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Poetry

NORTHWEST



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POETRY NORTHWEST SUMMER 1975 VOLUME XVI, NUMBER 2

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POETRY NORTHWEST

SUMMER 1975

Gary Gildner

Four Poems

LIFE & DEATH IN SKOKIE

However it began, it began almost at once—

He would dress her up like a little Greenland doll
& kiss the insides of her elbows,
the tops of her knees,
& then as if lost in a howling storm
drift into sleep.

She would find notes he had left marking his place
in adventure stories, books he would never finish;
always they said, "I have never sizzled."

He would stand in a cold telephone booth, his wisdom
tooth aching, & listen to her hum.

She would follow him to a bar in a foreign neighborhood
& while he sat in the back under a rack of antlers
she would slip down beside his tires
& let all the air out.

He would bump her begonia off the antique whatnot,
scuff his loafers in the dirt,
then make tracks for the club
where he worked on his old windup,
practiced approaching the net.

She would draw his funny bone in charcoal
then rub it, ferociously, until her cheeks burned.

He would eat a celery stick
& slap the latest averages.

She would read the life of Edward Hopper, the life
of Kierkegaard, the life of Fanny Brice,
& crack Brazil nuts, almonds, or chew ice.

He would open his eyes in the middle of the night
& declare he only wanted a mountain life,
declare he only wanted to raise goats & have a wife
wake him up nights when mice scrapped in the rafters.

She would promise to can his pumpkins.

He would promise to churn the earth.

She would say, "But something else is trying to surface . . ."

He would say, "But something else is trying to roll free . . ."

WHEN THE RETARDED SWIM

at the Y on Fridays
a lot of time is taken up
with holding them, so they do not drown.
They whoop and squeal, they sound
like children given some wine
with their bread, but their bones
will not follow smoothly
where the flesh wants them to.
The retarded enter the water like cattle,
slowly, led down a sloping gangway
by a man with a full, curly beard.
He makes them bellow—their large eyes
dart in every direction, their feet
think the water is fire, or Jello,
or something else altogether lovely.
Some of the men get erections
and thrash at toys the attendants
have set to bobbing, their pink eyes
made pinker by chlorine,
and two or three of the women

find squiggly fish in their suits
and are beside themselves with joy . . .
and no one ever wants to go.
Outside, miles away, it may be
October or the dead of winter.
Leaves clutter an old man's walk
or snow lies frozen under a sparrow's
peck and weave. Wetting a finger
the old man discovers which way
the wind wants to blow his fire,
and the sparrow suddenly flies away
toward another part of the city,
where it is summer—where a young boy,
his eager hands far too small,
bobbles a ball—

But he runs after it.

MY GERMAN GRANDMA

kept close tabs
on everything and
everything stayed
in its place—
the chairs,
the shiny wax
bananas, pears,
a cactus someone
left for Christmas,
and the Falcon
she made Raymond
keep the chains on
all year round
kept its nose
toward the road.
But Grandpa,
resting in the roots,
wouldn't quit
that foolishness.
He called her

when she wasn't
looking and he'd say
"Old sow, get down—
come see how slick
a crawler gets around. . . ."
Grandma heard
the squirrels grinding
walnuts on the win-
dow sill, she heard,
way out back,
the deer come lick
the salt block too.
"I can hear most
anything . . . but Gramps,"
she said, "is gone
and he don't need
to talk to me
like that."

LAST ARTICLES

Here is his coat;
hang it up
for the crows,
its histories
all have the same name:
wanting sun,
wanting rain.

Here the shirt,
its finest sweat
has turned into bright
pockets of heart-salt.
Hand it down
to an only son.

Here the pants—
there is a braggart inside
who could never help it.

Tear them into rags
to dust the piano,
the clock.

Finally the shoes,
those sad dependable cows
who traveled the same path
day after day
and said nothing.
Put them out in the orchard
where sparrows play.

William McLaughlin Three Poems

UP A MOUNTAIN, UNREGARDED

Near the beginning
a wrong turn, a view mistaken,
and the path underfoot
never said a mumbling word.

From the flowering acclivities
before them, no warning:
daisies won't tell—
nor cowparsnip.

That old symbol,
the checkered snake, symbol
no more, uninformative now
in the dancing shade.

If they scared up elk,
privy to no man's journey,
a body crash in the brush
corrects no itinerary.

And when streams leapt music
across trails, it was

scherzi variations of
flow gently, Sweet, flow gently.

Where then were the sermons
in stones? The preachments on
easy return down
a steep place?

Yet in the wrong high valley
they reached their graves,
all agreeing the initial error
had proved a glory.

TRYING FOR A GETAWAY

"Take me up into those mountains"
(My cash on the nose of his jeep)

That high school dropout
no less
to laugh at my fistful of 1975 dollars
the price in London
hee hee haw
risking his time in worked-over diggings
up Dead Sheep Wash
thinking yes sir yes sir three bags full
of gold dust

"Fly me low over those mountains"
(My hands holding by the struts)

That playboy of means
enough
to shake his head at my 1975 earnestness
the price in Tokyo
hee hee haw
planing daily out to abandoned placers
up Flat Broke Wash
singing ding dong dell and a pussy full
of gold dust

"Lead my feet up through those mountains"
(My palm slapped over his whiskey glass)

That ghost Argonaut
what else
to look disdain on my 1975 calves & thighs
the price in Zurich
hee hick haw
banking on worn-out equipment and gravels
up Red Nose Wash
roaring yo ho ho and a bottle full
of gold dust

What is your day's pay
to eternity?
and granite ranges trembled by the pounding
herds of untamed gods
(hee hee haw)
freshets channeling those green slopes
down Paradise Wash
wrung above the desert from passing clouds
of gold dust

"Take me up into those mountains"
(My selves are afraid to go alone)

ACCOUNTING FOR YOUR LIFE

Say the one-day float trip on The Green River,
unlicensed, had been cancelled, so you sped
eastward to her, telephoned her at *Neusteter's*,
then waited with a slim volume of
artless free verse under shade at Civic Center
until that unscheduled touch-and-go lunch
hour sharing a cool bed in the Brown Palace
before her return to "notions," you to slouch
with students slouching before old mansions
on Pennsylvania Street, or a while to survey
the destruction/construction in dead sections
of Auraria, walking up a big hunger for evening

not so big that either of you wanted more than
ham and potato salad, dark German beer
in an Irish bar, and back to your rented sack.
Next day, the day she had intended for
your little divertimento, you do
all over again in one way or another
the impromptu designless delays of yesterday.

