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# Poetry

NORTHWEST



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# POETRY NORTHWEST

VOLUME EIGHTEEN

NUMBER FOUR

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POETRY NORTHWEST

WINTER 1977-78

*Janis Lull*

Three Poems

THERE ARE FIVE GREAT THEMES

The question is: are they Nurture,  
Sin, Reconciliation, Desire and Death:  
Or are they Innocence, Interdependence, Wandering,  
Enlightenment, and the rhythm of heart and breath?  
Or Birth, Ingratitude, Renewal, Mutability and Love,  
Or none of the above?

TO HERSELF REFLECTED

This breath is you if you could face  
It; the old one-two each time  
Expresses all, and each time new.  
Just so you saw yourself escape  
As vapor on the winter afternoon  
You turned five. Years later, it was you  
Returning as rasp and gulp the day  
They pulled you from the spilled canoe. Your cough  
Kept you alive, and kills you now  
You like to say and laugh and smoke  
One more. This song, this sigh, this arching rate  
Won't change; could change, but won't

This breath predicts the next and when  
We take the air we take it as  
We used to. The one surprise is  
That there are no surprises; no Cave  
Of Self, no secret alveolus where  
A treasure's locked of air so pure  
Its whisper would crack glass. The mirror  
Fogs and clears and keeps still  
Its fascination. What you will  
Means nothing in the mirror: what you think or might  
Think is never there. Yet this is you  
When you can face it; all you do  
That counts here is breathe and shine in the borrowed light.

#### DREAM MAN

He only drives night loads  
Skin won't hold scars  
He gets kicks snapping chains, shaving skulls, smashing cars.  
He wears his electrodes  
Down to his ass  
Eats naked babies on buttered glass.

He smells of excess thought—  
Ozone or sulphur—  
He's got an extra mouth on the top of his head  
For sucking the sky.

Don't you know this is a job for Moonwoman?

If he don't get what he needs,  
You're gonna see some shreds.  
Just give me an hour with him  
In the cab of his pickup truck  
Oh brother,  
He'll be licking me all over  
For the salt.

#### Carole Oles

#### Four Poems

#### OLD TEXT

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
four I do not understand:  
the way of an eagle in the sky,  
the way of a serpent on a rock,  
the way of a ship on the high seas,  
and the way of a man with a maiden.

—Proverbs, 30:18, 19

I'll tell you.  
The way of a man  
with a maiden  
is the way of all  
three wonders.

He soars and tumbles  
drawing loops in the air  
which she flies into  
and he cinches  
pulling her down  
to the pile of sticks  
on the ledge.  
It begins.

He's all muscle.  
How can she resist?  
She knows that dance.  
Even the rock squirms under it.  
He hardly sees her.  
If she doesn't fight back  
she's female.  
He has no shadow  
until he's erect.  
Then, even the trees applaud.

Only those on the shore  
call the sea Mother.  
The maiden's the ship  
made to dip and rise  
with his moods.  
He's dark-eyed

a roaring drunk  
a batterer.  
Remorseful in the morning,  
Rolling the sun  
off his tongue.

### THE UNTEACHING

A social worker was sent into the 3rd grade class  
that had witnessed its teacher shot and killed  
by her estranged husband. She was sent to assure  
the class that school is a safe place.

—UPI

She talks about the law  
of averages. How many storms it would take  
before lightning struck one of them.  
How often they would have to fly.  
As she speaks, they glance at the door  
he came in by, they trace  
the stain on the hardwood floor.

She does not mention the law of opposites,  
love and hate for example. How they cohabit.  
Or the law of gravity, demonstrated  
by the teacher's falling. Or the law of  
conservation of matter: that nothing is lost,  
the teacher lives in another form.

She talks about sick people,  
says they need help.  
A girl with braids is yawning—  
she has slept fitfully—a red-headed boy  
sits rigid, as if he hears her through water.  
His study habits will not improve.

The children are not stupid.  
As she talks on and on  
they do not relinquish the one priceless  
picture of their teacher crumbling  
before a blackboard spattered with lessons.

### RESPONSE TO A. J. DALY, SPECIALIST IN 'PERMANIZING', POSTMARKED PROVINCETOWN

Dear Mr. Daly, Thanks  
for your offer to 'permanize'  
this clipping about me.  
But I'm writing to tell you  
about noon on the beach.  
The bodies. From the splayed  
legs and surrendered feet  
you can tell they're goners.  
No blood, but poisonous quiet  
under the sun's drumming.  
Even the sea's tongue cut out,  
no water until the Point,  
a period on the horizon.

Over the flats, more bodies.  
Crabs belly-up, squid with ten  
useless arms, flies drinking  
their eyes. And mill-ends:  
the lower jaw of a bluefish  
biting on air, scales dried  
to fingernails, bones too small  
to extrapolate from. And shells,  
whole city blocks of rooms  
where no one makes love.

Mr. Daly, for a dollar-fifty  
with your sparkling clear  
plastic and special equipment  
can you protect me forever  
against moisture, soiling  
and the wear due to handling?  
Mr. Daly, at night here  
the foghorn persists in its  
two wornout notes, question  
and answer. The sea, that reformer,  
works its dark industry. Free.

## A MANIFESTO FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED

Don't curse your hands,  
the tangle of lines  
there. Look how  
in the deepening snow  
your feet make blue fish  
no one can catch.

Don't take personally  
the defection of leaves.  
You can't be abandoned  
by what you never owned.  
Spring will give back more  
green than you can bear.

Don't rest by the hearth  
when all you're worth  
tells you *Run!*  
If the fires within  
strangle, not even suns  
will comfort your bones.

You're not so special.  
The jungle's full of animals  
whose guts invert  
when a stronger one parts  
the camouflage, peers through  
as they climb a tree.

Don't think you're different.  
The world's full of runts,  
stutterers like yourself  
who'd save all they have  
not to lose it.  
They lose it.

Leave trails, be separate,  
dress warm, travel light.  
Eat fear to grow muscle,  
even Olympic champs fall.  
Store advice  
in a cool, dry place.

