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NORTHWEST



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POETRY NORTHWEST

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Gregory Djanikian

Three Poems

MRS. KINSEY'S HOUSE OF CHILDREN

We are in Mrs. Kinsey's house
and it is full of farm children
dropped off each day, Martha and Noah,
Caleb and Abigail, too young
to drive cows or tractors, or cut hay.

Sometimes there are eight; today, eighteen.
The shy ones are in the corners looking tremulous,
the bold ones have claimed the best of the toys,
and Mrs. Kinsey is tending to all of them,
the bruised and fallen, the loutish and ever willful.

"Oh, they're good children," she says
as she coaxes Eunice off her sister's chest
or gently unlocks the arm around Erwin's head.
"Some need more than others," she says,
"and don't they have the harder time of it?"

Outside, Cyril is dangling from a branch
by one thin leg, Willy has pitched a stone,
and Helen is snagged in the raspberry bushes,
and Mrs. Kinsey is trotting in and out
among the pandemonium of children,

Are You Moving?

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retrieving strays and steering danger
away from heart and bone.

If, once, we could hear her shout
or ever see her raise an ugly hand,
we could say, yes, we know her limits now
and aren't they much like ours?
Justice be served, we would say,
and the smallest crime find retribution.

But this is Mrs. Kinsey's house
where we are sitting and talking softly
and being our kindest selves all afternoon.
There are children all about us,
Adam and Sarah, Betty and Everett,
and Mrs. Kinsey is passing out crackers
and juice and pats on the head
to saints and villains alike.

"Maybe you'd like some to," she says,
turning our way, coming toward us,
and we are saying, "Thank you, thank you,"
along with Lara and Eben, Joshua and Rachel,
quietly, and all of us, for a moment, deserving,
in spite of what we may be, or might become.

UNHAPPINESS

It is an island (poor wretch!)
you might find yourself on,

dispossessed of almost
everything, even regret,

the crates of your belongings
bobbing horizonward like small goodbyes

and even your loved ones
winging away in the last rowboat.

Nothing now but this unbearable heat
you finally can't imagine your days without,

and once in a while, the wind-driven clouds
with their faint promise of *somewhere else*.

Soon this hopelessness you begin
relying on, how easy and poignant

to count the glass bottles
which somehow keep washing back,

to feel the island itself,
through tidal ebb and rise, slipping away.

Nothing but sky blurring beautifully
into water, nothing but blue

into unerring blue, except, of course,
for the cruise ship suddenly heading your way,

billowing its white smoke
and blasting jubilation out of its horn,

which, now, you can make no sense of
and for which you can find no place

even though the gangplank is swinging down
and hundreds from the deck are shouting your name.

FOR US

Moonlight, and the cows are lowing
in the high pasture, and the Black River
is passing now under the bridge
that spans farm and farm.

And we are on that bridge
looking at the dark water flecked

with silver, momentary, elusive.
What makes us say, *This is beautiful?*

Fireflies are jewelng the woods,
the blackberries beyond are lush and dark,
still the sweet smell of cut hay rounds us
and the world is suddenly, briefly, ours.

And if I kissed you now,
wouldn't there be tremors through the wild roses,
nuances, quiverings in the aspen leaves?

And even if the moon were shining tonight
for a hundred lovers unfolding under the trees,
wouldn't we still whisper, *For us, for us?*

Naomi Clark

Three Poems

OMENS

Winter. An apple-green scorpion
climbs beside the light switch I just flipped on.

Incoming tide makes a garden—
in the print of a horse's hoof, a salt pool:
torn eelgrass, a crab claw, three grey pebbles,
sand dollar skeleton smaller than a shirt button,
tiny cockleshell, purple and brown and ivory,
barnacle-covered stone like a cluster of white allium.

Two A.M.
Blood on the pillow, the mirror.

A hospital room with big windows. A crane beside the framework
of a new building raises a chemical toilet; men hammer, talk,
gesture. In the night, sirens, big planes; a helicopter lands

on the roof. Dawn. The city becomes visible again, lights
disappear into daylight and fog.

A young deer lies dead on the beach—
legs bent as though running,
head turned back over the shoulder.
Skin hangs in strips,
the belly sac white, swollen,
eyes still wide in their sockets.
Small hooves, the whole a stillness
like that of the great cave-paintings:
flight caught at mid-point,
the deer going on beyond its water-stripped body.
When we walk back, the tide has covered it.

Two flickers shrill their piercing cry. They speak in soft
phrases as the breath is sucked in and blown out. They call
piercingly again and drum, their hard, long beaks pounding bare
wood. They drop to the ground, dance for each other. They run
forward and back away, leap, bow and spread their wings. Their
spread tails flare in late sun.

Smoke from the mill puffs out,
wind carries it far over the water.
Song sparrows sing all day and into the night.
At dusk, a crow carries a crab above high-tide line,
drops it on rocks, swoops down, flies up,
drops it, drops it—eight times.
Plucks out the meat.

On the operating-room screen, a thin wire
snakes up from the groin,
twists into the right atrium,
pulmonary artery, the right lung.
An injection of radioactive iodine:
quick-freeze, a sudden fire in the veins.

Sitting on a beach-log below the winter rose thicket, I hear
surprising and varied birdcalls—liquid trills, long-drawn
single notes, short flute melodies. Brown warbler; winter

wren; red-winged blackbird—as though someone were whistling through a leaf. Many rose hips remain, most a shiny black now, a few still red. I want to creep into this thorny thicket and sit in a little cave, as I did among briar bushes when I was a child in Texas. Under the bare stems, deep green moss grows. One bird plays the harmonica.

A moth spirals the room, touches my face,
settles on the minute hand of the clock.
Under that weight, the clock's hand sinks.

On TV, the worshippers of the Candomblé religion of Bahia
sing:

Come soothing death, you save us,
you save us from misery and pain.

