put my two hands down slowly  
On a photograph of two faces, side by side,  
An image scars the inner eye.  
Familiar as a glimpse in the mirror.

A photograph of two faces, side by side:  
The chief of police blows out the prisoner's brains  
Familiar as a glimpse in the mirror,  
I wonder which side of the trigger I am on.

The chief of police blows out the prisoner's brains.  
All the small deaths knock against my heart.  
I wonder which side of the trigger I am on,  
As beech trees bend in a violent wind.

PERSEPHONE IN HELL

I grew in a city layered like the mind,  
Among white ruins overgrown with poppies.  
In the early morning the gates of the city  
Blushed with sunlight.  
Young girls walking, arms encircling waists.  
Mourning doves, blue in that early light,

Fluttered from the trees.  
At night, the walled city closed tight  
As a sleeping child's fist  
And the sky shivered in my cold eyes  
Promiscuous with stars.  
What tempted me.

My breasts swayed, heavy, two handfuls of earth.  
Skirts mothered my thighs.  
Picking anemones, I smeared  
My hands with pollen as dark as blood.  
The sound of horses pursued me,  
I hid behind my hair.

A dark man caught me with his bitter smile,  
Netted me with his bitter tongue, and dragged me  
Underworld. The dead lie sucking  
The underside of the earth, beneath the soil,  
Under the tangle of worms and roots.  
Each night I must lie down

Along the side of a sleeping man,  
Like a coastline beside a dark sea.  
Alone beneath my own skin,  
I dream of the snake twisted between my breasts,

Of cold constellations turning in the sky  
I dream I sit at the crossroads biting a pomegranate.

The red seeds stain my teeth,  
Smear my lips.  
All day I wash and wash the clean smooth bodies of the dead;  
While my wild mother is sweeping and sweeping  
The clean bare earth,  
Sweeping away the green corn, the green wheat.

Those thin fierce heroes, arrogant in bronze,  
Can spill one cup of blood and take the knowledge  
Of the dead, then turn and go.  
Their eyes shine with burning ships and fields in flames.  
But I, who descended without a guide, kiss and kiss  
The sweet King of the dead as he sleeps.

I taste a song of the earth's open mouth,  
The temptation in the fruit,  
The pomegranate's bite that holds me here.  
But an old woman descends the spiral stair  
Dancing with a green wand  
In each hand, dancing

Me up, step by step,  
To where the wind ripples meadows  
And April steals me back.

*Jay Meek*

#### THE LOVES OF JAMES BUCHANAN

I am a murderer. Of course, I do not  
know I am justified in saying I  
am anything at all, or how it  
was I earned the right to be severe  
with myself. But on the chance

I am what I dream, I accept it,  
if only for the penalty of failing to  
remember, which has made my life  
so impossibly vague and utterly  
without precedent. Honor, what is it?  
A pride that congratulates itself  
with principles? On my honor,  
then, I killed you, in how many ways I  
can not count, but since that day,  
love, I have not kept company  
with guns, knives, ropes, or arsenic.  
I have stayed away from parapets  
and chasms. But it's no good.  
For on the evening of my swearing-in,  
my first night in the White House,  
I sat by the fire remembering,  
what, some liturgical melody I heard  
or did not hear, a *Stabat Mater*  
in your lovely soprano coming  
from an upstairs bedroom in that mad  
Georgian house in Philadelphia.  
You singing: "James, I am dead,  
I am dead." So I looked all about me,  
into the mirrors and ornaments  
in every room, and I was found  
missing. How young it makes me seem  
just to say it: *your bachelor*.  
No, it is best to say I am not  
anything, that I-who-am-I have melted  
and hardened, like a blue candle  
at midnight. I remain at most  
your unwedded widower, your old wick,  
your bad dollar, your ambitious  
murderer. Which is why, dear,  
I came in a fast carriage through fog  
to Philadelphia. It was August,  
no, another month, a cold one.

*James Masao Mitsui*

PAINTING BY A MENTAL PATIENT, WEAVERVILLE,  
CALIFORNIA JAIL, 1922

—now displayed in the Weaverville Museum

It is the picture of a man who dreams  
at night, his dreams a color  
he can't forget in his blue cell:  
a fork chases a hard-boiled egg  
across the smooth paper,  
watched by an angry alarm clock.  
The clock rings  
and the artist knows it is morning  
even though the iron cell  
is in a basement with no windows.