Say the float trip had been pulled off
as planned, a score of venturers transported
to an inside bend of The Green, unloaded
,snapped into life preservers and distributed
over rubber rafts, to drift between walls of
striped sandstone, unsated smiles on city faces
,desert on the margins, seat of one's pants
hailing one over white water when sudden storm
and chute of red quartzite boulders rips you
out of that Dumbo fleet and under
,two bodies lost, yourself smashed to silence
found by whirly-bird on an edge of
sand the Uintah County Hospital bathed away
telling you you were wholly lucky to take shock
and drive off whole after twenty-four hours
.Your call from a booth on I-70, passing Denver
,lets her know you're well and thinking of her
,though mind is awash with wild water
ecstasy you feel you must apologize for

.Say, then, your ledger before you now, you are
doing your portion of double entry bookkeeping;
should you show that in cancellation there was
a day gained, or in consummation a day lost?

Joseph Di Prisco

Two Poems

WHEN IT TAKES PLACE

It will not take place within the clearing
and the song of thrush and the whippoorwill
will not fill up his head. Perhaps, the bark
of the beached seal, the final cry of
the killer whale, maybe, knowing him, the howl
of a white wolf up at the absent moon.

In the sky, and even above that, the memory
of the stars, not the stars themselves; below,
the lake surface unfurling like forgotten lands'
darkened flags. Before the planets will have crashed
the sun, he will be on his way, I mean else-
where, to where after other journeys others arrived.

Once there he will learn, in his new language,
how to ask for water and not get a thing
in return, how to reach the station and be glad
when he loses direction, how to photograph
the air that parts behind him where he goes,
how to feign surprise for what keeps taking place.

He will, it goes without saying, not be alone:
all the parties will have fizzled out long before,
long distance runners will have turned forever
their backs on destination's arbitrary dominion,
the music scores litter the way, stage lights
glimmering, as instruments rust in constant rain.

It will be strange, the sensation that shines
within, how this has transpired a thousand
times for a thousand years. Even the October
leaves will grin up at him from the apple-strewed
ground, amazed at how the ladders stand tall
up to the full trees without any rungs to climb.

He will read in the next day's paper of what he failed to achieve, the names of the women who tried to care, the books he wrote now lost in good friends' rooms. On his way there, where it will be impossible to care, nonetheless it will linger, regret, like dust in the mid-day air,

and he will await the sunset to clear the house. After the fact, the children crying out in novels, on the screen, will move him to a kind of smile: his eyes will close and he'll stretch out to take in some little light at a time. There will be documents, elaborate matters of official record, for which

there is no need of him. We will not be sure when it is he arrives: one of us will check his pulse and push open, this one last time, his eyes. We who tried all of our lifetime to get to this point now see in at what he no longer wants to endure. I will think of him as a mountain range, his body

in its final white relief under the white sheet. Back in the world he forever wanted to love, things will be different. After the event, his dog will growl on the floor, the calf in the slaughter house will drop, the squirrels will avoid his path, far away hungry bears will run from him catching the scent,

each deer will headlong turn into the traffic and two eagles will claw each other to death for one lamb. I mean, it will go without any notice. We will give thanks for that at least, the only grace given in the world we're given to know. Looking down at him we will not know each other.

Someone will try to call him a good man, or great, but we will shout him down in chorus to silence. Now that he has arrived we will resist our wishing to go along, the journey will appear less difficult, or more, but, mending our shoes for the hundredth time, we will take to him the earth he hoped all along to survive.

MEDITATION ON THE ANGELS

for Josephine Miles, skeptic

All year long survives a season
When knowing itself seems to know:
A kind of radical summer when oranges
Demand praise for illuminating
Symmetry by their confident pose on the table;
I mean affection considered as permanent
Occasion, as everlastingness of clear weather.
It occurs when people wear lesser clothes.

Any momentary interlude: awareness
Of the moment in its passing. The girl
Weeping helplessly by the window,
The auctioning of a trunk of letters;
The revolver dropped on the floor,
Cartridge shells empty as boats back
From a cruise on the Ganges; the black swan
Floating on the palace moat.

How many failed, sick, ambitious
Angels would dance on the head of a pin?
Give thanks our angels are unnecessary.
The obsolescent hunters of unicorns.
Nobel Prize-winning pioneers of black holes.
Fashioners of Faery Land and Arcadia.
The lantern seen through the caboose window.
The last lighthouse operator on the coast.

The heart, the rational but stupid heart,
Summons like the realms of the angels,
Their faint signals growing dim, like stars
Lapsing in this universe to stream in
The mind of quite some other. What shall we
Say in the absence? (My voice trails away.
I can these days hardly carry a tune,
And there is no dance, no clearing, no

Circle.) *Anymore.* Perhaps
We may know too much. But I left my bed
To go outside at dawn down to the lake which froze
Over in the night. I needed to taste the coldest
Water and I smashed my fist through the ice.
Holding one sliver of it up to the sun—
Shimmering against the sky, a host of angels
Singing like the wind in a chorus of trees.

Norma Farber

Three Poems

NO MAN SO UPRIGHT

No man so exquisitely honest or upright in living but that ten
times in his life he might not lawfully be hanged.

—Montaigne, *Essays* III.ix.

To lie down while ocean sustains me. Look,
the horizon shows me how.
It never falls below
the waterline, never stiffens its back

to rise erect, but yields its whole
flat extent of supine
being. Let me now incline
onto what upholds with a strong swell,

with salt subvention. No less than all of me
is enough. Only this entire
abandon persuades the caring
sea to lift me against the stones I weigh.

Not on those two mincing soles of my feet
to walk exquisitely
on water, but to lie
at closest body-length, ensuring the long transport.

A LASTING SUPPER

A half century later,
I'm finally coming into the taste
of separation. Really. That light piquant spread
of distance we used to lay between us,
was mere hunger-ration. This is a feast
threatening never to end. Must I still eat?