They celebrate, happy, happy, they say. A religion of joy. Chickens, to be prepared for dinner, are beheaded on a stone chopping block, and the priestess pours the blood of those chickens over an old man's bald head. The chickens' feathers flutter in the air. As I do when I collect along the beach, the pluckers press feathers behind their ears. "A stone is not just a stone," they say, "it is a place where a god expresses itself, a way the god expresses itself."

Waves, deepest blue
this evening under a smoky sky,
move endlessly onto the beach,
turning its pebbles.
Shush of pebbles, of tide turning.

Frost so heavy it looks like snow, and in low places, ice fog. Creeks and channels frozen. A mallard swims madly to stir the water in a small round hole. And a mallard lies on its side, still, feet caught in solid ice.

On the news last night, a burned-out, rusted hulk, abandoned months ago by the crew, who got away in lifeboats—except for one man. Below decks, the Coast Guard found his skeleton, in ropes. They try theories: did he tie himself to the bulkhead

against the pitch of storms? Or, a prisoner, was he left behind in the panic to escape, or deliberately, as of no value, or for revenge? He didn't die by fire, they say. Long days in the bare, burned-out ship, alone, starving as the great storms twisted and jerked it, as it drifted slowly on the Japanese current.

Along the estuary trail near the flooded creek-mouth,
swarms of yellow-jackets circled close to the ground,
gathered in clusters on beach strawberry,
crawled from holes the size of my finger.
We were among them before we noticed.
Death whirred and circled around us.
We walked untouched.

Change shivers through me
like wind weighted with the odor of wild currant blossom.

POTATO, GRANDMOTHER, & BEAR

To carry about a body like the potato's,
I'd have to resign myself
to dead white sorrow.
Smooth and brown,
no waist, no legs, no arms.
I'd squat under an inch of soil
or struggle in the vegetable bin.
I'd send out pale shoots till I found
light to green the quickest tendril.

A hand—Grandmother's hand—
moves along, seeking the plumpest
potato for her lunch.
Grandmother, those who send out
early eye stalks grow flabby.
Even in a stew we taste
musty, like a moldy cellar.
Listen. Somewhere

in this dark house I hear rats.

At the ends of these stalks,
leaves like feet begin to bud.
I taste water
risen at night through dark soil.
I'm moving away into the night.

In spring, Grandmother,
a great sow bear
from the center of the earth claws out.

THE COMICS

She clutched the lovely names of chemicals
in her fist like a stiff brush,
scrubbed everything.

She ingested no alcohol,
used only drugs legally prescribed.
From a tide pool off San Mateo County,

she collected specimens; an octopus
smaller than the last bone of her thumb
looked at her,

fastened minute suction cups
on the skin of her fingers.
Purple and green,

it faded to brown in formaldehyde.
Her skin too drank that.
As a child, on a dare, she'd swallowed

three drops of quicksilver.
She breathed herbicides, pesticides,
ate them as garnish, gulped smog.

Under her lowest right rib

a mound rises, smooth, fibrous, hard.
Her skin yellows,

her eyes yellow; the blood,
sluggish and dirty,
backs up.

Clouds of migrating termites,
their wings rainbows in morning light,
drift past her windows;

through the garden's soil,
nematodes send out their invisible threads,
beautiful, under the lens,

as the dendritic patterns of rivers;
in the infinite cosmos, the endless
mutations of matter swirl;

she does not disturb them now.
Among dandelions radiant
with last night's fog-drizzle,

the Stellar jay, that comic
she's loved, resplendent in blue silk,
gobbles the poison-resistant snail.

George Drew

Three Poems

MATTHEW BRADY SPEAKS

I: ACOUSTIC SHADOWS

I know my reputation. Ever since Antietam and my exhibit
they hold me tightly in the dreams that wake them
in the night; their lips are moving, thousands
upon thousands of lips, but just as in some battles

those close by hear nothing while those far off are deafened,
I hear nothing. Even as far away as Deer Isle, Maine,
they remember monthly lists of the dead tacked
to the bolted doors of their white-spined churches
and like serpents grip me, all the rage they feel
at the violation my photographs have done them, shattering
the consolation of their parlors and the hard-backed pews.
I can live with this, but that I actually liked it,
that I hungered for it, chased it with copper plates—
that I cannot. And that my courage in the enterprise,
though grudgingly admired, was valor driven by ambition—
that's even more despicable. Courage?—Jackson had courage, too,
the kind that flared as ghastly as the Northern Lights
over Fredericksburg, the kind that left him smoking a cigar
and counting it a great success as he was carried from the field,
his left sleeve flapping. Yes, old Stonewall had fire
in his belly, and look at him—mad with his own rectitude,
so mad he'd storm through battles like a man in love
with death. That wasn't me. All I could ever see
was what stared back each time I aimed at all those haunted eyes,
those scarred and gutted faces; aimed at those who had
been aimed at so unspeakably so many times already.
By Jackson's ghost I swear, like the man in the black dustcoat,
my aim was to preserve, and not just the lumpen bodies
in a field at Fredericksburg and Shiloh, Chancellorsville,
Antietam, Gettysburg, and all the rest: bodies that lay
in cornrows and on ditches, limbs all twined and eyes
as fully open as a camera greedy for the light.
No, no! I only wished to salvage what I could,
imprinting all those twisted and blood-covered shapes,
both blue and gray, on plates that wouldn't die,
thereby taking back from time the grace it always kills.
I measured only what I saw, not what I could not hear.
If there are any who would thank me, thank me then for this.