In the middle of the painting  
the devil blows a whistle  
and his pitchfork drips blood.  
Above in the night  
a man has taken off in a rocketship  
heading for a yellow, one-eyed moon.  
He grips the steering wheel in the open cockpit  
and never looks back.

In a quiet corner  
under a naked tree  
a satyr sits and plays his pipes.  
The music weaves all around the painting,  
twists around a girl  
dancing in veils.

The man who dreams all this  
pulls at his covers,  
sleeps at the bottom of the painting.

The man who painted this  
died in his dreams.

The painting of his dreams  
rests on an easel  
in the dim museum corner.  
Past closing time, past the turning out  
of lights, the people in the painting  
listen to their own noise.

*Colette Inez*

Two Poems

OVERVIEW, CHOICE

I put my heart  
to looking for your voice  
on film,  
granular reels, cluster of vowels,  
the filmclips in a canister.  
Your voice said ahem.

I had cast you as a Sultan,  
the soundtrack hummed our names,  
sirocco, Algiers, zodiacs turned.  
I was your singing Nubian  
blue-skinned as a seal.

Overview, wide. I hear the whir.  
There's the scene where you sing  
Mustafa and his Astrolabe.  
Here's the scene where I ride  
to the fringe of your oasis

and you sweep me inside  
the tent of your realm,  
my body like a dune  
collapsing under hooves.

Steeds. A shot of sky. The camera pans  
the caravan.

Blots on a screen moving in frames.  
What was your wish, the Caliph asks.  
A dream of water, my low voice blurs  
trailing pale cracks in the sand.

#### LISTENING TO DVORAK'S SERENADE IN E

Everything has ripened,  
the oranges glisten  
in their sharp worlds,  
the apples have broken  
their juice  
in my mouth,  
I am alone at the edge  
of all the gold seasons,  
a tide of clouds  
bearing me home  
like a migratory bird.

And this bright music  
shaping dancers  
on a bitter dust of roads,  
divining rods  
that point  
to a further distance:  
stone, water, stone.

Dowser, find my deep stream.  
Builder, make my house  
to last  
in the ochre heart  
of the falling sun,  
in this shining harvest.

#### *Carol McCormach*

#### RIDING TO BED WITH THE EMPIRE BUILDER

Shinny up, mount  
and settle, the black ribs  
divide your knees, the sinuous flanks  
stretch back, now you're beginning, raise the blind  
on a violent moon, a glazed sea, snow on the Badlands  
flowing east, breaking against the black brow, swirling  
around you, under your buttocks the engine croons and rocks you  
westward almost to sleep but always  
you wake at the lip of a dream, the moon on the blanket, your  
arms dark  
on the luminous sheet like twigs in the snow, and feel the beast  
below you shudder, a one-night bed  
through the one-horse high seas, whistle stop, thistledown,  
seckisee seckisee

#### *Linda Pastan*

#### LEAVING HOME

I take a giant step north,  
Mother, may I?  
No, you may not.  
I take three baby steps.  
Mother, may I?  
I give up a green forest  
for trees the color  
of fool's gold.  
Mother, may I?  
Fool, you may not.  
I take an umbrella step  
and it is raining  
leaves. They drift



through my hands  
like migrant children.  
I read their crumpled palms,  
they have no life lines.  
I take four giant steps.

Mother, may I?

I follow a trail blazed  
in paint, broken white line  
broken arrow north.  
They call it Indian summer,  
Indian given.

I take six scissor steps.

Mother, may I?

No, you may not.

I tip my head back  
for the final drops of sun  
and feel the cold—a blade  
at my bare neck.  
And I am caught moving.  
And I am sent  
all the way  
home.

*Michael Sofranko*

#### TURNING OFF THE PRESIDENT, I SIT SILENT

It is clear November freezing.  
The moon, white glass, half full.  
Light spills out on the clouds that pass,  
men with big stories, going to war, moving at night.

The spare boughs of the elms on this street  
rise and fall as lovers sleeping.  
Across the street the neighbors are anxious;  
you, next to me, breathe easily in the dark.

The night news makes its way around  
the block and back again.  
The wind is less certain.  
It pushes a thousand stories between us,  
spayed and scented, entering the room  
and staying there.