Must I, filled, still eat
while the heavy banquet lasts later
with every tolling month? To feast
without relief is to lose the taste
for food. Let there be small famines between us.
Let such infinities as spread

into malady, shrivel. Widespread,
this table gluts me faint, for I eat
the years. And still the board groans between us,
heaping our division. Later, later!
my tongue implores. Impossible to taste
an undiminishing absence. . . . But the feast

insists. Famished for want of you, I must feast
on want. Survival is my spread
surfeit: grossly deadening, foretaste
of death. O let me starve on live crumbs. To overeat
is morbidly to suffocate hunger. Later
I'll need that hunger—should there arise between us

some bare subsistence: some nothing between us,
an essence, in a place where feast
is a kind of fast. Later,
I think, eternity may spread
so spare refreshment, we can eat
innocently again. Together we'll taste

the frugal air among our atoms: day-taste
and night-taste pure vintages between us.
Meal of simple starlight we can sheerly eat.

Dissolution itself shall serve our feast.
And should our particles be moved to spread
themselves galaxies apart, they'll plan later

reunions over the spread cloth of *later*.
We'll taste the aeons: between us—
a lovers' last feast—break bread of extinction, eat.

DANCE OF THE THIRTY-NINE CHAINS

for Robert Francis

"If you drape thirty-nine iron chains
over your arms and shoulders and then do a dance,
the whole point of the dance will be to seem light
and effortless." You feel the burden a skin
bulkier than your own, a jangling metallic hide
in which no body of flesh can sensibly move.

And yet, feel it! you move, you move, you move!
You've undertaken the weight and stricture of chains
as though they were a shawl in which to hide
your natural reticence. Now you can dare to dance
bolder than if you wore only your pallid skin
whirling faintly under the terrible light

of noon. Around you a drapery's lying light
as clouds laid on the sun. The vestments move
easy in air, they bind no more than skin
binds flesh. Now let your flesh draw down the chains
easy into your marrow, and dance, dance
till they turn bone, your bone. In you they hide

their April skeleton. Trunk and branches hide
in season their hard, dark, sculptural light
to lead you on a wrought armature toward the dance
you're amply leafing into. Sooner remove
the ground beneath you than these ingrown chains.
They quicken the greening maenad in your skin.

Watch her, that tree of forms bursting her skin
of verdure! She leaps from where her ravelings hide
their root in fetters loose as water, in chains
of minerals flowing upward, upward. Pure light
drinks thirstily here, till all its members move
imbued, impelled by her sustaining dance

into the hundred hues we call the dance
of vision. Look, every color drapes its skin
with tone. A whole jangling spectrum starts to move
in irons effortless as syllables: hide-
bound by words that fondle the strands of light
because we see by what we speak in chains,

because our chains, our phrases, bonded in light—
time's deepest hiding-place—expressly move
in the poem's skin. They keep us while we dance.

Tom Hansen

THE SALVATION OF COUSIN ESTHER

Now all that old life is over
(Too many drinks, too few men,
Thirty-six years of sin
Down the drain) Cousin Esther reforms.

Now she has all the answers
And none of the questions,
Walking on water, by God,
Without getting wet.

She hobbles all over happiness now,
Even her own, lost soul—
Proof that a life of sin
Leads to a life of sin.

Samuel Hazo

NAPOLEON'S

Appropriate that near the tomb
of Bonaparte upended cannon
barrels should defend the corridors.
This Corsican who loved artillery
would surely have approved such vigilance.
"Give them a whiff of grape,"
he muttered once before he fired
at a mob with scattershot.

To crack
an enemy's defense he nixed
direct assaults as rapes.

Instead
he concentrated all his cannonpower
on the weakest of the weakest flanks
of that defense until it cracked.
Later, accepting losses with a lover's
shrug, he claimed that Paris
could replace them in a single night.
At Waterloo, the rain, not Wellington,
defeated him.

Unable to maneuver
caissons in the mud, he damned
the French, the English and himself
to history.

That history engraves
the upright cannonshaft that he
erected in the Place Vendome
from all the melted guns of Austerlitz.
Centering the square, it scrolls
in corkscrew chapters to its tip
a bronze procession of the passionate
in arms . . .

Outside the Ritz
a newsgirl pedals by, her nipples
tenting the *Herald-Tribune*
T-shirt sweated to her breasts.

A guide and all the guided near
the pillar face away from France
to study what is after all
quite clearly in a manner of speaking
also a piece of France.

Aroused and rising to a war
they think they'll win, a few
lone stragglers, squinting at their target's
front and flanks, change
suddenly to cannoneers and zero in.

Richard Blessing

Two Poems

35TH BIRTHDAY

Presidential age. Your wife's still
with you, more and less. Your son
sings HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DADDY MONKEY,
cracks himself up. And the day is good,
gusts of sun and leaves, the air ringing
like a telephone. The way to work
is trying to be your friend. They've found
the girls somebody stashed alive
in the hills. *People are nice, really,*
the radio says. The lake fills
with light and your lungs are sails.
Every day should be like this,
italicized, nobody missing, love
coming in cards, unsigned, the wind
blowing smoky kisses. Don't cry.
People are nice, alive, really, and well.
Blow out the candles, get your wish.
The cake you cut gets lighter every year,
your wife gives you her cheek, your son
his song and Happy Birthday's happy
no matter whose. Nothing is changed.
Your only lasting present is your past.

BRADFORD, PA.

A place you'd drive through heading south
to Pittsburgh, north to Buffalo. Not much
to see. The pretty girl is married again
or off at school and never was so pretty
you'd have stopped. The tavern died
without a poem. You'd say *Somebody lives here*
and be wrong. Living somewhere is when
you plan to stay. No one lives here.
Smoke leans hard against the screens
and the houses weren't built to last. Kids,
dirty-kneed and cruel, play hide-and-peek
for keeps. Old men peel like tarpaper roofs
from porches and are gone and, like you,
the young are always heading someplace else.

Brian O'Neill

Two Poems

TO THE PRODUCER

We don't mind telling you
that nothing we've won on your show
is alive. The radar range
failed its own star-mothers
in the last breath of a meatloaf
though it was close. Had it been
rougher aluminum—I'm sure you understand.
But even more queer proved to be you
claiming that one year's supply of Womb-Nugget
would be more than enough to see
our terrier in heaven when in fact
he is there this moment due to a liver
death and we suspect more. We do
not suspect you, of course, though
you can imagine his expression.