2: SHERMAN'S NECKTIES

So no one wants them now. Thousands taken by the likes of me,
and now they paste them to their greenhouses, the sun
sucking the images away until, like the dead themselves,
nothing is left. Bankruptcy looms. But what of that? Franklin,

Cold Harbor, Petersburg, Bull Run—these are the deficits
I care about. When he died, "Let us," Jackson said, "cross
over the river and rest awhile under the trees." Tell that
to the bones seeding the peach orchards of Georgia; tell it
to those wrapped by the flames of the gunpowder-kindled fires
whose terrible shrieks were borne on the evening breeze
through the forests of The Wilderness. Tell it to them,
not me. Glory is what they called it when they went marching
to Manassas. Hell, that's what it was. Do what they will,
the photographs survive, each one a grisly pose that plants
itself in the scorched earth of our souls. Beside this,
what is profit? Each night I dream, and in the dream,
their dead flesh hanging from charred skeletons, the corpses
come tramping; night after night, like Sherman's army,
they come, twisting and bending the railroad tracks until,
more than neckties, they are gallows from which, as far
in any direction as the eye can see, the deep red earth
of Georgia dangles, turning in the breeze. So let them do
with every picture what they like. Bankruptcy's threat
disturbs no more than would a skirmish General Lee himself
after Pickett's charge. Like Jason and his Greeks,
they've harvested their crop of bones. Now let them eat.

DIRECTIONS FOR OBTAINING KNOWLEDGE OF ALL DARK THINGS

—Ahmes Papyrus

This time I beat my father. I call him,
give him the news my ex-wife's father
gave me just this morning, asking me
to never tell he'd been the one who told.

He'd meant of course my father's sister,
dead John's wife. But I forget. I tell
my father how I heard, and naturally,
when he calls his sister he'll tell her

he'd heard from me, which means of course
since she hadn't called me or sent

a single word she'll ask how I'd heard.
He'll tell her then. So I tell myself

to ask my father, when he calls tonight,
to ask his sister, when they talk again,
to please not say a word should she see
my ex-wife's father. Naturally I'll forget,

and do. Between his dirty jokes and mine,
we talk of John's slow death at sixty-two
from cancer. He's suffered horribly these
three years, gave one quick breath,

and died, I tell my father. So I forget.
Soon of course my father's sister will
see my ex-wife's father and he will know
she knows he was the one who told,

and I'll know he knows I told her so.
And on that note our conversation ends,
and I hang up. Now I remember, of course,
but when I call him back to tell him so

the line, the operator says, is dead.
It's too late now, so I go to bed
and think of men in tunics drawing new
geometries in dirt. And still can't sleep.

I think of Thales, who tried to plumb
the darkest things—those deep, deep
distances between the stars—and fell,
instead, flat on his face in a ditch.

There must be balance, then. Looking up
quicken the pulse. So does looking down.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Good Book
says that, too. You must, that is, know what

your feet are doing. Archimedes died,
forgetting. Dirt is king. And don't let

the fireworks fool you—moonshine, stars,
the leaves' assumption of the beautiful

in autumn. Leaves quicken, leaves die.
And John has died, his eyes the cold
glitter of the starspecks Thales observed
in his clear sky. It helps to be oppressed.

THE SCHOLAR SKUNK

On Monday night it was South Africa
and necklaces of fire, machetes, spears;
Ethiopia and bloated guts; on Tuesday,
Wounded Knee and eyes like bloody bison hides;
El Salvador and Ulster; the West Bank.

But on Wednesday it was only Troy, NY,
a college, and the scholar skunk,
a prince of olfactory mayhem that was not
daring the edges of our civilization,
wedging its head into garbage bins,
massing its troops of little heirs apparent
on Main Street with an innocent aplomb,
skulking about to see what it could see
in Lovers' Lane, and in general doing what
it could to undo everything. Lord, no!

This critter didn't skulk at all. Rather,
it made its way across the campus at
exactly noon, proudly blazing a trail
of unmistakably tart perfume not only
through the academic quad but through
the Science Building's catacombs as well.

What bravado! What timing! There it was,
the end of term and all the students gone,
leaving the cinder block and metal cells
of Academe to the care of the custodians,
office staff, grounds crew, and of course

to the Management—they and this VIP,

this black and white audacity; this sleek
and pungent pedagogue of the polemical;
this walking insurrection of the redolent;
this pestilent post-doctorate; this striped
semanticist of smell; this scholar, skunk!

South Africa, Ulster, Ethiopia—what's all
of that next to this odoriferous miscreant?
And when the Management's committee meets
to form advisory committees that will sub-
divide into sub-sub-committees to consider
every angle of the situation and direct
its representative to meet the problem nose
to nose with buckets, mops and ammonia fumes
slapping the air like flags, what on earth
can prime time offer that's more critical?

So geographies aside, though it might take
the entire term break finally to conclude,
let the opposing camps collide! No smell
of any kind must be allowed without a fight—
it's a new State law. May the best beast win.

Ronald Wallace

Two Poems

MOTHER'S DAY PANTOUM

Your mother complains you have written
a poem for everyone but her.

No. That won't do. Start again:

How do you write for your mother?

A poem, for everyone but her,
resides in conflict, tension.

How do right by your mother

when your love for her is so un-

complicated? No conflict. No tension.
Perhaps capture her musical laughter?
Your love for her that is so un-
commonly perfect, like the hereafter?

Perhaps not so musical, the laughter
such lines generate. No one
commonly accepts perfection; the hereafter
is a joke; "love" an irony. Sarcasm

generates our lines. *No*, one
cries, *that won't do! Start again!*
No jokes, love, no irony, no sarcasm
(like, your mother complains, you have written.)

IN THE PIANO STORE

Baldwins wall to wall.
The tired salesman, his small
face pinched as an eighth note,
offers his modest help. Everything is
restrained: the dark velour
carpeting, the tasteful gray
decor, the oak and pecan cabinets,
the solid cadence of place.
When I sit down
at the instrument, my fingers
do not remember the keys, my
childhood stretched out before me
in the ivories, the music of
another time, another space.
So little remains. The pain
of practice in the unheated
breezeway, my father's ominous
prompting, off-key, out of tune.
There was the moon, the basement
rec room in which we

kissed and first danced close.
 Who could have known this music
 would stay on in the brain
 well past one's capacity
 to play it, the fingers stubbed
 and clumsy, the hands clasped as
 in prayer, as if the past's
 intractable orchestra, long gone
 on to other ensembles, could be
 happily called back
 for some more satisfactory coda.
 In this dark piano store
 the great concerto of my life
 as if never heard before, is
 silent, out of reach—
 just hammers, felts, and wires,
 the music flat between the sheets.