The bones, well fed, are still.  
Only when no leaf or other thing  
moves can I hear their mingling.

Tonight there is no talk among them.  
The war grows, stone by stone.  
The clouds roll, so many I can't count them.

*Bruce McAllister*

#### THE RETARDED BOY OUR PARENTS SHOULD HAVE HAD

I promise I will sit  
in the aluminum dinghy

head resting on the orange cheek  
of a big life jacket  
soft against mine.

I will hold the pole  
without a sound  
fish hookless, safe  
there in the middle of your living-room floor.

I will let you hug me  
without understanding.  
I will let you feed me in that fog  
your voices like horns.

People will come to sit  
on the sofas, those docks  
like brushed velvet. They will see

how good you are. Your goodness  
or my knees, connected to my smile  
by clear fishing line  
when I run in dreams

will make the women cry  
in their cars, going home  
asking God  
for a world like ours.

*Henry Morrison*

#### A BALM FOR ENNUI

The worst dogs  
clutching their throats in mid-bark—  
you, you, you, an endless address  
loaded with every zip code on the map:  
finding yourself, in dogs, is your  
kind of destiny.

The sleek and naked murderess  
slashes the knife through her night table  
laden with concoctions of yesterday's wind, tomorrow's dust.  
She has no tomorrows to wait for. You  
are a feather on her wind, blown end-to-end in the hourglass.  
Your time is a grain of sand, perhaps, a universe.

That dog is you. *She*, barking her name,  
is you. Destinies pile up, sure as cigarette butts.  
Accumulate: that's the lesson—names, winds, whole  
atmospheres, a universe, a place to be. Dolls  
to slash knives through. Voodoo on snap-together plastic souls.  
At last, your turn to bark.

*Kathryn Snyder*

#### JOB'S WIFE

Day after day he sits in his ashes  
moaning like a lawyer for judgment:  
I ask, is he the only man?

Our sons lie broken on the sand;  
they will not chase their straying sheep  
in summer pastures: their wives wail  
at night (I hear them) on the empty couches.  
Our daughters do not sing beneath the yew trees  
at their spinning; they will not dance,  
heavy with child, their hair scented with almond.

Was Satan's wager worth these?

My heart had room for many children;  
let it go. I do not ask for life.  
I am not Sarah, would not laugh  
if angels came to me;  
I would drive them from my tent with spittle,  
hack my belly with knives.

My children's father is beloved again,  
awaits new babes from strange wives  
in the house of women. Sheep and cattle  
flock to him, gold rings and oxen console him.

Let God send the world to Job!  
I will trade tongues with Satan  
and eat grass in the wilderness.

I curse to speed my dying.  
I have heard my children's voices in the hills.  
I have heard the rattle of dice from heaven.

## THE BURN

John Unterecker

A tiny scar just off the life line:—a kind of cucumber,  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch long,  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch wide.

'Call it stigmata.'

'Not on your life—off center.'

'Call it a cigarette burn.'

At 37,000 feet, land edges in:

9:15:

wrist wrong.

(It is dusk in Ireland, afternoon in Labrador.)

Change time.

*Shed:*

cover/uncover

Ten hours: I have shed Sligo by two days, Mountrath by one:

'I am beginning to shed Dublin.'

(Patrick Street:

St. Patrick's.

Goodbye, Swift.)

—to remove a covering (as skin) / a lean-to (flimsy as faith)

'Shed of God'

motor idling

door slam

'Write.'

Nobody's home.

'Keep time,' I say to my wrist,

and it listens to Greek dances on a Donegal field,  
night voices by a Connemara lake.

(The dancer is the song inside my wrist:

I know that dancer's name:

grace is a gesture we must learn to bear.)

Friends, I have lost faith:

37,000 feet straight down:

I fly on artificial wings,

mine gone.

'Burn this,' I think.

*It will explode.*

I saw a barn burn once,

a flare against the Pennsylvania night.

I was young:

a kind of gathering, embers

swaying pell-mell toward black.

My reach is emptiness.

In a week, the scar will be gone:

an absence burning the palm of my hand.

Who doesn't press his mouth against fire, then lick the wound, flying home?

ABNORMAL SONG

If a songbird is raised without  
hearing the song of his species,  
he will develop incomprehensible  
vocal sounds never heard in nature.