But if any complaint is to be raised
by your tuliped linen, consider it
prejudiced on the account of bed parts
you had no way of knowing would escape.
You might remember how we came
close as an angel to winning
an orthopedic bedspring which would have been
marvelous had it not been for the capital
of something in Africa. And am/fm
golf carts are yet another thing
if you consider how they sacrifice
frequencies for the smallest gear
and nothing for par. And I realize
we should not have answered "elephants"
but the buzzer approached us like wind.
We cannot even say it was the fault
of your sponsors that there were
only three dinners for two and nothing Mexican.
Ourselves, we can hardly say anything.
Except to remind you that our large-pore luggage
is mistakenly somewhere in Naples
with your sweepstakes couple who shouted "Broadway"
when we had expected something absurd.

AS A RULE

Your yellow parking lamps
by law
are not permitted to guide
 a moving car
 a midwife
 or the sins of antiquity
Though the color yellow
is not so much dead
unless there are
 buses with alcohol
 pieces of fruit
 or no witnesses

under the law
Place a mark in the box
under the law

Repeat after me the law

You may drive in this state
until you are heartless
if there are women
who would rather not find you
at home
or acting like women
But you may never plow into
a blind person
with your parking lamps only
until he slides past second
unless planets finger him
unless nothing
is worth not having his cane
which is always
not yellow
darker than most

Section six-digit
remember
requires you merge left
though your own road is like impossible
due to weather
under the law

Repeat after me

Conrad Hilberry

Two Poems

FISHERMAN

Wet to the knees, the fisherman whips
his line in the air and drops the fly in a pool
beyond a log. He takes the rainbow trout.
The meat is savory—hooked, creeled, and cooked.

Hand and eye. But the body is the whole
canyon, the river falling ignorant
over rocks and debris, over the fisherman's
boots, over the precise scales of the trout.
It is box elder, marsh grass, the broken
cliff—vague browns and greys and greens
rumbling, turning in their sleep.
It will not rise to the lure.

APPREHENSION

"Even the dim apprehension of some great principle is apt
to clothe itself with tremendous emotional force."

—Alfred North Whitehead

Clark Kent slips into a telephone booth.
By the next frame, everything the past gave—
the job, the name, the coat and tie—
is transformed. Out of those shucks and shells
leaps the cape, the great S, the bullets bouncing
back on the crooks. Silly and false, this flash
of red white and blue—pernicious, even.

Nonetheless, we may be changed. Surprise
sleeps in the interstices of things.
Pushed by an apprehension, a thousand boys
leap from garage roofs, and I myself
sidle up to a phone booth, fingering my tie.

Jay Meek

TURNING INTO ONESELF

"Going-into-oneself and for hours
meeting no one. . . ."
—Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Think of it as entering a patisserie
selling brass bedsteads
and Coca-Cola. It is the gas-station mirror
before which you put on a paper hat
in Acapulco.

The palms are luminous, as never before.

Friend, write to me of the pure sorrow
you have found in winter marigolds,
in the white hulls of Norwegian freighters,
outbound in the fog.

And truly, does it rain in the city?

No, Kappus, this is all much too indulgent.
Even when walking on the wet sand
under the pier at Tarsus,
there will be other solitudes to cross:
the handsome spear-carriers

from *Rienzi*, you will remember them.
And the scent of a boutonniere
on a bank clerk,
it will go with you to your untidy room.
The poem that suits you

you would do wrong to find at the palmist.
It has no future, and hardly a self
but the self
which must always be leaving it: over an arm
of your chair the trousers

folded, waiting immeasurably like old cloth
for that otherness
with discrimination and anguish and love.

At Madame Tussaud's,
before a panorama of The Plains of Abraham,
take the bullet to your heart.

For myself, I have been making this letter
so exquisite for you
it already has the ring of a poem—
but how ambiguous the reading of lines
on a palmist's face,
or on a page from my own workbook.

Often the compassion I find there
may simply be ennui.

Often there are roses, the scent of cheroots.
Fat ladies knitting in their cabanas.
And palms,
the palms are nearly always luminous . . .

Dear heart, how misleading to believe
this poem comes to no end
but the end from which it started

to confirm this world, again
and again the shy entering
of resort towns for the homeless
and unforgiven and mad,
perfectly inadequate, perfectly in excess.

James Galvin

COMING BACK

You are awake but your eyes will not open
Your arms and legs will not move
They are like branches full of black water

I can see the shadows passing
Beneath your skin as they swim up
From your memory like generations
Unravelling into light as you wake
Sleep becomes the color of your bones
You are thirsty as always

The last drop of spring water
Stretches from the lip of the cup
Inside it there is a blizzard
Descending upon a house made of ice
When the whiteness is complete
It boils and falls like a planet
It cuts into the soft black skin of the sky

At first snowfall the earth
Is like the flesh of an old man
Covering the roots of trees
Which are like veins
When the last snow melts it stays
On the fallen branches and pine twigs
White fingers pointing to each other

As the wind flies backward
To the mountain it dissolves
Into tiny particles like ground glass
It disappears into the pores of pine needles
And waits for the next call

It is late morning
You are pulling yourself forward

Through the mud and blankets
Using only your eyelids
Like a fish using its fins
To walk on land

Constance Urdang

THE OLD MAID FACTORY

This is the factory
Where they manufacture old maids
At one end of the assembly line
The women are jostled into their places
They wonder where they are going
What will happen to them
One says, "Where is my sister?"
But the foreman is not permitted to answer

First she will be hollowed out
Her juices extracted
Her natural organs replaced
By parts she is not permitted to name
Her five senses
Are replaced by substitutes
Guaranteed non-inflammable
Non-toxic
Her sister is replaced by a substitute

At the end of the assembly line
The old maid minces out
Into what she calls America
She has forgotten she is a woman
She has no sister
In her shrivelled brain
Something murmurs that life is an accident
She wonders how it happened to her

Steve Orlen

THE JEWISH FAMILY

Mother's on her bed playing solitaire,
refusing to sleep. Why is she suddenly old
and bitter, and without sex to save her,
or pills to put her under like a little girl?

There's Father striding the huge cracks
because nothing is wrong,
dignified in his long coat like a paint brush
spreading sickness, smiles and fix-it.

When we can't sleep, we roll over and over.
We make up stories to fit the bad things
and by turns we are heroes or victims.
When we can't remember, what's to become of us?

One night we decided to be heroes,
to kiss our enemies until they were Jewish.
Then the grocer refused us credit,
and it took forever just to make mistakes.