Pamela Gross

BREUGHEL'S BIRD

Mine is the only eye that sees
 the entire landscape of suffering. Perched
 between the lead and sulphur grip
 of ice and sky, I hawk
 the bad news: To the hunter, bent
 beneath the stiffening fox, and
 to his hounds, leashed close
 on their master's scent; to the innkeeper's five,
 where they stand trussed
 to the spectacle of a singed
 pig, its hide fairly whistling
 under a shower of cinders, steam;
 to the skaters, whose gaze
 locks on the inch or so beyond
 the blade's knifehold;
 to figures small as flake of ash, black

and wind-whipped like ash, swirling
 toward the chimney-fire's rash
 bloom; and to the rows of snow-wimpled
 houses, and the careless jumble
 of seedy cousins, feeding
 nearby, pinned
 by avarice or need to a scatter
 of crumbs. All fits
 and rises, all mindless
 of an old door, upslung, its broken jaw
 propped and leering
 above them. Warned
 is not saved. There is some good reason
 we stay captive
 to the private view: Accept
 the foot's preoccupation with
 its next step, and the body's whole devotion
 to the sound of the footstep in snow; a sound
 which—for all it resembles a grinding
 of tooth against bone, or the rope's
 complaint against the sprung weight—
 might be innocent.

David Biespiel

Two Poems

THE IDEA OF WHAT'S HERE

The idea of what's here: the many
 Footpaths crossing and round stones made by water,
 Small and ordinary, suddenly-lighted-
 Then-shadowed, suddenly picked up and thumbed

Into a pocket, or thrown over the ledge
 And the tops of pines to lie on the rim
 Of a long path's stillness, the many there,
 By the river, gathering, the water slow.

Or the soft and reddened rain-dampened twigs,

Or the entire trunk fallen,
From lightning, or age, or hail's
Great winds that break summer's back to a point.

If you could see this path and the river
Turn out of sight, the small sticks breaking up
In the backwater, would you remember
A particular blue day, in spring?

Would the mast of that daylight's sail strain
Above the moment you bit your lip
To remember? The way I bit mine the moment
My father said he was leaving us,

When we sat in the front lawn, under the pines,
And the air cracked, and I listened.
Even now when the sky's folded to black
And the clouds are white and moving fast,

When the wind and the leaves are one sound
And I've already slid out of bed, but paused
To kiss my wife on her cheek, and pulled up
The sheet, and pulled back a bunch of her hair

To hear the slow breath her singing body makes,
I am that boy again the night my father's left us,
Walking to the roses and cutting off one bloom,
Walking to the pines to break the needles.

Or I am not that boy, and the idea
Has faded into the footmarks, ordinary
And small as it is. What's here:
An open window, wind on the cheek

Of a single leaf blown four stories high,
Then higher, then out of view.
Behind me a turning, the full breaths
Moving in and out, through the every-night.

AT TWENTY-EIGHT THOUSAND FEET

What you can't see of the earth's cut and paste—
A river's needle line, lines of trees greening,
The roadway lanes in composition without motive,
All the buses let out by a bell—is nothing
Compared to these white islands of clouds
Burning to distraction. Both are anonymous.
If you could see to whatever point in the sky
You wanted to name—as if you could be there
Waiting, anything you thought you were,
That is a thing, like a meditation, a child
Would see as a lap, climb there,
And lay the head to rest.
The word that comes to mind is *volcanic*.
The word you speak is something different,
A spray of breath vanishing in the sky's blue streaks:
Infinitesimal. Those explosions
Are an earlier mist, sparks the color of ash,
Nothing you could touch, the airplane
Descending like a submarine. What sleep you feel,
Laying the head back, what shapes you fall into,
Whitecap or mountain, resemble swimming in a bay
At morning, mist rimming the beach
And horizon, and hung overhead like a hood
For the body of water—the waves inverted,
Easy to swallow—the blue in the sky brushstroke
When you swim to the buoys, float,
Measure your body halfway under, halfway
Above, trusting the clouds steaming will flame out
By noon, piece by piece, in the actual sky.

Gloria Boyer

CANE TOAD WARS

"Toads that grow to the size
of dinner plates are invading
Brisbane, one of Australia's
largest cities."

—The Idaho Statesman

Earth globules, bog farmers,
we are excellent survivors.
The rattle of plastic amuses us.
They plan to bag us, send us to freezers,
stripped and ridiculous as chickens.

But we are the wet grass fabulists—
we are fit, we have Darwin's blessing!
Look out, old disaster bag!
It's the master of dogs,
you rag-infested flesh monkey!

There is no end to their devices.
Cartilage harvesters, they sprinkle
death tide on our pebbled skin.
Their machines mow us to cracked
plasters on asphalt.

Their young surpass them in cruelty:
devils with terrible rubber feet.
And where are the beetles we devoured
with such pleasure? Now we make do
with dog food and slugs under pale roses.

Our mates call across a flat night
beneath the moon's empty den.
Thugs of the underground bunkhouse,
we sleep on these stone pillows.
We dream of the rattling cane.