*Conrad Hilberry*

## SCRIPT FOR A COLD CHRISTMAS

These reds and greens, of course, are all wrong—  
the blazing log, the star like a sunflower  
almost toppling the tree. All fall, the colors  
have been diminishing. Look: the beech tree  
breathes twigs of vapor against the grey sky,  
icicles drop their spindly light in a long beard  
from eaves to bush to ground. My promises  
have cracked and dropped away like old bark.  
I am a winter stick, a flagpole clanging  
a hollow note in the wind. There is nothing  
dramatic here, neither jubilation  
nor despair, but rather a kind of exile  
as when in a foreign country you shrink  
into yourself, unable to speak.

Our rituals exaggerate. The star  
was no Catherine Wheel spinning and hissing  
over the stable. It was a star, a point  
of no dimension, one match flaring across  
a frozen lake. The shepherds, hearing the angels'  
song, thought it the wheeze of a cold sheep  
it had so thin a sound. They heard but hardly  
spoke, saving their words like a last handful  
of grain. And the child—one child, not a crèche  
in every park. This one was different, but  
not now, not yet. Now it was a small jug  
of flesh with a candle glimmering inside.

It is almost cold enough. The year is shrinking  
toward a small festival, a saturnalia  
that will fit in the cavity of a tooth.  
We may gather up our deaths and make  
of them a twig fire, hold our hands  
to it and sing for the cold seed.

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You're not so special.  
The jungle's full of animals  
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when a stronger one parts  
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as they climb a tree.

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The world's full of runts,  
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who'd save all they have  
not to lose it.  
They lose it.

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of them a twig fire, hold our hands  
to it and sing for the cold seed.

1.

Be grateful for the wound. The wound is alive.  
What does the wound invent?

Erotic cardiograms: love's

mutinous chorale.

Monitor the grave:

a metronome of husks; chaff rustling in torn sieves.

2.

Rustle of starch in the dead hall. Flashlights. Gasp of stretcher against starch.  
Quick voiceless rustlings.

"I am alive," I think, stretcher bars clicking into place.  
Something who had breath rumbles down brisk corridors  
toward history.

"Tomorrow," I think; but bare  
abstractions hurt. I turn on my side. Ice  
explores the windowpane.

Yet in this hospital, wounds begin to sing. Tender as rain, remorseless as love's  
constellations, a choiring hymn begins, the wounded alleluia roar swelling until  
skin howls diagrams of pain, white voices blurred against each gaunt insinuation  
stroked on dawn.

## NOTHING SOFT, NOTHING LOVED

—Cape Breton, Nova Scotia

Fat swells coil on a headland I've never seen,  
its seagull-crested tongue of rock and light  
rammed into ocean. We walk to cliff's edge.  
If there were a path, it would be a precarious path,  
and I turn to you wanting to say, "Stop."  
This is an edge. There is no path down."

Far out at sea, the long swells round toward shore,  
Below us, waves flake into salty dust  
and the hard rattle of pebble on stone.

I have never been to this place.  
I have never talked to you at the edge of this cliff  
nor watched these torn rocks feather into air.

*Victor Trelawny*

## WHAT THE LAND OFFERS

The fence goes on to great length  
Like an answer to a difficult question  
The farms pose. Because of hunger  
We believe the abundant bough only so far.  
But here the wheatfields combine  
With what the land offers, rise as with yeast  
In the fall sun between barns, and become  
The immense tables of the world—  
Peaceful, plentiful,  
The silos like salt shakers,  
The almost circular lazy Susan towns . . .

So we drive along the empty roadway,  
Unaware of the silence  
Entering through the lowered windows  
Like an unseasonable heat

Tightening our throats. Anything we might say  
Would overwhelm us, slam the brakes  
To the floorboard and send the car skidding  
Into the ditch. If at length  
The fence repeats itself, we listen  
As the fine wire of the argument returns again  
To the rain-blackened stakes, the premises  
Every few feet.

In the backseat  
The pears glimmer in their deep crate.  
Our children sleep in the seat ahead  
Of us. As the light dims, we can almost  
See them through the windshield,  
Reflected in our reflected faces, wrapped  
In each other's arms, waking  
Up into the world we leave them.

*Fred Muratori*

#### CONFESSIONAL POEM

The moon is sludge grey, pin-striped  
in places like a patchwork suit.  
My blood is the color of Colby cheese  
and each night, after dinner gets cold,  
I open my veins with a potato peeler.

Never in my life have I practiced  
before mirrors.  
Both parents loved me dearly.  
I got A's in school.  
My car has fantastic gas mileage.  
There's nothing in my dresser drawers  
anyone would be afraid to touch.

I tell you these things  
because I long for your resentment.

I want you to skirt me widely,  
as you would a rabid goat or cripple,  
and pretend that I don't matter.  
I want your poems to stand  
for everything I think is funny.  
I want you to look away.  
What I do is better left to shadow  
and grey-green landscapes  
that would not support the barest life.

*Ronald Wallace*

Three Poems

#### ART WORK

My daughter is drawing a picture  
of me, comical figure: my hair  
a spike of asparagus, my face  
a round tomato, fat and red,  
my eyes two curvy worms  
tugging at their hole, my mouth.  
She is bending over this garden,  
tending it carefully, absorbed  
in her own small making.  
I smile, and return to my larger work  
where, later, I find myself  
scratching my thick green hair,  
squeezing my ripe plump cheeks,  
my old eyes squirming away from me,  
tugging at my blind mouth.

#### SPRING

5 A.M. We are safe  
inside our house, sleeping,  
when, suddenly, the sun  
reaches in through the window,  
grabs us, shakes us awake.  
The thin sky cracks open

to a clatter of birds:  
waxwing, towhee, junco, jay;  
the plum tree erupts with blossoms;  
the bloodroot and toothwort,  
scylla and trout lily fester.  
Even the tulips open their mouths,  
and the moss uncloses its fist.  
Spring. We lie awake listening  
as the sparrows and warblers clatter  
at the windows, the wild  
flowers nudge toward the house.  
And down in the basement,  
dark and voracious,  
the carpenter ants slowly  
continue their work.  
I hold my wife closer.  
We do not go back to sleep.