Whose story is this? Whose lifetime?
No one's to blame. We dawdle around the table
like wisely unattempted lives;
we total up our accounts: this pain

is for Father for looking away, for frowning;
this pain is for Mother
who keeps it inside and sickens
into gall stones, into one lonely breast.

Remember the house, Daddy, bristling
with sores that wouldn't scar,
and the cop who kept finding me under pillows
and porches, sooty and weeping, confessing?

Every friend I have is a hoodlum.
Every girl I take is a bad girl
with toothless parents and dirty hair
and I fall forever for our sins.

If you love me, Daddy, do it good,
beat me up laughing, not crying
like a sorry old man. Why is love
like dying? Why don't we ever leave home?

Lee Blessing

THE MAN WHO INVENTED ISLANDS

felt a certain responsibility.
Just because islands are not
always populous doesn't mean
I can ignore them, he thought,

some islands need constant reassurance.
"Are we here?"
they think, day in
day out, "Faced with the sky,

at sea forever, only the stars
at night—maybe these are things
that we alone perceive. Where
is our reassurance?"

Therefore he and his sons
travel to even the most desolate
of them where, beneath the remote heavens,
one will kneel down,
and hug the island,
and give up his life
on that spot.

Robert Wallace

LOVE POEM: NINE YEARS LATER

Not Christmas this time, but
just after. Dirty snow
shredding from a dirty city
like weasels vanishing.

The sun is treacherous, lemon,
watery. And you are gone,
a mile maybe, hiding
among your friends, considering

a life of your own.
Across the street a fireplug
in a boy's red knit hat
eyes our house—

me looking out, a husband
shadowy amid hanging plants
and ferns. The mistakes
of even the good years

must be chipped away, hurt
periodically renewed.
The traffic moves, or doesn't.
The year runs down.

I long to say this, love,
across the spaces of a darkening city,
and may not.
I try to give you up—

hard as stopping smoking.
I've never managed
and probably won't
till one day I lie down

and am colder than
I've ever been. Sad girl,
there is no sparing one another
how love survives

its failing. Chill dawn
will bring a sparrow or two
into the trees, like leaves
until there are leaves.

David Brewster

Two Poems

CIRCUS BOY FALLS IN LOVE

Well, you taught the elephants
to shake hands, you pointed out
that when cats sleep they chase
mice printed on the backs of their eyelids,
you even had the courage
to interpret the improbable calligraphies
of zebra-stripe and leopard spot.

So where are you off to in such a rush,
now that angel-face dances on the white stallion's back,
her little blue tutu twirling like a parasol.
Is it that the Ringmaster's a lecher,
the handsome high-wire man can prance
through the Big-Top, full of suggestions,
and even the stall-cleaner has a glare that cuts?

But it's worth a try: your friend
the pock-marked albino with the lisp,
the bearded lady's husband,
he'll show you all the dirty pictures,
and he'll tell you just what to say
as you hand your darling
the heliotrope bouquet.

GIVING IT ALL BACK

Here are the years, lonely blades cutting clocks to pieces;
here are the hours, old socks remaining in a chest as the house is torn
down;
here are the lies, bootsteps in the stairwell;
here are the dreams, the hostages for whom no ransom was too great;
here is the world seen through the eyes and here are the eyes;
here is the hair-trigger for the rest of the gun;
here are the flies that groomed on the meat;
here are the children, the bait of names;
here are all the poems, the death-wishes.

Here are my veins, that I pieced together from the discards on the
floor under your loom;
here are my fingers, that I collected knuckle by knuckle by
reaching into the storms of my groin;
here are my arms waving at the horizon like two piles of an invisible
pier;
here are my hands winging overhead, circling a bare bulb;
here is my penis, a mute bat;
here is the rest of my body, covered with mudwasps.

Here are the memories of your breasts, a cotton-dry mouth and two
empty wine goblets;
here is the memory of your crotch, a useless divining rod twitching
nervously;
here is the memory of your hair, a tenement hallway swirling with
autumn;
here is the memory of your odor, dirty underwear I cannot seem to
get off.

Here is the skeleton key to the light beyond the stars;
here is the charge account with which we leased those stars;
here is the stone-faced guitar chord;
here are the scissors, the blood, and the blind lady sprawled on the
floor;
here is your uncle the queer, your other uncle the pornographer,
and your two crusty aunts, who whine at your leotards.

Here is the garter snake who once swam through your shadow;
here is the grasshopper who was born in your fingers;
here are the birds that died in your throat.

I return as I received,
then slide the window shut and steal away,
wondering all the time how your breathing is like the breathing
wind,
giving it all back to me again.

Diana O Hehir

Two Poems

THE OLD LADY UNDER THE FREEWAY

I've come down here to live on a bed of weeds.

Up there are white spaces with curving ceilings,
Harsh wide silver-fitted cars,
Marching squads of freckled-armed men.

My world is depths of green, a water of fern.
No one would guess that a safety hides here,
Secretly jeweled, dropped in this special pocket.

I'm the mad old lady under the ledge. The good
Who fall headlong off the freeway bridge,
I salvage their nailfiles, pen knives;
I carve my way in with them;
I make a tunnel with green sides.

At night I lie on my back;
The ferns meet over my face like lover's hair.
They nestle my ear. Their words are unsafe.
The words they say are green.

I'm roasting shreds of leaf, roasting soup in a can.
My air is as solid as the inside of a honeydew melon.

A POEM FOR SARAH'S MOTHER

"My mother was a widow. She cleaned offices. She sent all four of us to college."—Student theme

Those evenings the offices are cold; the chill gets in under
your ears,
Sends an iron bar from here to here; I imagine her
Like a kind of saint hassling a dragon, a prophethess,
Toes locked against an angel on the edge of a cliff.
The angel says, prove; it says, behave.
It says, one night on a cliff is fine; afterwards
They go away, they turn your hopes inside out.
No one will remember a thing about you and your mop.

One of those fighters had to go over; one
Had to stand on its forehead in the chasm, bat hair flying.
Fall like my wishes, the mother said,
Your arms wrenched back into broken wings,
Angel. I'll wallop it out of you.

The mother is tall, her hair tied behind her ears in a kerchief.
The worst part of her day is midnight:
The tiredness of soup, sullen radio,
Sleeping children, the angel who follows after, wings akimbo,
Edges of feather dipped in paint. It has a neon line around it.
It says,
I'll wrestle with you, lady.