For the reader

Tired of our own voices asking  
always the same question, bluff song,  
the same preen in small talk,  
bright feathers of the dialect

of longing, we learn less from birds  
than we might have wished.  
Gone to listen in a scrubbed field  
in simplifying winter how less cold

a white-crown sings the day,  
we don't hear normal song.  
He's learned another melody  
in tanner shrubs, his fellows singing

lower notes here over the hill.  
He's never heard his own voice, may be,  
and never modifying his glib whistle,  
he's lone, outlined, in the leafless

oak tree. Awry as a bud  
in the silver air. What are we to do?  
The singular voice in the wind  
falling on dead ears. Oh,

we cannot look openly  
into each other's eyes. Neither dominant,  
we look at a neutral place a few inches by  
our faces, rock on our feet, breathe slant.

The bird warbles and warbles and warbles.

THROUGH THE DARK

Midnight is a place,  
a town you hitchhiked through  
in the dark. The fields beyond  
the ditches recede, locked up with night.  
Berries hang on roadside vines, their shadows  
and yours twisted by moving headlights;  
they are your black jewelry, amulets among thorns  
as long as fingers  
you cannot see, but sense, the way,  
turning in the dark,  
you sense her breasts  
and her hands sleeping, dreaming of becoming  
rabbits, stung by the dark  
of moons.

HIGH AND DRY

After they have eaten  
Your friends will leave you  
Alone and drunk, and the night  
Still young. They have to get up early,  
They say as they pour you  
The last of the bourbon  
By way of apology. You want to dance,  
You say, getting up and putting on your coat,  
Looking for your keys.

They think you will sleep  
When they leave, promising to call  
In the morning. But you will sit up  
Half the night and watch the moon  
Through the black trees. You will think  
Of a poem like this one. It will be



No better than friends. It will be unable  
To say goodnight or make love.  
The poem, like the night,  
Will leave you  
Too tired to sleep  
Or write.

*Mark Moe*

#### BLIZZARD

At first we compare it  
to ourselves: silent, evasive,  
wishing to be left alone.

We stand by the dark panes  
guarding the light, the wives,  
the children already lost in sleep,  
the listless cats who cannot save us.

Toward the end we begin  
to wish for less: a few stars,  
a tree stripped to the veins,  
the sound of chains and water.

Afterward  
we drift out around our homes  
in small boats of silence,  
waving our shovels

like the sweaty exiles  
waved their torches on returning  
to the dark islands that had suddenly disappeared.

*Henry Carlile*

Two Poems

#### THE NIGHT CAT

The black cat climbs onto one of the seats  
of the upside-down canoe and sleeps there purring.  
The sky is his sea where fishbirds swim.  
In his dream he hears their watery voices.  
Perhaps he catches a few—the cardinal  
a bright red snapper, the shark-colored dove  
whose voice is like the tunneled wind.  
Their feathers overlapped like scales drift away  
from his raking paws, through the riptide of his bite.  
In the cat's world, everything is reversed, the sun  
rising, sinks deeper into the sea,  
illuminates the depths of his dream with refracted  
light, glances off the hull of his ship conveyed  
at blinding speed as he rests, an inverted Viking  
prince on the first of nine passages to Valhalla.  
The cat will wake, climb down from his throne  
and walk blinking into the light.  
The world will come right again as he slinks yawning  
over the snow, beneath which mice, temporarily snug,  
tremble as the night passes over.

O°

Already he appears to disintegrate,  
head wrenched in profile,  
barely enough snow to cover  
the juncture of wings, breast and head,  
a shred of oak leaf stuck to his chest,  
the skeleton's outline rising  
through a pulp of orange and gray down,  
and all around him spears  
of dead grass, twigs, and shredded leaves  
aim through the snow.

His feet, maple twigs  
with curved shiny nails,  
have simply let go.  
He seems more fossil than recent casualty  
failing into the landscape.  
Or else the emblem of a defunct  
European state  
on the tattered background of a flag.

Only the powder-blue primaries  
retain something of the speed  
and curvature of flight,  
as though flight's cunning alone  
could hurl the whole mess,  
skin, feathers and bones,  
flaming into orbit and so oppose  
this blind separation of powers.

*Helen Dickinson*

Two Poems

### BEINGS

Why prize anything out of sentiment for the event?  
Things themselves are better than souvenirs.