Janet Holmes

THE DOG SEASON

Mornings, the road in front of my house
trembles with runoff—last week's rains
working down from the mountains late, still in their party satins,
making for the river, one street and one field away;

and in the tiny arroyo that results, the soft clay-edged runnel,
many birds, ten or eleven, fuss at bathing. A mist
shaken from wings clouds their chattering not-yet-song
of specific pleasure. My dog

will jump the fence these days for anything: fragrance of horse;
the mile-away yowl of a cat, or an imagined cat; he wends back
through Rivera's fields until he is decorated—
belly, paws, and ears—with seed-pods, their rasp and nap
tenacious, delicate. He sows all Nambé with new weeds, drinks
from the irrigation ditch, and finally, on Luisito's porch
with Luis in his wheelchair (as if they had been gossiping
all afternoon like two old men), politely
waits for me to come home.

Then runs with me. I bicycle along the flooded river, where
cottonwoods
shed white tufts of the stuff they're named for
and from where the sunset is radiant with clichés. . . .
Everything says, *Early summer, end of spring.*
The ridiculous baby goats, all bleat and stumble.
Somebody's tilled garden. Where was my own

glad rush into the season? At twilight
next to the Rio Nambé I could inhale it:
steaming mud and newborns, the yellowish
new green leaves, the dance
of canine impatience. *How often*, he asks,
must your nose be rubbed in the evidence?

MISSOULA, MONTANA

It may well be the first day of spring.
 Two weeks since the equinox.
 One month since the robins have come back hungry
 This morning I am watching a woman and her young son
 out on the sidewalk
 picking worms up off the wet pavement,
 tossing them back into the grass,
 which is greening now, here and there.
 The boy is still squeamish,
 mostly scouting it out ahead and gesturing down at his shoes,
 then stepping back,
 waiting for her to catch up,
 to dangle one over a finger
 like a wet shoelace,
 causing him to scream and wiggle his whole body,
 to wring his small hands.
 For a half block or so
 they're at it like this,
 then they start on the gutters.
 At one point a man comes out of his house,
 stands with his hands in his pockets,
 grinning, doing his part
 by standing in the grass, out of the way.
 And when the boy works his way down to the man
 he explains what they are doing,
 pointing all around his feet again,
 doing his flailing, worm-in-the-air imitation.
 The man nods,
 says something like:
*Good for the grass, you know, worms,
 they eat dirt.*
 Squinting,
 he looks up at the sky
 which is a harder blue than yesterday,
 walks back into his house.
 When the two finish their work

they get into a red truck
 drive on.
 They talk about how the worms are gobbling their way back home,
 how the worms discuss their rescue
 with their mouths full,
 how the dandelions are conspiring a comeback,
 along with the bitterroot,
 the hemlock,
 the cedar and the fir,
 all in the man's front yard.

PASTORAL

Let the roadside go to chicory
 and gall-
 of-the-earth, and the hillside go
 to clover
 and everlasting
 pea, and the road itself
 to the barred belly of the blacksnake
 and the tarot belly
 of the tortoise,
 while burdock and poke
 choke the corn
 out of the fields,
 and morning glories run wild
 over the immaculate gardens—
 let thistle grow tall
 and defiantly purple.
 And let there be no noise,
 just the pileated woodpecker
 screeching
 like a wild monkey,
 heat,
 and the wind stumbling through a long row of pines,
 the unabashed turning
 of leaves
 asking
 the wind's *blessings, blessings, blessings.*

Colette Inez

OHIO LETTERS

Dear S.,

On my cutting board, tomato quarters
resemble the torn off ears
of an Aztec spirit.
The malevolent Tomatl.
I can't appease him with song.
Having yielded my voice
to the god of sore throats,
I'll offer him cheese,
gold as the jeweled pectorals
of a nobleman.

My meal, an open-face grilled cheddar
and tomato to devour alone
where the Lords of Ohio
whet their knives
for the sacrifice of the maidens.
On the south green
they scream as if it were time
for virgins to leap
into the hubbub of promises
for perpetual life.

My hunger for home rumbles like a summer storm.
I write you words, notes, poems, curved,
pressed hard against the page.

Dear S.

It's past the start of my tenure on a mountain
that holds small towns like a sow
nursing its litter.
West of Parkersburg, east of Chillicothe,
among wind and water gaps,

here I am in the Appalachian ranges,
and I dislike mountains,
stacked earth at the end of town streets.

Selling pressed dates on camel back, your ancestors
roved through deserts, mine foraged through plains.
You ask for my dream: a singer finds her voice
perched like a bird in the sycamore.

What does it mean? Tomatl lurks
on the outskirts of town,
readies his troops to clash against foes
in the roar of the stadium.
Silence is the penalty for loss.

O Dear S.,

Again I wake without you
and the air is sharp with memory,
the gentle routines of a seasoned pair.
In a tangle of purple berries and spiraling leaves
corn light fades into clouds
out of reach.

Peering up at constellations, I stumble past trees
that vault towards heaven's mountain.
My body wants to nourish poems at each teat
like a dazed pig, one eye half-opened,
wary as a blood-shot moon skulking out of her pen
behind the watchful mountain.

Faithfully, C.

STORM

Snowsuted, sitting perfectly still
 puffed up like a ptarmigan,
 you gather with your eyes each
 wind—
 ribbed drift, milkweed pod, foxtail,
 broken stem
 of pampas
 grass, star-spiked shadow, and pine clump
 strewn by the storm last night
 sweeping
 from the mountains to the sea,
 cold
 wind twisting the apple tree outside
 the room where you
 lay motionless
 in my arms for days, too listless
 to lift your head to drink
 until the wind
 knocked wires down, bowed our fence,
 and your fever broke, releasing
 us to sit, quelled, in the silent
 after—
 storm, tipsy with delight
 at every icy
 twig, reaching towards the shiny
 red
 branch pointing up at the sun, tarnished
 silver in the smoke-bundled sky
 and suddenly
 you commando crawl away from me,
 grinning, rolling on your back,

flailing,
 sweeping the new green grass clean,
 kicking
 wafts of powder
 up, stirring
 the effervescent, unstoppable,
 churning
 flurry of which you are the center,
 as the sun lifts from the mist,
 burnished
 by strips of fog, you
 kneel on your
 wing-marked ground, wave one
 fist, press the snow—
 gritty melt of garden dirt and
 crumbled leaves—
 into your mouth, laughing,
 offering me some, too.