My student thinks herself an ordinary woman,
Except for remembering that battle. That's one of those childhood
flashes
That startles sleep, that lights up Oakland afterward.
She says: They fought. The angel glowed like an electric
heating element.
They fought for fifteen years.
My mother won.

Peter Mladinic

A HOME FOR RABID ANIMALS

From the polite distance
of a window,
the great dane laid
with its brain open
out on a table.
Like a trapped dinner
guest, the powder brown
bat came alive, in a jar.
A real doubleheader.

The wings pink with fright.
A small thing. Ferocious,
small death hunching in us all.
It did not say "Come sit down,
fear me." It looked sad
a little like a violin
on the sunny side of the jar
waiting to be tested for rabies.

Half student, half janitor
I wait to be tested, think
twice, knock on the door.
In the library john
once a bully grabbed me
hard by the collar.
His white fist carried
cure for lechery.
It pricked the melancholy
of me. And he
was tested for rabies.

A kind man moves through the room
with a cane. His hair is white.
His microscope bites through darkness.
The small bright thing in the jar

feeds his mind. "Come dog with me"
he whistles through the dark.

Along a highway in Viet Nam,
was it dead man's curb?
Reason swerved at the wheel. Then,
center of bloody attention
dog we fed you, trigger cocked
your final scrap of pain. Darkness.

Inside the room a mind
behind a microscope and
a great dane no longer;
but bait for good research.
Half janitor, half student
I have no cane, no cure
for this fear.

Once a grackle swooped
close to my shoulder.
In a dream the blue-black
head glistening
like the hair
of a Chinese girl.

Tomorrow what rabid skunk
or squirrel will click
its marble eyes to charm me?—
as I stoop to empty the basket.
Tomorrow wishing for warmer skin,
a cleaner kill. Not entrails
spread out on comic strips
over tables.

I polish chrome, pick up
waste for a living.
I look in myself all day.
Tomorrow a kind man
will pray for me.

His shoulder falls
to one side when he talks.
I stoop for his basket.
But the basket is empty. See?
Look out the fifth story window.
Across the river and off the bridge
dog a flag flies over the orphanage.

America.

Fredric Matteson

Three Poems

DRAINING THE SINK

The kitchen is clean
leaving you surprised
that there is nothing
more to be done even
now so long after the
others have gone to bed

Down the hallway asleep
in their rooms their
breaths are as loud as
bees around a hive on
a mid-summer afternoon

Even now as you listen
the last bits of food
are turning to white
powder between their
teeth while their puffed
stomachs sink back down
return to former waters
which feed their hunger

As the water drains
the ring in the sink

NORTHWEST

closes on your wrist
pulling you down
through the ceiling
of a room where the
bed is a bar of soap
wrapped in white sheets

Standing
in the waterworn light
of that room you look
at your hands wrinkled
and soaking wet as you
wait for their touch

But just now are they
coming towards you
as if for so long
they have been swimming
far away from you
two fish passing
into an unknown water
to lead back your
clean body

SNACK

So this is what you
have gotten yourself
up for in the middle
of the night a piece
of cold fruit a face
picked from the past

Shaken from sleep
you turn it in your
hands as if it were
the room you are in
moving under you

In your fingers the
knife floats downward
through its red skin
a stretch of water
dividing two hills
copper at twilight

The two halves part
rock back in a gasp
of light like the
faces of two people
suddenly interrupted
after a long embrace

THE ERRAND

Why have I been sent here?
To pick fruit?

The orchard is bare
smelling of snow
There is nothing
in the trees
but the wind stretching
through the branches
like an old
clothesline draped
with winter

Feeling I've wasted
my time I turn to go
Suddenly I remember
the mare
that once harbored here
when I was a child
her granite sides
impenetrable
to anyone's heels
but mine

I was the only one
who ever climbed
inside her swam
the dark channel
of her body far
under the earth
until morning
shook me
from her flanks
throwing me to
the ground a
full-grown man
running errands
for myself

David Fisher

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

This is no mere biography—on the verge of becoming incredible I have ceased to apologize for my actions. Always and forever my destination is someone's arms. If these small boats help me get there, then I am glad to have written them and glad too that you have sailed them towards me. Language is an extended pronoun, the existence of which proves nothing but a point of view. As with myself I love it and I seek to destroy it.

1. I have always wanted to meet someone who was on the verge of becoming incredible.
2. Your small boats are a definite argument for mass transit.
3. Would you mind getting out of my arms?

Priscilla Denby

TIGHT CAGES

Myra Pholief lives in Vermont and has no bones. She was born that way, carrying her name in a skin, milk-smooth, diffuse

as sunlight touching sand. The birth was easy, leaving the landscape unmarked. Post partum, cows continue chewing cuds

like old men, and mountains still bump the clouds that hang high as chandeliers. There are stone walls stubborn as farmers'

limbs, piles of calcium just beyond the outskirts of her name. The menfolk, Vermont pines in their spines, have never

seen her, only heard tell of wheelbarrows of marrow imported from Chelsea and closer: They sink, rigid ships, in her garden.

Petunias have turned hemoglobin red; marigolds no longer move. There are bones growing there—stone bones, radish bones,

wheat bones. Dogs are beginning to sprout. But starving Myra, toothless as a wave of starlight, gropes past the garden, flows like

the water that weaned the earth to Noah's ark and continental drifts. She is passing deep as the Pacific, past people in tight cages.

FORGETTING MY DEAD FRIENDS

I

They go deeper.
Their tight faces recede.
White flowers cover the entrance

more thickly,
cover the hillside,
the trees,

fill the valley. I walk through them.
The air ruffles like paper. I taste fog.

What has disappeared in my blood?
In the pools I see myself only.

II

Today I have your letter, from a drawer.

"I went to Ensenada, saw this chick
in a bar. I sent her a gardenia
and bought her a steak for a dollar. I stayed
all night at her place. I'm telling you,
there was *nothing* like that in high school."

I remember your stiff pompadour
and cleverness with girls. Roommate,
I'll bet your heart twisted like a fish
in a basket when you blew in half.

Every day I make the same mistake.
Miscarried friends, I pad your flaking bones
over and over. What's the sense of it?
Your history is bunk.

Here's a yellow light,
a sticking door, a cramped staircase, the street.

III

I find them pale and thin.
They flounder in my eyes.
I dress them as I wish.
They dwell as I see fit.
I know them all by choice.
I keep them where they thrive.
They die when I forget.