Teapots, beer bottles, hammers, old clocks—  
not for the weddings, not for the salty grip of hands  
now gone, not for the moon struck twelve—  
these ghosts, though mattering, come, go.

Curves, colors, the weight and feel of the once-imagined  
thing, though, these stay.

And minds that patterned  
clay, sand, dull metal into these forms,  
outlasting factories of thought,  
also stay, silent and crafty, here.

### WALKING THE GHOSTS

Here they come again, the goon squad, up your stairs  
to rattle you out of your sleep, trick you into the long ride  
in the country, the shuddering walk on the waterfront,  
past Lady Macbeth on a meathook.

You were good all day, except for your goat-footed heart.  
You didn't rat on anyone. It was a long hot day, forging  
the letters, stashing the unmarked bills, garroting a pigeon.  
You helped eat prayers for breakfast. You coughed up for the family.

*Why you?* They ain't talkin', them over-coated thugs,  
them hooded red-eyed hags, them runts. Why can't some cool  
blue cop nab you in broad daylight, show you a warrant?  
You'd sing then. They could shut you up in the slammer—clang!

You'd come clean, inside. Barred up, you'd write  
the horse's mouth book, tell how your brain got rotten:  
experts misguided you. Screwed loyalty—your only crime—  
was primal. People would be human, understanding.

Well, Mac, these freaks aren't human. Sharp at two a.m.—  
police are in the coffee shop, the guard is busy changing—  
they click-toe up, pick, claw, splinter your door down.  
They're up on the bed, slathering your face, mauling and pawing.

They stamp on your chest, ramp on your belly like incubi,  
romp with your tender phlebotic leg. Their tails  
beat you like black-snake whips, rubbery hoses  
cracking with welcome, as if you'd planned to skip.

You're theirs, you pulp, every night. Old pals,  
old pets are like that. Never leave us, their loose eyes beg.  
Slap! Schlup! Up! Up! That's how it is with ghosts, man.  
They need their exercise.

THE QUESTIONS IN THE DARK AIR

We should have used double-headed nails on the lid,  
and, like arkwrights, teak for its tight-nested grain.  
We used idiot nails and the wide-open grain of young pine,  
hoping memory might wander inside the boards and get lost.

Cruelty in the lost hours sang in back of us,  
as we looked along your gray face like an old knotted  
board, seeing so much kindling, so much debris,  
so many unknown planes. Many days later we palmed  
up damp sawdust to putty the pith of distance  
and fill the checks.

On the final day our lapses before and after  
hardened with the pitch, long after you hung in the garage,  
joining the sap and smell of bruised  
wood blooming in our soft throats.  
We bundled you aside in wood, out of fear and respect,  
the child tucked under the slate gray blanket of tarps.

We laid our tools aside then for rest at dusk.  
At evening the stars dropped low, and the nettles  
gathered strength from ocean winds to carve out dumb  
rasping cries in the dark air, almost speech, as we slept.

At nightfall the wolves came down to dance  
for the stranger you became, floating in our levels;  
they raised in the dark air questions  
that pierce wood, flesh or stone, that bury mechanics:  
what would we have done?

THE POTATOES

Trapped alone for weeks in the cupboard  
the ten pounds of spuds turned blind eyes  
away from harsh light; a forest of albino

twines grew from these eyes, groping  
in the plastic and wood for a check of soil,  
a row to lie in.

They are all that is left this evening:  
I move, knife in hand, and pry  
them loose, whacking each tendril  
and each eye off, without mercy.

Their eyes stare out of the brown sack.  
Long after that evening I dreamt  
of cunning small men who grafted those eyes  
back with snippets of string and old rusty nails  
clutched firm in palsied fingers.  
I decide not to eat potatoes for awhile.

Now and then, at midnight and noon  
a low soft whisper edges out with the skid  
of door and panel, saying: "All we want  
is a bit of earth to kiss,"  
and the air is filled with the noises  
of white roots groping snail-slow in hiding.