#### CONVERSATION WITH THE MAKER OF CLICHES

Up here above the treetops:  
*green heads*, you say, *green hair*.  
Why not green water waving?  
A thousand locusts hovering? Green air?

The branches, now, the bark. You say:  
*the long arms of dark women*, *mossy skin*.  
Why not the hard scars of barnacles?  
Dead husks? Stuck wings molting?

Now the roots and trunk. You say:  
*the long body*, *crossed thighs*, *soft toes*.  
Why not a sunken Spanish galleon?  
Dead cicada dreaming toward the sun?

But now the leaves like fingers  
open in the poem, combing their  
green hair, green arms holding my throat.  
They love me; won't let go.

#### Carolyn Wright

613

Never bring your elbows to this class.  
There's barely room to duck the dean's eye  
coming at you like a clammy funhouse hand.  
You wake up at dawn, love nailed high  
on your list of intentions, remind yourself  
to hold your blood's calls in abeyance  
till the right bells ring, get to class  
on time. This time, we learn how  
to manipulate the inside views—words  
that have heard of each other,  
ridden up elevators together,  
never yet been introduced. You try  
to remember what comes after how are you.  
But it's a damp fuse, and the omniscient  
author's prose monotonous as the barroom  
conquests in the late late shows.  
You doze; lovers drift side-by-side  
in your thoughts like leaves on a river.  
You peel off superlatives like clothes;  
the dream stands up to repeated readings;  
there's not one adjective to edit out.  
You start; it's over. The class falls out  
like a regiment—the same show of feet,  
meters winding down in all the faces,  
briefcases tight with thoughts  
too stuffy to admit they've met.  
Left out, like a student from one  
of those small, angry countries, you see  
your best harangues have dwindled, sunk  
to footnotes in some rival text;  
even old lovers, whose best moans  
quote yours, keep the credit. A secret zero  
starts its slow growth in your heart.  
It will look for allies everywhere.

Carol McCormach

ROUGH DRAFTS

December 1975

- 1 The tree of dreams burns too long  
in a windy alcove  
grey and balding  
ready for the splintered alley  
  
We neglect that knowledge
- 2 There is no mantel  
a sock falls  
and crops up lost
- 3 Five o'clock  
  
A flock of lights  
blown to stars in the fraying branches  
  
Where your fingers graze  
fine nerves sing and scatter  
sparks in a tilled, implacable landscape
- 4 Christmas was stillborn  
cards mailed late  
the unrevealing ink smeared  
not by a tear or snow but drizzle  
  
It was dusk all day  
in the chinked room the lamplight struck  
like fire from flint  
the hush a bruise
- 5 We wait listening in the sheets  
the rain pocks mud  
  
Or cut our rum with apple juice  
pronounce it wine when we are thirsty  
shadows on the white curtain fabricating  
snowdrifts

- 6 From the calendar's stiff hinge  
the untried days  
at a time pressed for resolution  
dangle

And while your peremptory arms enclose me  
I am wary  
nursed on air by wistful ascetics

But this is where we meet ourselves  
in this house  
in such a season  
eking frail harvests from our separate crust

*alvin greenberg*

*poem beginning with 'beginning'  
and ending with 'ending'*

beginning on the wrong note's everything:  
you cannot sing your way from there  
to where you wanted: you can't begin

again: back where you started simply is  
no more, even though it flaps in the wind  
at you like an american flag raised upside

down. so beginnings signify distress and  
middles fill up quickly with the stuff you're  
distressed about—beginnings, mostly—and

endings! let night come even more quickly  
and save us from the endings, save us  
from having to reel the flag back down

in this damned wind where even the wrong  
notes won't carry and the flag's as big as  
a parking lot: just try folding it yourself

if you think you can manage an ending.

*Mark Jarman*

WRITING FOR NORA

I should be pleasing myself, you know,  
old woman, though I owe  
myself to you. Through the hospital window  
edged with ferns, the trucks and birds appear,  
gearing up hill, up air.  
Should they be included?  
They have not been informed you are here.  
Or that I, waiting with you  
for your last seizure, can't  
stand to listen again  
as your dictaphone winds through  
the summer of the first:  
the buckets of sweet water,  
the sponges stroking and stroking  
your wrists and ankles cinched  
because your prone dancing tore  
too many sheets . . . Each time I've almost  
got it, the plastic  
red recording tape ticks off  
and again you accuse me,  
thinking me one of the brothers who sent you to fetch  
foxfire in the woods, and followed, and watched  
laughing when you fell down.  
I can't convince you they are gone.  
Bold as the girl  
you think you are you twirl  
around in bed, and thrust your knees  
in my face,  
pointing to scars as fresh cuts,  
to the shine of the loose skin.

Desperate story-teller,  
those words of yours that wore me out  
sworn on tapes crammed in a box  
will be lost.  
You know I owe you them.

And you will twist  
me everywhere to find, at least,  
one way to tell how you died  
the way you would tell it, digressions turning  
and twisting till I fall  
as you fell in your fit,  
Grandmother, ghost, epileptic,  
caught, sick of it.

*Ron Slate*

PASTORALE

An afternoon that demands  
appreciation, plenty  
of reasons to take that drive.  
Pulling off the road, you want  
to feel a part of all this.  
The book says it's meadowlarks  
on the phone lines, that's Queen Anne's  
lace beside the fence, that's mint.  
You don't know him but a boy  
leans his rusty bicycle  
on the car and says "Them's red  
poll Herefords," and all this time  
they've been staring at the Ford,  
the glint of your belt buckle.  
They're not planning anything,  
not apprehensive, just fixed  
the way you are fixed on them.  
When they go back to the grass  
it's only you and this one  
cow, eyes locked, your bodies dead  
weight and attracting horseflies,  
until a red-winged bird flies  
between, and the cow lets go  
for no reason, and you let  
go to save the day from dread.

POWER FAILURE

In darkness someone returns  
his glass to the table with a soft tick.  
We question the roof.  
A huge oak has not toppled  
over the wires. We reach out  
our hands at the ends of our arms.

Flames appear gliding up the stairs.  
Lovers rise and paddle  
through the air over Pennsylvania.  
The farmer drifts over his fields, in moonlight  
admiring the pattern: alfalfa, drainage, sweet corn.  
Now the police are playing their sirens.