KANTISHNA TERNS

Arched bodies hovered
 over us, wings
 beating,
 soapstone bellies
 shining, scissortails opening
 and closing,
 snapping shut,
 slicing our fire's smoke.
 Sharp, white sticks poised midair.
 Their whistles rasped.
 We hesitated,
 afraid of hidden nests.
 The zippers on our sleeping bags
 joined together,
 one big bag for both of us—
 the smell of oil cloth and paraffin.
 "Will you?" you asked. I said
 I was too tired to know, but secretly

I asked, *Forever? What is that?*
All night I heard the sounds
I'd heard all day—
water meeting wood, water
washing dirt,
shore-rushed, rain-roughened river
now whirling in pools, now
smoothing
reflecting light
the way scrub willows mirror
wind, streaks
of silver quickly moving through,
then passing on.
The snags we saw!
Whole trees, some of them.
Each one thrashing
the surface, hooked
to unseen anchors,
struggling. I watched
one branch break free of rock
and begin
to float downstream.

Jennifer Snyder

Two Poems

TINY BUDDHAS

i.
The snail
can live
with the gaudy table.
It can

live
in its easy way
with easing across
the yellow expanse.
To it

peace is easy.
Peace is the pouch
of water,
a country the size
of a palm,

on the table.

ii.
There is a formulation
of the lizard:
under the dizzying sun
inchflies come
to rest under leaves.
The sneak of the lizard.
Quick tongue.
The sweet, crunchy
taste of inchfly.

All this is done
with quiet lizard respect.

The puff of the lizard's throat
is a tiny
unoffending prayer.

iii.
Blowfish:
serious laborer.
She spends the afternoon

going to the bay's other end
where warm stale water
bends into the shore.

Dignity from the eyes
of a blowfish:

the mastery of her
awkward body,

the love of her bloated self.

She is a bloated
mobile sun with this mission.

iv.

The common cockroach
is neither crawler
nor flier,
Somewhere between.

Its tiny legs
and antennas
are coordinated
without fault.

Its thoughts
are quick, rare

equations—
the dimensions of floors,
of trashcans.

In this
the cockroach is beautiful—

its life is a moment
of truth and legs,
a multiplicity
of delicious fates.

v.

There are tiny
buddhas.
We will call them
O.

Love them enough
to touch them—

the cockroach loves touch.
His black wings are sensitive.

You are a blowfish too.

O
learn dignity
by praising the ugliest
parts of your body—
elbow stub, blowfish belly,
unclean ear.

O
pray as often
as quietly
as the lizard.

O
there is peace.
Think like the snail.

Calculate your life
as if you were easing
down the leg
of yellow table.

THE BIRD MAN

In the cowy
lung of summer
he fed all 300

by hand—his house was
ending in every
way . . . no

bucks left and white lilies
tilted over
keeping inside them

fragile pouches
of water.
Once inside the house

ruckus came
from every angle. Often
the bird whose eyes were

particularly stagnant
stood, so to keep
its body from going out

of its body,
on its left leg.
At twilight

the August sun put
holes through the air
and the birds stayed

stiffly up,
calling in,
a strange roar eroding

walls, the bland
tall planks
of summer.

Jeff Worley

Two Poems

LATE SUMMER: A LOOK AT THE GARDEN

Next to the compost bin I find a possum.
I give the corpulent body a soft kick
and it rights itself, waddles into spirea
and thistle, this indignant god

of garbage and revival, its pink tail

disappearing like a grin. The garden
pushed out its last green flag months ago,
and I am home late from the office,

trying to reason with that part of myself
that says I am day by day more discontent.
I bend and see that blight has taken
the cucumbers, cancer spiraling deep

into the white flesh. . . . Who have I
made easier today by anything I've said?
Who have I nudged even further into the past?
I see none of the poison I've sent down

to the mole has mattered—he's still mining
the green beans—and the Japanese beetles
stop feasting just long enough to copulate
on a corn tassel. . . . Today, I talked

on the phone, led a stray participle to its
rightful noun and took my check to the bank.
The garden is giving itself up, and a day
will come soon when none of this will matter.

I snap the cucumbers from their stalks
and toss them in the weeds, discover
a plump strawberry the earwigs and aphids
have somehow missed. It's good as gone.

HUNGER

I sit in the lawn chair reading *Scientific American*,
another black hole discovered out beyond the borders

of the known. It's eating stars. It's ravenous for space.
It's collecting the first splinters of light our sun sent out.

Then I'm distracted by an orange striped cat bouncing from
the thicket we've let go to seed. The cat has a tiny rabbit

in its teeth, so I scream, *Drop it! or Hey! or Goddamnit!*—
something to make him lose his grip on the speckled ball

no larger than a wren or a baby's fist. But he waves
it at me like a dirty rag, it bleats its terrified bleat,

and they disappear back into the thicket. I will rescue it
because all my life I've wanted to save something from dying:

the thick spirea and blackthorn ransack my shirt, but
I keep wading into them. The hop sedge and holly, poison

sumac and spiny thistle shred my cut-offs and then strip me
bare, but I keep going. Down my back the bloody calligraphy

of rose thorns and witch hazel—the bleating just ahead now—
until everything grows still; it's dark; night with no moon.

I stand in a clearing, the gnarled trees a thousand times taller
than a man. Somewhere up in the thick branches an orange cat—

big as a moon, terrifying as an insatiable universe—crouches.

Melody Davis

Two Poems

CIELO

The Dominican ladies have it right—
mi cielo, my sky, they name their love.

Ah, *my cielo*, and everything else
in the world settles in place.

Oh ceiling, I'm your floor.