SELLING YOUR HOUSE

The brine tank on the water softener  
fills up, spills over, the floor  
growing sticky with salt. Bugs lick  
in the dark corners. Then,  
the blower motor on the furnace overloads,  
starts its slow burning. Thin flames of odor  
kindle in your nose. Then,  
the water heater starts to leak  
its rusty bottom spreading

well beyond middle age.  
It's no longer a joke.  
You take out your tools:  
chewing gum, pencil, a bag of notes.  
Now the water level starts to rise,  
bubbling up under the floor:  
the pipes have burst. The ceiling  
catches fire, gas fumes struggling  
for your throat. You brace yourself,  
prepare for the explosion.  
Meanwhile, upstairs, your dry wife is signing  
the papers with the buyers,  
smiling, holding up.

#### ALONE

There is something about loneliness  
that keeps you riding your skin  
like an elevator  
up and down its empty shafts  
looking for old hopes.  
You watch the doors open and close,  
people getting out or in,  
but when you return  
to any particular floor,  
no one's there.

Love, could I woo you  
into this conceit, imagine you long enough  
to fix you there,  
even a metaphor would do,  
would be something more  
than this clumsy isolation.  
But as the door opens on every floor,  
only pathos, the snot-nosed child  
is there, shoving its sad way in.  
I've lost you that far.

#### BUILDING A WORKBENCH

I suppose nails.  
Some two by fours and a hammer.  
Yes, I can imagine it.  
I open the plans.  
They are so simple a child.  
I cannot read them.  
They disintegrate in my clumsy  
hands.

When I pick up the hammer  
its head falls off,  
leaving me with the stump.  
The nails slip through my fingers  
awkward, insincere.  
When I raise my voice  
against the wood,  
it splits.

I'm sitting in the basement  
with all the spells I cannot manage:  
tape measure, plumb bob, T square,  
my hands full of splinters,  
nailing here, joining there,  
furious now,  
building my workbench out of thin  
air.



### *About Our Contributors*

DANIEL MATHEWS lives in Portland, Oregon.

DIANA O HEHIR teaches at Mills College and is writing a novel set in California during the Depression.

DOUGLAS CRASE is a free-lance speechwriter living in New York City.

JULIE MISHKIN is a recent graduate of the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop.

STEPHEN GARDNER is the director of the English Program at the University of South Carolina at Aiken.

JIM BARNES teaches at Northeast Missouri State University and is coeditor of the anthology *Carriers of the Dream Wheel*.

MADELINE DEFREES teaches at the University of Montana and has published widely.

JOSEPH GARRISON lives in Staunton, Virginia.

CONRAD HILBERRY teaches at Kalamazoo College.

ROBERT GILLESPIE teaches at Colby College, Waterville, Maine.

FRANK CADY is living in Palo Alto, California.

RAY A. YOUNG BEAR lives in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

JAMES ANDERSON is a recent graduate of Reed College.

RORY HOLSCHER teaches remedial English in South Bend, Indiana.

MIRIAM SAGAN teaches poetry at the New England Conservatory of Music.

JAY MEEK teaches at the State University of New York at Cortland.

JAMES MASAO MITSUI's first book of poems, *Journal of the Sun*, won the 1974 Pacific Northwest Booksellers' Award for Poetry.

COLETTE INEZ is teaching a poetry workshop at the New School and has finished work on a second book of poems.

CAROL McCORMMACH is a student at the University of Washington and has published in several magazines.

LINDA PASTAN's second book, *Aspects of Eve*, was published by Liveright in 1975.

MICHAEL SOFRANKO is a student in the University of Iowa Writing Program.

BRUCE McALLISTER is associate editor of *West Coast Poetry Review* and directs the creative writing program at the University of Redlands, Redlands, California.

HENRY MORRISON is a staff writer and poetry editor for *Oregon Times Magazine* in Portland.

KATHRYN SNYDAL, a graduate of the University of Washington, lives in Seattle.

JOHN UNTERECKER's newest book, *Stone*, will be published later this year by University of Hawaii Press. He teaches at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

CAROL FROST lives in Otego, New York.

JOSEPH DUEMER is a student at the University of Washington.

MARK MOE lives in Denver and teaches English at Metropolitan State College.

HENRY CARLILE is living in Portland, Oregon, and working on a second book of poems.

HELEN DICKINSON is teaching English at Portland Community College, Portland, Oregon.

L. D. ENGDAHL lives and works in Eureka, California.

RONALD WALLACE's study *Henry James and the Comic Form* was recently published by University of Michigan Press. He teaches at the University of Wisconsin.

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