Night surges over the buildings,  
against the picture window with a few stars.

The city has vanished.  
The children have shut their eyes.  
How will we find our way back.

MY NEIGHBOR HOSING HER LAWN  
IN THE DARK

And now the roses—arcing cool rain  
into the garden, the dry loam talks almost.  
Heavy blossoms rock on their stems.  
All afternoon bending her rake, white oak  
leaves catching on her  
dizzy head, she rolled brittle piles into the fire.

Where is her husband?  
From the stoop she can reach the whole lawn,  
swishing spray over the grass.  
What did their impossible son shout at him?

Doors slammed, cups springing from their saucers.  
Now the tomatoes. Now  
the sunflowers looking down.  
Their only child, what with the war  
and the payments, and then he was gone.

She is dreaming on the dark porch,  
water rumbling in the hose.  
Flowers grow lush  
grasping her hem and hand—and now  
the roses, now vegetables sprawled on the soil.  
Her beauty is still inside,  
in a summer dress wandering  
back and forth through the weedy field.

TROY, OHIO

My father built dream  
houses on scratch pads,  
piled high on his desk.

Mother hated a mess.  
She must have been Greek.  
She burned his secret city.

He sold shoes that year.  
It was only a job,  
but he gave his customer

a good fit: enough room  
for the toes, arch support,  
“a home for each foot.”

Who is ever that lucky?  
I carry him with me.  
I am my father's house.

## FARMING THE RIVER

He seeded the slow current  
with stones, and watched  
his broken face compose itself

time after time, barely  
transparent, dark so soon.  
It would rain, enough to grow

deeper gullies, new stones  
to bear him down, like sons  
that drifted off, weary

of working a family farm.  
He'd meant to plow straight  
to Colorado, but always veered

at the property line: drawn  
to the river, murky-eyed,  
angry at all of his planting.

*Marjorie Hawksworth*

## I NEVER CLEAN IT

The oven is black.  
A charcoal potato  
and puffballs of carbon  
from the sweet juice of pies  
lie at the back of the cave.  
Their substance is like the dry  
yet faintly shiny tissue of snakes  
that emerged from pills  
ignited on Fourth of July morning  
when pyromaniacs  
sat on the front porch steps  
at ten o'clock in the morning  
because they could not wait  
in their burning  
until the time of sparklers.

*Vassar Miller*

Two Poems

## A RESIGNATION

They sit, attended by a yes  
from which the world's no falls away  
unheeded like the dogs that press  
upon my heels day after day.

Although I pass their secret door  
and feel the shadows of their song,  
I try to enter there no more  
as once, where I do not belong,

tracking the carpets everywhere,  
staining their sofas with my sweat,  
my pause, the best part of my prayer,  
makes angels happy I forget

until at long last I have crept  
to that same door I could not win  
by pain or other right except  
a tired child's to be taken in.

## OBSTINATE

Like Adam I am flushed out nude  
Though I have hidden in the wood:  
I cannot bless my solitude.

Like Cain I will not pour out blood  
As much too cruel, much too crude  
To my hell of solitude.

Oh Lord, You are a hard man, shrewd  
And cautious, miserly with good:  
I cannot bless my solitude.

Yet I believe that if I could,  
At its dark root I might find God,  
Whose other name is solitude.

## TO MY MOTHER

after Amichai

1 Night, the blackness of the telephone,  
you on the hook  
hold down all other voices.

Mother, I say, Mother why don't you write  
the story of your life?

—Oh, if everyone did that—

2 Though children are raised from breasts, those halves  
as clean as cereal bowls,

those bowls are modestly put away  
when not in use,  
a pear or peach  
painted in the center depth of each.

3 Mother sat on the beach and out of her knitting bag  
grew a red sweater.  
Sand knitted into the purl,  
sand for eggs and long distance calls,  
sand such as wore down the teeth of ancestors who ate  
dried fish.

And she gave it to her granddaughter.  
Secretly a moth gave it also  
to her newest born.

4 One's history should be blank  
to show you didn't use yourself  
for selfish ends.

Once you held your baby by a palm tree.  
Your hands itched in the humidity.  
You smile toward the camera, but the truth

is you are gazing out to sea.

## THE BLUE SKY

Air, light blue,  
light's blue,  
its nut breath,  
sneezing,  
its fixtures  
purple locust pods,  
hollow root  
a buried  
bushel basket,  
its sounds  
soft swats  
at tennis balls,  
whale-like  
snorting of bison,  
storm puddles  
behind time,  
its clouding,  
smoking up,  
its blowing clean.  
Every day, every day  
it's clear,  
the river dropping,  
the hill too dry  
for mushrooms,  
dinners  
meaty with fat  
poured into cans,  
and stolen suet  
drags a nuthatch  
to the ground.  
So formal  
I don't expect

the shot:  
the frozen  
bird songs:  
the deft transmission  
of a sound  
for practice.  
Breathe quick,  
the goose  
wedge out its wings,  
the tree top  
look straight up.  
Where is the target?  
I look.  
Assembling hawks,  
a web raised  
like the frame of a barn,  
and people being solitary  
fire lookouts,  
each reads the sky  
for an alternative.  
But it is  
the blue  
that keeps on falling  
in and around  
the spent shell,  
the blue  
that tumbles  
doubling up  
above the autumn  
stockpiles.

TORTURE

The animals were weeping copiously.  
The plants had stolen their mystery

and rammed it down far beyond their roots.  
The sky had sucked it up and dissipated it.

The ocean was rolling it long distances.  
It was no longer theirs.

They hated themselves. It was hell.  
They were now no more than animals.

What they had was on the outside. Peeked at.  
It had become part of what wasn't quite.

Once we were each king in a world of meaning.  
Now the world is king. We are meaningless.

The shepherd said, No! You are spotless!  
Guilt is always blameless. Inconsistency

is the edge of the shadow. Where can it go  
when light fills every corner of the meadow?

CLARITY

There was nothing there.  
Perception justified by itself.

Detail taking over the whole.  
Depth risen to the surface, alone.