Together we make a room,
a little room bounded by light.

What light the walls of our arms
hold in. Did you know that skin
can blind? Over and over I'm struck,

and falling I take the earth so you,
Papa, can have a place to earn your name.

Papa, mi Papa, do you cover me or I, you?

Who can tell in all this encircling
whether we move or stay still?

We'll cradle each other, sky and earth,
roof and place,

if you do not manage to bury me

and I do not manage to burn you down.

BLESSING

It happens simply,
a slice of bread,

the fact that you have butter
to put on it,

the fact that though we could
we haven't yet blown up the planet,

the bowl of borscht called evening,
permission of green.

It comes across the dry hills
and parking lots, unexpected,

and sits at your table,
and you feel unworthy to feed it but do.

To have so much—*here*, you say,
take back the ten thousand pleasures

*I never deserved. I've lost that frantic bird
in the rib cage.*

I barely remember—was I ever a child?

Was I really small enough to think I would burst?

After your life had become an abandoned house
your body kept trying to live in,

gratitude comes,

and your eyes and hands begin to touch
what lies before you gently solid—
nails, hair, wood, stone, doors, skin, fruit,

horizons that peel away,
the child you were, tortured with expectation,
all the pure things you do not miss,
a breeze that long ago rustled

your classroom and finally caught up
with you again among the simple facts,
such as how haters say don't don't don't
while everyone does.

Joanie Mackowski Three Poems

THE CLEANING

Violated, imagine, a world so mild and soundless,
where orange angels drift

sideways, zebras ascend, light sends warmth
from a bulb, and no territory harbors

predators. Yet I saw
hands reach in. Of course, here are partisan

schools and factions, minuscule tooth marks
in a chiffon veil, small tetras

striped like Italian flags, muscular bullets,
moving in a wall to match the blackchin mouthbrooder,

massive, neon, and with human cheeks. The medium
is liquid, the hierarchy rigid: Jack Dempsey

is ugly but awed, the kissers kiss only themselves,
cardinals glide upward, and some fish do not move

at all. They hang like paintings or paisley
on wallpaper, deeply conscious of being

waiting-room decoration. A bleeding heart lurks
outside the little green pagoda. Outside their case,

diaphanous grace contracts to crushed petals, and inside
they appear drugged, in a tropical way,

until they dart
from behind the pagoda toward the crumb that mingles

with substitute sky, and staring an instant
beyond the crumb, they see ripples and feel

the peculiar difference between their world
and ours, how air cuts ridges on the water, seems even

to draw water off the lips. The air
of the psychiatrist's waiting room

does not agree with the fish.
They sense in it a preoccupation with interiors,

and the fish have worked millennia
for their brilliant exteriors. Some person waiting

may try to lock eyes with one, say
with the empathetic blushing angel fish,

nose to nose, but the angel's flat face
disappears like an image on a screen. Eyeing

it one-eyed, however, one may bathe
in its unblinking, guardian sight, askance,

frank and swirling with wings and reflectors,
and here the waiting person finds her own element.

Was it a violation at all? Not one fish was netted, but
the environment shrank to a desperate

low. Siphoned upward, water exacted mean
margins, and the fishes' lidless

eyes widened (although they can't),
harrowed in the narrowing

strait between us and
them. Professionals scooped

out the terra-cotta
gravel and rinsed it

in a pail. Each plastic foxtail,
fern, hortwort, and some that looked

like shaving brushes was uprooted
and cleaned, one gloved hand

sponged. Barbs
jabbed, black moors

sunk to despondency, angels
pressed flat against the wall.

Then, from buckets, for minutes, fresh
water poured, and the world's lip rose

back to normal. A slow-moving, dream-paced
avalanche of gravel released

an effervescence that rivaled the iridescence
of scales. The hand, contemplatively,

rerooted plastics, returned the green pagoda
to its corner, and the fish circled in lovely

agitation, more like joy, in the larger body,
reconstituted to their glass house, glass

good for reflection and good
for sucking whatever palatable thing may grow.

THE RECEPTION

*There are occasions when this vision of the world
takes us by surprise, the mind having slipped un-
consciously into a receptive attitude. It is like
the oft-recurring tale of coming upon an
unexpected door in a familiar wall. . . .*

—A. W. Watts

A bulging black eye cursed the living room:
woodchip brown, flinging soot, a wren!
It thrashed like a scissors, had tumbled
scratching down the knuckled metal chimney
and was trapped behind glass in the wood-burning stove.

Its angry eye seemed to recognize
its mistake: a sofa, a rocker, an oriental carpet,
The Audubon Society Field Guide to N.A. Birds,
where it is written:

"The wren often nests in odd places,
such as mailboxes, flower pots,
and even the pockets of coats on clotheslines."

I was afraid. Its gestures were savage,
its wings tore jaw-like,
it burned in the quiet stove.
I knew I could not trap it,
neither could I let it die like an ember.
It flew in my head, flew

from the pages I read.

Wren, animal heart, beating to flee
a passive mind. This house and its glass
are a trap; not reading, I'll look
for hours, my eyes white as a movie screen,
dissolving myself into seen,
and "nature never returns the stare."
But I look up, suddenly, and there you are,
looking—hatefully—at me.

So I opened all the doors and all the windows
before opening the little glass door of the stove,
and the wren shot out unthinkingly
through the closest door.
The abundance of doors was overdone:
the day received the wren named and unknown.

THROUGH THE RAVINE

Cedars curve like the ribs of arch vaults:
the path through the ravine bordered by moss
leads inward for some;
topmost leaves diffuse the light,
ferns unfold like prayer,
and this sanctuary, dwarfing the walker in vegetable domes,
decomposes our trespasses in rich red mud.
But some, rocks in our pockets
and dragging sticks long as the path is wide,
are crusaders for peace,
looking for invisible beer drinkers
who scattered the empty cans,
for the bicyclists who are Hercules
changing the course of the little stream
with the prints of their tires.
They are inappropriate.
I feel the enemy within.