IV

Under the snow the ground thaws,
the springs bubble.
The deeper the snow, the deeper the thaw.

In a windswept clearing
the ground is frozen deep,
and the top looks frozen.

The snow has its own contours,
its own roundness,
creating the earth.

WINTER ROUND

Deep in the town the cold gong
of the church reminds us day and night
of the churchyard's congregation straight
under a windy song.

The winds play in the hard limbs
a song that turns those in the church
toward bared oak and peeling birch
out from the warm hymns.

There the trees with polished spines
against the air that sets them to crack
stand root to root and back to back
whistling their stiff tunes.

William Doreski

SAND

Sand grates in my new false teeth
as if knowing what's best for me and my tricky digestion.
After all, birds eat gravel
with those narrow throats and entrails
like segments of broken shoelace.

But sand!
Everywhere boozy thirsts gather to re-enact the kill.
Everywhere people dip and dodge for miracles
on the same Charles River that once supported fluffy sailboats.

Don't blame big business, don't blame the mayor,
who's already dead and propped in shameless underwear.
I felt myself dry up early, like a dog spilled in the street,
each tire thumping over the corpse
extracting its dram of wine.

I felt myself an hourglass
indifferent to all dimensions but that of gravity sorting dunes,
a parody of time.
The pipes wheezed for pressure but got sand.
The soldier's wound sponged up sand and healed.
Ducks dipped for algae in sand and stayed there,
heads under, dead to the tourists heaving crumbs.

My teeth are useless. The air is sand,
the sun is a sandball thrown high between the east dune and the
west.
My digestion is an abstract discussion
after the dinner no one ate.

The distant hills re-enact themselves with a gritting of plucked
skulls.
They line up in the sand, teeth from my jaw,
pickets in a fence—

milestones toward a further mirage
to calm the sightless, drunk on the current drought.

Douglas W. Lawder

SLEEPING THE FIRST TIME IN A BED
MADE OF OLD BARN SIDING

All day whatever it is we are
is used up—water drawn from a well.
Then the thick dregs put the body
to another kind of test.

Like a hook on a long line
something has caught
and snagged on what is half-
buried in sand
under layers of sleep:

Suddenly awake from a puzzle of light
the moon going down puts through a knot
in the tall foot board. Standing over the bed

a strange horse that has come up from the fields
before dawn.

Falling back into sleep I hear
the well's pump through underground sand
ticking on and off on and off,
all its clear water rising

and under eyelids
the mare is grazing far out in the fields,
her ears that are ready to flick
for the first sounds from the house,
the first pulse of life breaking,
the way daylight is far overhead.

Mekeel McBride

WHY WE WRITE POEMS

for S.D.

Because when we walk into an empty room
we feel the need of chairs, a lamp,
a gramophone. So our words fill the room
looking like light, a certain victorian chair
as ponderous as a circus weight-lifter and soft
as his fat-lady wife. Our words
are Noel Coward spinning in the green Victrola.
They even become a lover who pauses
to drop his heart into our laps
as simply as if it were a quartz pebble
or his great-grandfather's wedding ring.

We write poems because we walk into a room
and suddenly it's full of furniture not our own.
And so we write words that look like our shoes
under the kitchen table; our parents
in frames over the fireplace; our own
white nightgowns filled with anonymous wind
as we stand at the back door, listening to owls.

Finally, we write poems because we find ourselves
tramping a hobo ragtime to nowhere. Our words
have turned traitor; into mice in the mouths of owls;
into whole nations of children who will grow up
without books; into our own bodies that have become
coffins because they are untouched. And we keep
writing poems. Even the ones that sound like bells
only ring us deeper and deeper into the dark.
And because this is the darkness that has grown
from our own pens, we are not completely alone.

Eric Dahl

THE MONKS OF TARAXACUM

After the age of rains
the youngest monks of Taraxacum
wore their brightest robes—

yellow to honor the sun
in a sacrosanct pasture
bordered by ancient birches.

At night the monks would sing
the accidents of the gods:
how earth had girded sky

with a ring of jade and bone
that shattered one dawn and showered
the islands with magical plants

that float their seed in feathers
and grant one wish to children
who whisper and believe.

At the tops of slender towers
as the nights grew drier with age
the monks would change their robes

and the white-faced monks of Taraxacum
kneeled with blanketed shoulders
to worship a feathery moon.

And the monks became the moon
as the gods of earth and sky
sent the persistent winds

that turned the leaves in the birches
and wafted the shimmering sap
down to the dust

which blew into the towers
emptied of monks grown thin
who drifted over the pasture

chased and caught by children
and always the monks would promise
and always the wish came true.

John Engels

WAITING FOR KOHOUTEK

That night was a clear night,
and slowing the car at the top of Depot Hill
and staring to the south, the sky
still lemony over the Adirondacks,
I waited for Kohoutek. Between me

and the mountains Miles's fields
were frozen into ruffles of ice. There
was nothing in the sky, though
I held my arm out looking
for a patchy brightness small

enough to cover with my fingertip;
nothing, though Venus elegantly burned
over the southern ridges and the wind
exploded on the windows, and I
stayed in the shuddering car

watching for the comet for only
a little longer. Whatever
the promises had been, nothing
ever came of them. Orion
flickered in the lower sky,

and it was dark as I had always dreamed
night to be dark. Next morning

I found in the freezing center of the road
a Holstein bull calf, newly born,
legs neatly tucked like something

from a creche, shiny as china
at that angle of the cold sun, from
that distance, but close up matted
with barn dirt, and shivering, three
starry drops of blood strung in a row

on a foreleg. He must have fallen
from Miles's pickup. Some mornings
at dawn the old man drives
a load of calves for slaughtering,
and lost this one from the truck,

not noticing, because he drove East,
blind into the sun, and the sun
at the top of Depot Hill rises
mornings as I always imagined
the comet would rise, in horns

of light, and at the enormous arc
of the rising center the tangled
curls of its incandescent poll. Though
lately I've come to think fire
is a lie, and every year four months

too early that it's spring. Now,
watching for the comet over Miles's
icy fields, eyes frozen bright as china,
I can feel the fat blood dwindle. Nothing
happens, only out there in the cold fall

of its farthest swing, smaller than
a fingertip, a lion's roar of light
maned and billowing beyond all brightness flies
out again beyond the farthest I
will ever see.