Over and over we repeated  
the name of God, the animals said.

In each movement we uncovered  
new logic and became wiser.

With every bite and breath  
the world cleared, gained

in the sovereign presence  
of the senses. Something.

What was it? asked the shepherd. The element  
of sight? The source of light? What was perceived?

It was the clarity itself we saw,  
the animals sang. Absolutely free and tame.

Miller Williams

HUSBAND

She's late. He mixes another drink.  
He turns on the television and watches  
a woman kissing the wrong man.  
He looks at his watch. He feels close  
to the cat. Well Cat, he says.  
He feels foolish.

He mixes another drink and stands  
turning the stem of the glass  
back and forth in his fingers.  
This also makes him feel foolish.  
He looks at his watch. Well Cat, he says.  
Lights turn into the driveway.  
He slumps into his chair. He  
kicks off his shoes and spreads  
the open newspaper peacefully  
over his face.  
He hears the tiny grating of the key.  
His heart knocks to get out.

*Paula Rankin*

### THE MAN WHO INVENTED FIREWORKS

Once a man with Roman candles gunpowdering  
his head went out at night  
to find sky's inattention  
resembling too much the ceiling  
towards which an invalid strains  
his dimmed eyes. Or perhaps

he simply weighed the various acts  
by which one is remembered  
and chose combustion, the vocation  
in which whole moments are strung  
on short fuses, tattooing air with vermilion,  
emerald, flumes of white fire.

He may have foreseen us,  
huddled by one shore of Jekyll Island,  
awaiting promised flags, chrysanthemums, riders  
pinwheeling unbuckable stallions;  
and if so, predicted a market  
for charcoal, saltpeter flaring from mouths  
of medieval statues, while priests  
uttered prayers on atonement.

He may have sensed that the path to attention  
would not change much,  
that those with strained eyes  
would still be around  
drop-mouthed at the trick of ignition,  
of getting shows not only off the ground  
but shot through the sky's epidermis  
and the skins of each other's eyes,  
a searing of tissue  
to last the whole length  
of its moment.  
For who gets enough attention?

Perhaps he knew how some nights  
these collisions of stars, shells, saxons  
would still be the only holes  
worth congregating for,

how that is all we would own,  
that, and the shared, humbling aftermath  
of backdrop.

*Joan LaBombard*

### MARBLES

They are his planets,  
his suns and milky spheres, his red Mars.  
Their clustered fires seethe in his pocket  
compelling his mind  
till he must touch them, count them  
over and over for luck;  
aggie and cat's-eye, his brilliant clearies,  
the prized green shooter  
where all the leaves of all his summers burn.  
Ambling onto the playground,  
he chalks the ring of a universe.  
Other boys drift over  
to watch a champion set out  
marbles like pigmy moons, globes of ice  
and crystal, closed worlds  
with miniature rivers in them,  
colored like sky or tigers, vivid as blood.  
It is Genghis Khan baiting his surly chieftains  
with hope of treasure,  
who hunches beside the circled suns, and aims  
that Pearl of Marbles, which obeys  
his eye and cunning thumb  
so wickedly.

## LATECOMERS

To all those who have come too late  
 and found the doors closed against them,  
 the dance hall doors, the music  
 stolen by talk and distance,  
 the gates to the sea, the subway barriers,  
 the license bureau doors so there can be  
 no marriages tonight,  
 no barnraisings, no rooftrees lifted up,  
 no lot lines run,  
 no woodlot walked off,  
 no garden in the flood plain ploughed,  
 no key turned in the ignition,  
 no border crossed:  
 strike up! we will dance where we are,  
 live in the open, become  
 the teachers of their children.

## BAGGAGE

The man at the door says it's  
 lost luggage coming home by cab  
 with the apologies of the line's agent  
 who hopes that I will travel with them again.  
 Travel? I can't remember traveling.  
 Perhaps a former tenant? but then  
 I've lived behind this door for twenty years.  
 Greyhound? I hazard, United?  
 Union Pacific? Grace? but the man is gone.  
 This has happened before.  
 I've opened a few.  
 That overnighter by the stairs  
 contains a green chiffon, a color I never wear,  
 a flapper style from the twenties, and snapshots  
 plainly of the traveler's relatives,  
 inscribed in German.

In the matched cases, a handgun. It's been fired.  
 In this flowered hatbox with the Continental labels  
 a perfume bottle is obviously broken.  
 In the heavy leather, wool shirts, moths,  
 some excellent hunting boots, the smell  
 of male sweat and alcoholic urine.  
 Others I have hesitated to open. I know,  
 I ought to have called the Salvation Army  
 long ago, or piled them at the curb—  
 my ludicrous responsibility! I keep them  
 for whoever it is who takes my name to travel,  
 though the hall, large as it is, begins to be  
 narrow to walk in, and nights lately  
 I've begun to dream again—the bell rings,  
 I can't get past the baggage to the door,  
 the cabbie swears, can't be made to hear me;  
 sounds: something heavy—trunks?—crates?—  
 piled against the door, the cab driving away,  
 someone's fists pounding on leather, latches snapping.

## IN A FILM WINDING BACKWARDS

I come out of my car  
 rump first and heel  
 to my front door,  
 which opens to a hand  
 I reach back blind.  
 My wife unhugs me,  
 I fill my raised glass  
 with juice, fork my eggs  
 out of my mouth,  
 fit them whole on my plate.  
 All as it was.  
 My shirt shaken off, folded,  
 my bath up the nozzle,  
 I muss my bed, sit on it,

slip into the covers  
and hear the alarm  
set me to sleep.  
Day before day  
I return what I have  
until I am cared for,  
cared for, cared for,  
and all's put away.

#### HEART

I shift my pillow so I won't hear my heart  
knock like the mad boy who burned his room.  
I would leave secret everything inside  
that floats in blood, yet in the dark  
I rummage in my guts for bad news.

Again I cheat him out of his comic books.  
I am up to my chin in his funny books.  
His starved face, his raw picked nose  
pressed against his window, he knocks to get me  
in there. I drag his comics home in my wagon.