Today yells reached me a quarter mile away,

sliding strangely in and out of the maples and the moss:
this walk could be my last, I thought,
liberated from matter during my daily meditation.
Then I saw: men and women, uniformed
and marching in pale light, pushups in the creek in the cold,
blotched with mud, shivering, chanting
yessir yessir yessir.
They cheered each other on,
danced the dance where fear is the music.
I supposed they were practicing for something.
I forgot to ask who was in charge.
Their cries unfolded like leaves,
and war hung like an odor in the park.

So I left. Climbed out of the ravine
and into the picnic area,
where the shouts backdropped
a little girl's birthday party:
red bouncing ball, hamburger smell,
ribbons, giggles, and distant grunts.
Two women stood at the edge of the trees
and watched through a clearing
the drills below, and I joined them.
One was blond and had a hairless dog that ate grass,
the other wore a red coat and a small drop
hung from the tip of her nose.
We shared our contempt, confessed
the rocks in our pockets,
the murder we'd consider to defend our peace.

We talked of piano wire, of loosely covered holes,
of the inappropriateness of war for a little girls' party:
we were frumpy gods on the wall of Troy,
and the fate we decided was undramatic.
The fake soldiers marched away even as we spoke,
without our noticing.
Then the silent park bounced back to holiness,
the little girls didn't change.
The hairless dog vomited a white dollop
and relieved, or emptied, we went three separate ways.

BANGALORE

It may come to this: all controls break down at once,
and I meet you head-on, finally, each on separate flights,
and in the moment before the crash, you say,
"Tell me everything," what would you really like:

current events? I sleep in different cities every night,
sharing hotel lobbies with other airport souls—
Baghdad, Delhi, Dallas—pictures in a skull, a fragile bowl
of water. I have held yours in my hands,
not caring where you came from.

Or history. Miss Crustacean five years running,
a shot of her holding, correctly, a snapping arthropod,
just out of reach of petty injury, as she lowers him,
inch by screaming inch, into the pot.

Further back, the Hopscotch Queen performs in the dirt
behind the general store. There are moments
when both feet are off the ground. They want it
to last forever. And it does.

Now, the Escape Artist: persons with problems
twisted as colored hemp truss her with knots
of just complaint. Obsessed with her own flexible
timing, she squirms out nightly, bubbling to the surface.
Stunned amazement. Applause.

I'm tired of all these stories except one:

Ten years I've slept with
lepers outside the flower show.
They are no worse than you, no better.
For a rupee, I'm allowed to wander
freely among protected trees.
Around me, the noisy streets

and people of a town,
its Christian missions, ashrams.
I am guided through the gates,
walked through beds
of xanthomosa, uvularia, jade,
white and carmine roses
forced to bloom.

It's getting late. You'll want the truth—we are never alone.
Look down; they were waving their limbs at us all along, laughing
at these little, circling machines.

A SUMMER NIGHT

—From an account of a Viking funeral
by Ibn Fadlan, envoy from Baghdad,
922 A.D.

*They asked the girls, "Who will die
with him?" One of them answered, "I,"*

and imagines herself
falling: a leaf
across the body, his huge
floating bed packed
with dogs,
daggers, cloth of gold—
everything needed to
mingle with gods—

*The hag admonished her to drain the cup without
lingering, to enter the tent where her master lay.*

recalling how, at ten, she
crept to the door
of the woman—
a creature of castoff
skins, talismans,
and the yellowed teeth

of a bear—and said,
“Make me someone.”

*Large wooden figures stood on the shore
in the semblance of human beings.*

Look at them:
old merchants, royal sons,
her own stupid kin
standing in the mud of the
great river Volga,
shrinking from the hand
she has held since
childhood.

Look at them
hobbled in marsh-grass.

*Placing her feet on the extended hands of the men,
she was raised up high, saying, “Finally.”*

So many nights like this: perched
on the slippery rocks,
“the way the very sun
itself,” she thinks,
“rides on the plain,
then at dawn, unable to
sleep, sails its half-circle
of summer.”

*It seemed she was ready to enter the tent, when
the hag seized her by the hair and dragged her in.
Six men followed.*

The first is close to her ear:
“Tell thy master,”
forcing her down beside
the corpse, dark head
shutting out the sun
beyond her tentflap.

“Remind him of fear.”

*Men began to beat upon their shields, to drown
her outcries, which might have deterred
other girls.*

He rises, soon replaced
by the next rough cousin,
stripped and mourning.

All the while, the nurse
holds her to the ground,
saying no:
“Not fear. Show him
anger.”

*The dead man's next of kin now drew near, and taking
a torch, walked backwards toward the pyre.*

Which is it?

Someone close is
screaming
and she can't think,
only wrestle
with the witch alone,
who even now
ropes her.

*A terrible storm began to blow up,
gave wings to the blaze.*

Not fear, (crawling
toward the body)
not anger finally—
just belief
that the one who shared
her bed, removed
fishbones, is now intent
on testing the blade,
humming something from
childhood.

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WE NEED YOUR HELP

Poetry Northwest is in its thirty-second year of uninterrupted publication. Unlike a distressingly large number of American literary magazines, it has not disappeared, altered its format, or curtailed its quarterly appearances under the stress of increased printing costs and higher postal rates. It continues to publish the best poetry it can find. The University of Washington is supporting it to the limit of present resources, but in spite of our increased circulation and a recent increase in our subscription price, there remains a substantial gap between our income and our expenses. Our readers have helped generously in the past. Their contributions have kept us going. Won't you please join them? Gifts to *Poetry Northwest* are tax deductible.

For the sake of our bookkeeping, if you are making a contribution to the magazine and at the same time are renewing your subscription or subscribing for the first time, would you please make out separate checks? Thank you.

David Wagoner
Editor