"WHY SHOULD A DOG, A HORSE, A RAT HAVE LIFE"

Here comes our jugbelly drunk my father's age
loose again on tokay or sterno, reeling
in the snarly twine through his bottled cave.

Eight years ago in a three-day blizzard
I dug him out of a snowdrift blue-faced and snoring
and wrestled him two long blocks to his house.

He fell in at the door like a tub of apples.
Others died in that storm: I cruised the snowbanks
all morning, thinking I'd ransom my life with rescues.

Now here he comes, oblivious to me as stranger
or son, balancing still on the stump of his liver
while my father, past ransom or rescue, lies dead

after long pain and his joys unfinished. But dear God
let me grudge no man like this his pointless life.

GETTING READY TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY

The hard and fruitless work of it—
rushing from object to object
like a lone nurse in a disaster,
trying to get them all in mind alive
for the long trip out of sight:
these dear people whose bodies I forget,
but more the very houses, rimrock, mountains,
the grass in its old place, my staunchest friends,
my elder aunts and uncles
who will not wave to me
who will not ever call or write
who do not urge me to stay

but deeper than anybody keep
a place for me here, a nest and station if I want
amongst the infinite infallible lines
in the air between them all.
When you are home all lines run true.
From far away, I know, night after night,
I will try and draw those lines
around, around, and through me.

IT IS NOT TOO LATE TO NAME A POEM "LATE SPRING"

For years I tried to learn to dive
From a board that bounced other bathers
Into high arcs of sky and water;
The other bathers were able to fly;
Unenlightened
I flopped;
My stomach, arms, legs burned
Scarlet with failure.
I did not learn to dive.
I bought an orchard of old cherry trees
Far from any water.

The new robins,
Still new enough to look like thrushes,
Flounder in the cherry trees;
Not sure of how to fly
They throw themselves
From branches that hold them
To twigs that don't,
Fall flutter save themselves
To try spring again,
Delighted with cherries,
Delighting the former owner of the orchard.

A GLASS OF PANSIES

I am sorry words
like queer and gay and pansies
got lost somewhere
between there and here
where I wait for my friend
beside a table that holds
a wine glass that holds
white water that holds
purple pansies
queerer than Rorschach patterns,
as gay as this whole wet June
the hermit thrush sings about.

ANOTHER MORNING BARGAIN

Oh my God
Who has promised to tattle
On that last great day
To tell my thoughts
When the books are opened,
The radio told me
This morning you'd tattle
While I was thinking thoughts
I don't want told;
O.K., I'll cry for the rocks and mountains
To fall on me;
The people on the radio need my prayers,
And money;
I will send money;
I will send money.

For the next sixty seconds,
Sound, count,
This is the test of the Emergency Broadcasting System,
This buzzing quietness
What you are hearing
Holding the sound

Like high blood pressure
Or the moment before fainting
Or committing yourself to life
Is
Only a test;
My God, you are counting,
My
God
You are sending money.

Mark McCloskey

Two Poems

EASTER

Here is my ex-wife; dogs are barking
the words "The End" in balloons on her dress.
Here is her black stud; he is drunk,
he has orange shoes on, his hair is flat.
Here is my daughter; she is saying, "Fuck off!"
Here is the poet thinking, "This booze, it
spurts like blood from a screw-hole."

Here is Africa on his way to the top;
he is saying, "Kids always comes first . . .
Don't she bad-mouth me or I'm leaving."
Here is my daughter's mother; she is saying,
"She'll grow up queer." Here is the poet;
he is laughing on the other side of his face.
Here is her real father who won't hit her.

Here is my daughter hanging on my neck.
Here is her fake father who likes her;
he is weeping his own son's mother is dead.
Here is my ex-wife's thumb wiping
his face off for my sake. I am drunk.
Here is the poet's eyelash; it is wet.
Here is my daughter who has no father.

Here is one-time-loser saying flat out,
"You can't take off, you're my man!"
Here is Africa looking for a way out:
he is saying, "Shut up, woman, I'm talking!"
Here is my ex-wife taking it on the chin.
Here is the poet; he is laughing
on the other side of his face.

Here is Africa on his way to the top
of the stairs; he is saying, "Talk it over."
Here are his shoes in the dark; they are stupid.
Here is the marriage that talked its way out
for a decade. Here is the booze.
Here is the poet and his ex-wife
talking it over. They are silent.

Here is my daughter with her pants down;
no one told me she was shoplifting.
Here is her mother; she is saying, "It's *your* fault"
with her long chin. Here is Flatbush.
Here is the poet who lives on the West Coast;
he is saying, "How luscious your ass is!
Even hags like you have high standards."

Here is the word "No" wearing a nimbus
straight from St. Wife's Epistle to the Morons.
Here is the poet in Plato's cave; he is drunk;
he is saying, "Drop dead!" Here is the door.
Here is Easter on its way out the door.
Here is my daughter going down her death-hole.
Here is the poet; he is drunk; he is dead.

THE AIR RIFLE: TO MY SON

It's time to show you how it works. First,
it's freezing out there, so put your hat on,
and your boots—the road-bed is snowed under.
We'll load it when we get there. Carry it
pointing aside. This is far enough.

Pull the lever this way, between your legs.
They'll pull the stumps out and pour the concrete in
next spring. It used to make my heart stop
when you ran in the street. This one is running west.
Maybe you can drive to my house next summer?
Don't expect to hit what you're not sure of
for a long time. Try the abandoned house;
it helps to start on what you can't miss.
Watch out for the stream; it's not frozen.
Your hands are red already; give them
a rest. Give me a long start . . .
then follow my tracks west.
When they enter the woods, keep your head clear.
You'll find me drinking where the spring starts.
Aim high, allow for the wind drift.
Then tear my heart out and eat it there.
Leave your gun and your pocket mirror behind.
Go deeper into the woods, leaving clear tracks.
You're the failure now: I am with you.

About Our Contributors

GARY GILDNER's latest book is *Nails* (University of Pittsburgh Press). He teaches at Drake University.

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News for Contributors to Poetry Northwest's Donors' Fund

POETRY NORTHWEST reminds its readers that it is the recipient of a \$1830 grant from the federally sponsored Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. Since that amount has been given to us in the form of matching funds, every tax deductible contribution in support of *Poetry Northwest* from you, our readers, will be doubled until we reach that figure. The CCLM rules stipulate that you should say you intend your gift to apply to the matching-funds grant. We hope for your help.