He heaps my foreign stamps, my woodcarving set,  
my new shirt in tissue in its box  
under his bed and puts a match to them.  
When they pull him out the back door,  
he kicks the air and screams I have cheated him.

That afternoon I shove him onto his face  
and sit on him. "You moron, you stink you're so dumb,"  
I set him straight. I educate him. I take  
his hair in my hands and teach him to eat grass.  
Despite all this, he seems to learn nothing.

My deeds knot in my belly like string saved.  
My blunt, resourceful bloody ghost beating,  
I want sleep! But through the shades  
my windows form, and a beam of dust,  
and cars rattle up and down the street.

#### *Katherine Soniat*

#### IN ANOTHER MOLD

After too much night-staring, taken in  
by constellations and carried off  
by underworld heroes, I began walking  
lines of wet, warm streets  
in what was to have been November.  
I'd come for blessings, an earthly shape  
to support me in this cloudcover  
called lowland heat.

The asphalt surface winds, the houses  
repeat themselves, but belief breathes  
easy on scrubbed doorsteps in the sun,  
ammonia rising proudly from them every day.  
Front yards are built-in squares of belief,  
resting under the calm hands and plaster  
of a little blue Virgin.

Slowly I make my ears deaf to the backyard  
predicament of an old hunting dog  
longing for a last dream of trees, forgetting  
when it was, if ever, I thrived on grass fields  
opening with dark deer and stars.

Now I am ready to live upfront, settle  
under my own small flat roof,  
paint my bedroom brilliant lavender,  
shock myself with locked windows hung  
with yards of orange organza.  
I would never be touched by the giant  
side of seasons so liable to blow  
in through screens.

Only at noon will I trust myself  
behind the house to take pleasure  
clearing trees for a fenced field

of plastic poinsettia. Come fall  
I'll clip their wires, stick them  
at my blue Virgin's feet, pray  
never to see clouds spread  
with blue openings or remember  
how the dark made me think  
with big eyes.

*Christopher Howell*

Three Poems

#### MEMORIES OF MESS DUTY AND THE WAR

Garbage went over the fantail, boiling into blue  
white wake. Among shark snouts rising to sample that  
sweetness, it rode like the raw  
stuff of hope. We watched. Our aprons dripping.  
Who knew what we, six hundred miles from shore,  
thought? What we were doing there (the abstract  
crime afloat) kept glittering  
phosphor-like in the day to day, unnamed. We didn't guess  
the sea of harm on which we moved. We smoked.  
We missed our women in the glo-bake blackness  
of the crew's compartment, hated brass, cursed  
our uniforms and thought that was enough. Grinning,  
thoughtless, the cargo burned at Asia. Let the garbage sink  
then, let sharks sever bone from scrap  
and keep on following. Still, on the floor,  
our longings and the spilled blood  
gathered.

#### DEAR MRS. TERRY

Johnson said, "yes sir, Mr. Carney, right away, sir, aye aye,"  
in his sleep. The ship droned in the lead hot Gulf into which Cadet  
Pilot Terry shot his plane, the impact of the catapult socking him  
forward, his gear snagging the stick. "I don't *know*, Captain, he

cleared the flightdeck and went down like a goose, sir." Fifty fathoms. Enough oxygen for half an hour.

Locked in the chill black with his prayers, wondering did the  
marker buoy surface? Could divers find him so far down, so cold,  
dark? No time to sing into the squawker. Just that rush of shimmered blue,  
the steely shadow and the jolt as 41,000 tons steamed  
over the closed seam that had allowed him in, then darkening  
stripes of aqua through the thick way down.

Black scotch broom pods snapped. A '41 Chevy rolled past  
four years of NROTC, sacrificed summers, haircuts, harassment  
from fellow students; all for this? Thirty minutes in a slow-filling  
memory of light? Water lapped. The whaleboat came back full of  
exhausted divers; sun scratching the stanchions, the useless day-glo  
life preservers. And Johnson slept, book over his face; the writing of  
that next-of-kin letter making a wide, slow approach through the  
dead chain of command.

#### WATER SCULPTURE

*for Patricia White, 1944 to 1968*

Wrecked bits of face and speed  
come back; and the bottle of pills. Such small  
food for breathing, Patricia. When the dead files  
let you loose, I almost catch the poor star of absence  
in my palms. Bill's dead, too. Cancer  
flooding him like honey or the lost notes of a drum  
buried in sand. And Grandpa, whom you delighted, broke  
his heart on the kitchen floor. So unreasonable  
these departures for the cold other shore.

Here in the high burnt shadow of Horsetooth, far  
far from the sea, I murmur only  
a hollow bone of you and bring this nothing-stitched skin  
of words. Take it . . . please. I know our lives and the carved sea  
come  
to water. Not even grief will wake you  
from those phenobarbital arms. May they love you senseless  
and forgive us your penny of sleep, forgive you  
that you dove so deep.

*Jack Crawford, Jr.*

BRUSHING AWAY GNATS

I just had a bowl of cornflakes with a banana sliced over it. good. good. and the milk cool going down the throat on a hot night. remembering in a pool hall, years ago, the clicking of the balls. the lampshade over each green table. the leather pockets. those pockets! the soft commotion of men. their sliding shoes. the positions they assumed to make their shots. the cue stick, smooth, thicker at one end, tapering. good to feel, good to slide over the pronged fingers. how they cranked the tip with chalk, as if it were one of the great pleasures. the fingers grinding it on. as if it would hold the stick steady. as if the ball wouldn't slip. and the cue ball riding over the green baize, and the click of collision. and harlan—and david. were you really there, harlan? and did you marry claudia? and did you not write for the morning daily how the ball game went that afternoon and how people sitting in the bleachers had to brush away gnats? what a touch! when the riot broke at the penitentiary you, david, got the assignment. what a whirl! what a going out of the office! what a thing to be doing: covering the great riot! going out—all of us watching. and when you returned, dashing in as if you'd stopped the presses. what a thing it was. with that hat you wore, your sharp face. those dark, burning eyes. and snatching the notes out of your pockets. dashing off your jacket. snaring it on the back of your chair. taking your seat before the machine. staring at your papers.

i can feel your concentration. you there—  
sitting before it: the whole thing.  
bringing it all together. the riot, the pleas, the blood.  
your quotes from the warden. et cetera. and how  
to find the lead. i feel your head working!  
how you shaped your lead, david,  
i don't remember. i'm sure it was good.  
full of your dash and intensity. as you dragged it  
nine times round the trojan walls and smashed it  
shield on shield and left it ringing.  
the pool hall murmurs with voices. the soft  
commotion of men, their sliding shoes.  
pronged fingers propped for the pool stick.

*Susan Stewart*

Two Poems

TERROR

A man has died in the house next door,  
rain pours through the open window  
and the curtains flap their wet arms  
on the bricks. Upstairs a phone rings  
four times, for you. There is nothing  
so prosaic as terror. Even as I write this,  
a lamp is turned over. The debutante's hair  
catches fire. The heroine breaks her teeth  
on the tracks and hopes that the train  
will loosen the ropes. Wars break out  
in the subways, and if I pick up the phone,  
I know no one will answer, nothing so  
voiceless as terror. A child feels  
the hammering of his mother's heart  
and swears he will never leave the womb  
alive. Snow drifts slowly on the insides  
on the windows like the ponderous moaning  
of widows. The piano refuses to rhyme.  
Life as we know it runs out of our reach,  
even as I write this, police fill the streets,

their horses limp along like battered children.  
There is nothing so deliberate as terror,  
like a wound that doesn't hurt and won't  
stop bleeding, like a coat lined with guns  
and razors, terror wounds us with its  
silence and blindness, wounds us with the  
calculated violence of lovers. Strangers  
are tearing at your books and letters,  
some are slitting your mattress with knives.  
Even as I write this, blood soaks the feathers,  
and the dead man stands behind you, terrified  
by this poem. His skin is luminous  
with rain and weeping, and he carries  
his voice in his arms like a child.

#### THE WAY THE MILKWEED PODS

No, the way a chicken watches his wings  
lug his heart toward the woodpile and the great  
red tear swells on his throat, nothing  
ever dies simply. Your right hand torn with splinters  
and your left hand freckled with blood, the way  
you walk so slowly toward the woodpile and fold  
the wings into the basin, no, nothing so simply,  
each foot dragging a world behind the other.  
Remember this, the way the milkweed pods  
fly open with a shout, the way their white  
wings sail out into the meadow with the sureness  
of some immortal animal, sail out  
on the stillest, most windless day of summer  
when the crickets burn up with static  
and a single hair sticks wetly to your cheek.  
There is a little money beneath the carpet,  
a little milk still cold in the bucket,  
there are two blue letters in the mailbox  
that think they are patches of sky.  
This very minute the bread is rising on the table  
with the unworried brow of a wise man.  
The cows are out on the road again and in the parlor

Louise begins to play her violin, the name  
of the song is "The way their white wings"  
and the curtains are throwing lace roses  
on her shoulders and her shoulders are aching  
from holding up the song. There is a room  
in the house you haven't found yet, where the ceiling  
leans down to rest on the window and brushes  
the hair from the eyes of a woman, who sits there  
all day sewing clouds to her apron.  
She will lend you her needle to take out the splinters,  
but when she tells you it's simple,  
remember what I've said.

*Dick Hamby*

Two Poems

#### GOING HOME WITH THE DROWNED MAN

There is a moment in the air when the sky  
falls away like a rising, blue balloon  
and you think that what must splash  
will be your life. The cold water  
closes around you and there is nothing  
in the swirl of the sea to hold on to,  
no hand or word to say you are not alone.  
So, you begin calmly to move your arms,  
undulate, flatten your hands like fins  
and you find it is so easy, swimming,  
this new feeling of being at home,  
everything decided, necessary. Soon  
you learn to love the taste of brine and  
small fish, the smell of your new mate,  
her nudge and bump, the slide of her  
thick body against yours, her gentle song.  
Rising and falling in waves or sounding deep,  
you glide in a wide current where time is  
the distance between leaving and returning  
to places that are never lost  
in the net of the past.

## RUNNING BACK

It is late afternoon and he  
Waits for the snap.  
This will be the last play.  
He'll break up the middle,  
Put on all the moves, be free  
At mid-field, running for the score.

The crowd goes wild.  
They cheer as he leaps  
Over linemen, speeds  
Past the Safety, sprints  
Into the end-zone, turns  
Up the runway, leaves  
The stadium behind.

Bus drivers, huddled  
Over schooners in the First and Ten,  
Watch dumbly as he strides by.  
He cuts into the street, sidesteps  
Honking cars, zig-zags by people  
Who stop to stare. Steaming,  
Panting, thumping the pavement,  
He startles shopkeepers closing up,  
Lovers pressed against the bricks  
In dead-end alleys. Families,  
Saying grace at firelight dinners,  
Hesitate, listen to what seems  
The thud of footsteps across their lawns.

Out in the fields, it is cold and dark.  
His breath puffs out before him  
Like a ghost. The sweet smell of hay  
Hangs in the brittle air. Each step  
Sinks into the marshy turf; he pushes off,  
Rises, soars past stands of trees.  
Lights of towns float by in silence.  
The sky is so wide  
He could be a star falling into it.

## Hollis Summers

Two Poems

### PETROGLYPHS

The nieces and nephews of lieutenant governors  
Compose the roadside signs for tourists:  
Historic Marker, Item of Interest, Landmark—  
They are full of words.

Take Indian rocks;  
The writers like to say the Indians wrote,  
When, in fact, they drew, I know  
Having drawn at a poem.

Are these marks a form of magic?  
The writers ask the sweating travelers.  
Are these marks religious, ceremonious,  
Or are they simply fun?

The answer is yes,  
Foolish nieces and nephews.

### THE PENITENT

Yes, his  
Double breasted Eterna-Wear  
Shirt of hair  
Is

Lined  
With violet and vermilion  
Ribbioned Dacron;  
The design

Of orchid  
Nylon flosses  
Embosses  
*Quid*

*Est*  
And *Quid Pro Quo*  
As the inside motto  
Of his chest.

Guarantees  
Notwithstanding, a hair shirt  
Attracts dirt.  
Laundries

Demand  
Outrageous fees  
For specialities.  
Washing by hand

Is only impossible.  
He, loathing poseurs,  
Provident, endures  
His gospel.

Devout,  
He wears his shirt, a sweater  
Of fur,  
Inside out.

### *Sherry Rind*

#### WHO'S HARLEY-DAVIDSON?

I had to slide my fingers down that long silver run of exhaust pipe—  
and burned them. On my first ride the boy called me a natural.  
Said I leaned well, rode light.

Years later, my lover rode a bike all winter. A foot-rest fell off  
and I learned to balance with one foot, cling with my knees.  
I arrived at parties frozen into a bow-legged walk, brushing shreds  
of his long blond hair from my mouth and eyes. We steamed like  
horses.

He said you could lose your balance leaning wrong; you must go  
with it  
even if, as his did, the bike leans into the pavement and leaves you  
fifty yards away with your face scraped clean and a hole in your lip  
you smoke your cigarette through. His face made the girls cry.  
I said, love should be better than that.  
He said, you'd go farther with a Harley.

### *Arthur Miller*

#### WHY THE DEAD RETURN

I  
Boredom. Heaven the white hole  
is managed by idiots.  
Hell is smaller than they imagined:

composed of whips and alarm clocks  
stuck on Monday morning  
like a broken recording.

II  
Each Spring they flop out of trees.  
Playing hooky they gloat,  
cruise for another hot time

among the living: snaking  
onto supermarket lines  
gobbling fast food with French fries

and rejoicing as if they  
too were alive. Rituals  
replace feast days and the last

rites for the dead. They request  
the colonel to cater their  
brief escapes from the casket.

### III

Curiosity. They peer  
eyes bloated, staggering behind  
blimp-like bellies. They regard

with total recall the hum  
before that inopportune  
quiet, but the first return

is the detective pruning space  
between there and here. His nose  
mashed to the pavement detects

the criminal, an odor  
carving smoke into footprints  
vivid as the dead, vivid

as the final smell, foolish  
one that never died. He stalks  
the villain, sniffing clues

and rounding up the usual  
suspects, but wonders if he overlooked  
some obvious aroma.

### IV

So they come, unlike their birth:  
this time they are well prepared  
dragging hindsight to guide them.

Their umbrellas stuck open  
expecting prophecies or  
visitors from Uranus

they bring sketch pads, cameras,  
and cages to capture life,  
their first obituary.

### *Edward Hirsch*

#### A LETTER

Come home. I don't want to sound frightened,  
but this morning when I got back from work  
I couldn't scrub the grease off my hand;

it had settled into my skin like a deep film,  
the veins were black, and the barges  
were blurred on the flayed rivers in my palm.

The warehouses were empty. The streets were jumbled,  
and the canals tunneled out in all directions  
none of them homeward, though somehow

they all funneled back into an open basin,  
a blank sea, like a tree gathering in  
its last branches, or a map smudged with dirt.

I don't want to sound desperate, but all night  
I could hear my feet opening narrow graves  
in the sawdust, the rats crawling through a maze

of pipes inside my chest; and I spent  
so many hours stacking crates inside of crates  
inside of crates, like paper cups, so many crates,

so many other places. . . . Come home.  
This morning when I pressed my hand to the glass  
I saw a black sun buried in sludge

and a thousand rivers clogged with waste  
running into the basin of a single map  
muddied with features, so many features,

so many faces, but none of them yours.

## IS EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT

Mother calls. My sisters aren't happy.  
One of them is so heavy she's tipping over  
into diabetes, another is going blind,  
another is flying home to escape her brats.

This time she doesn't mention my dead brothers,  
or the one who stays abroad like a war crime—  
only the one who had his head cut open;  
he's drifted into another drunk collision.

For once I've got good news to leave her:  
I have a girlfriend now who's broken records  
where I'm concerned; I'm almost getting younger.  
But mother says she has to get a scraping,

so I report the black she's used to hearing—  
that child support still bites me like a watchdog,  
and I can't know what my children look like  
if no one sends me pictures, no one writes.

I leave the best news to her; she says  
the old housekeeper got drunk at the last shower,  
and she herself and father's big successor  
will rendezvous at a swim-meet in the Midwest.

Mother waits for me to round her call off  
by telling her I'm going to live forever  
in spite of headaches and having no more children.  
The false news chokes the bad down like cold peas.

## HER PICTURES

These are the pictures in her room:  
Cary Grant supporting her mother's hand  
in his, grinning at her engagement ring;  
Ophelia in a storm of posies,  
lakefronts with nothing on them but ellipses.

And this is what she does: she wears

her nightgown around all day sometimes,  
pushes up her nose and rolls her eyes back.  
Her farts pop her out of her chair, she laughs  
like the roof of the jungle at moonrise.

This is where she goes: south  
to the little cheerleader pleats she jumped  
for the sky in, the Salvation Army  
to try on hats, my house to play dead,  
Oz to come back north like a wedding ring.

And this is what she knows: A Munchkin  
was her babysitter, Garland blew it,  
the Witch is in commercials, the future  
churns the flats of sleep up like a twister,  
all her pictures of herself are in the air.

## MY DAUGHTER ENTERS HIGH SCHOOL

Maybe the nuns will like her, but I don't think so.  
They'll know the Devil comes to her in person  
by her frosty lips, her blue eyelids, the streaks  
his fingers leave in her limp hair,  
the bells about her ankle which drive them crazy.

They'll fix her good: her breasts my grown-up lover  
thinks outdo her own by a full size,  
they'll flatten in starch, and drag down her backside  
in wool pleats, pack her feet in Oxfords.  
They'll stick her head in a white hood and teach her

decline and conjugate for Jesus' sake,  
knee-in-the-Devil's-groin, thumb-in-his-eye,  
give her homework to fall asleep on in her clothes,  
while her boyfriend—nine feet tall and growing—  
whines on the ladder against her window.

This fall it starts. Maybe it's good for her;  
her eyes don't take to shadow as it is.  
But damn the nuns—the same who schooled her mother  
to be the personal secretary of the Lord—  
if they cut short her career as an outcast.

### *About Our Contributors*

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